

BALTHASAR AND RAHNER ON THE SPIRITUAL SENSES

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AN IRONY OF 20th-century Catholic theology is that Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner began their careers as collaborators and ended their lives as antagonists. In the late 1930s, they jointly produced a new outline for dogmatic theology which Rahner published in the first volume of *Theological Investigations*, a collection of essays that Balthasar highly praised.¹ But when Balthasar published *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* in 1966, he began a polemic against Rahner that especially criticized his notion of the "anonymous Christian."² According to Balthasar, this notion, which tries to mediate Christianity to non-Christian religions, attenuates Christianity's distinctive claim as uniquely salvific.³ For his part, Rahner criticized Balthasar's notion that suffering is immanent to the Trinity, which Balthasar borrowed from the mystic-convert Adrienne von Speyr. This notion, according to Rahner, undermines the Christian's hope, grounded in the Incarnation, that the trials of this world have been overcome. Rahner believes that in the Passion, death, and Resurrection of the Son the Godhead who cannot suffer has brought suffering into its own divine impassibility.⁴

Dialogue between these thinkers in English scholarly literature is

¹ Karl Rahner, "The Prospects for Dogmatic Theology" and "A Scheme for a Treatise of Dogmatic Theology," in *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) 1–18, 19–37. See also Peter Henrici, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991) 7–43, at 38.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cordula oder der Ernstfall* (Basel: Johannes, 1966); English translation: *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley (Glen Rock: Newman, 1969) esp. 60–68. The polemic was begun in *Herrlichkeit*, 3 vols. (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1961–69); English translation: *The Glory of the Lord*, 7 vols., ed. Joseph Fessio et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982–89). It reached its fullest development in *Die Handlung: Theodramatik* 3 (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1980) 253–63. See also Peter Eicher, "Immanenz oder Transzendenz? Gespräch mit Karl Rahner," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 15 (1968) 29–62; and H. Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 124–25, originally published as *Karl Rahner verstehen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1985).

³ Rahner, "Anonymous Christian," in *Theological Investigations* 6.390–98.

⁴ *Karl Rahner im Gespräch*, 2 vols., ed. Paul Imhof et al. (Munich: Kösel, 1982–83) 2.245 f. (cited in Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner* 125). Rahner here repeats a theme familiar to the Greek Fathers. See for instance Gregory of Nyssa: In Christ "what is mutable and subject to passions was transformed into impassibility through its participation in the immutable" (*The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham Malherbe et al. [New York: Paulist, 1978] 61). See also Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5. pref.; and Athanasius, *De incarn.* 54.

still developing. Although begun before their deaths, it received impetus when *Herrlichkeit* was translated. This dialogue shows that both thinkers apply different methods to common questions.⁵ One such question, as yet unstudied, concerns the "spiritual senses," the doctrine that treats the interplay among the human person's sensate, intellectual, and volitional faculties as they strive toward knowledge of God. This doctrine seeks to resolve a paradox at the core of Christianity: How can the person attain union with God if God utterly transcends the finite world and the person, formed by sensation and imagination, is radically immersed in it? Although the origins of this paradox lie in Origen and Augustine, Balthasar and Rahner agree that Bonaventure's mystical theology brings its development to a zenith, principally in *Breviloquium* and *Itinerarium mentis*.⁶ Thirty years separate their studies of these texts: Rahner's work dates to a 1933 article in *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, Balthasar's to the early 1960s in *Herrlichkeit*.⁷ These studies develop remarkably different interpretations of Bonaventure because they are shaped by different ways of understanding how faith resolves Christianity's core paradox. This article first explores both thinkers' resolutions of the paradox; then it shows how these resolutions shape their interpretations of Bonaventure.

BALTHASAR ON FAITH AND SENSATION

Herrlichkeit, probably Balthasar's greatest work, seeks to reassert the religious significance of sensation and the imagination. It contends that Catholicism traditionally has undervalued these two faculties as media of divine revelation because it has overvalued apophatic spirituality. This asserts that pure religion can be experienced only in "naked faith," a knowledge that entails negating both the intuitions of sensation and the formal judgments of the intellect. Apophaticism can thus lead to a spurious "illuminationism" alien to authentic Christian spirituality. Balthasar claims that apophaticism has enjoyed an ascendancy

⁵ See especially "Balthasar and Rahner on Nature and Grace," a symposium in *Communio* (U.S. edition) 18 (1991) 207–80; Gerard F. O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Cambridge University, 1990) 133–34; Louis Roberts, "The Collision of Rahner and Balthasar," *Continuum* 5 (1968) 753–57; George Vass, "The Faith Needed for Salvation," in *Talking with Unbelievers*, 2 vols., ed. Peter Hebblethwaite (Isle of Man: The Month, 1970–71) 1.41–66; Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and Rahner," in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 11–34.

⁶ For a discussion of these origins, see Rahner, "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses' in Origen," in *Theological Investigations* 16.81–103; originally published as "Le début d'une doctrine des cinq sens spirituels chez Origène," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 13 (1932) 113–45.

⁷ Rahner, "The Doctrine of the 'Spiritual Senses' in the Middle Ages," in *Investigations* 16.104–34; originally published as "La doctrine des 'sens spirituels' au Moyen-Age en particulier chez saint Bonaventure," *RAM* 14 (1933) 263–99. This study is subsequently cited as "Spiritual Senses." Balthasar, "Bonaventure," *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles, The Glory of the Lord* 2.260–362, esp. 309–26.

since the Fathers condemned Montanism, the heresy of the early Church that relied heavily on the private visions of an elite coterie.⁸ Nonetheless, he ultimately blames Platonism for the dualism between sensation and spirit that apophaticism presupposes.⁹ Dualism marks John of the Cross, apophaticism's high-point; and it appears even in the English tradition, praised for its synthesis of sensation and spirit. The 14th-century *Cloud of Unknowing*, for instance, counsels the initiate to be wary of the imagination, which presents to the reason "counterfeits of [material creatures'] spiritual essences" instead of faithfully reflecting them as they really are.¹⁰

For Balthasar, apophatic dualism runs counter to the message of both biblical testaments, which manifest a range of divine revelations through sensation. The Resurrection is chief among these; it is known through the sensible visions of eyewitnesses whose imaginations are directed by faith to an objective form, the glorified Christ.¹¹ Allowing apophaticism a spiritual hegemony also runs counter to God's freedom to reveal himself as he wishes. Deferring to this freedom, the Church has recognized as Spirit-inspired such media as Bernard's "tasting" (*sapor*) of divine wisdom and Thomas Aquinas's connatural knowledge.¹² In seeking to combat apophatic dualism, Balthasar readily admits that the dialectic between sensation and spirit needs to be resolved by a synthesis grounded in faith. If all knowledge is necessarily mediated through sensation, then it follows for the Christian that having faith in God presupposes a sensory perception of Christ. Accordingly, sensation must become "spiritualized" since it must mediate a reality that transcends its intrinsic corporeality. Religious experience must be conceived as independent of the contingent world of historical concreteness because it embodies a formal knowledge freed from the merely subjective.¹³ Thus it is crucial for Balthasar that an analogous definition of sensory experience be framed since religious experience must be understood as perceiving the nonsensuous sensuously.¹⁴

In framing such a definition, Balthasar grounds theological anthropology in a key premise. Faith reconstitutes the human person according to its object, Christ, the humanly visible, structured form of God's definitive self-revelation. Through faith, human nature becomes transformed so that the intellect is rendered capable of receiving the forms of grace. Moreover, insofar as the intellect is transformed, so are the will, the imagination, and sensation, those subordinate faculties that serve it. When conceived as an intrinsically noetic act that gives all the person's powers an appropriate participation in its formal object, faith spares religious experience from being explained by either of two

⁸ *The Glory of the Lord* 1.410–11.

⁹ *Ibid.* 380.

¹⁰ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. William Johnston (Garden City: Image, 1973) 132, 136.

¹¹ *The Glory of the Lord* 1.365–66, 415–16.

¹² *Ibid.* 412.

¹³ *Ibid.* 365–67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 406.

extremes: by pure sensation, which would reduce it to mere myth or sentiment; by pure spirit, which would negate sensation and remove religious experience from the range of the properly human.¹⁵

Accordingly, Balthasar grounds anthropology in a notion of faith that stresses the end or object of its activity (*fides quae*) rather than its activity as such (*fides qua*).¹⁶ Faith elevates human nature because it reveals the divine object to sensation as formal evidence.¹⁷ This evidence, although sensibly mediated, is not intrinsically sensate.¹⁸ Since faith-inspired sensation opens the way to an experience of God, it follows that faith constitutes an analogous notion of experience. By reforming sensation according to its own form, faith allows the divine to be perceived according to the sensory forms of experience. "Religious" experience thus becomes a dimension of sensory experience; it shares in its forms while not being limited to them.

Balthasar supports this analogy with two theological precedents. First, Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* advocate "applying the senses" when engaged in mental prayer. By using the imagination to enter sensuously into the proposed material, the meditator endeavors to evoke a "felt knowledge" (*sentir*) of the mysteries of salvation. This sensibly savored cognition can then instinctively guide both thinking and willing.¹⁹ Sensation and imagination thus become the media for a range of religious experience, which can run from a simple appreciation of gospel narrative to the advanced graces of infused mysticism.²⁰

Second and more important, Balthasar turns to Origen's doctrine of the "exchange of states" (*katastasis*). This avers that, just as the Word intimately subsumes Jesus without prejudicing either the divine or the human, so faith spiritually quickens sensation precisely from within its corporeality.²¹ Exploiting this doctrine, Balthasar evinces a metaphysics based, not on an independent philosophical system, but on the Incarnation. This metaphysics offers a radical critique of all forms of dualism, especially the tradition from Kant to Heidegger, which, according to Balthasar, seeks to separate the subject from the world of phenomenal reality.²² An incarnational metaphysics asserts that the human person constitutes no "isolated 'soul' who must work its way to reality by inferring it from phenomena."²³ It affirms rather that sensation is

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 131–33, 139–40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 151.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 406.

¹⁹ See Jules J. Toner, *A Commentary on St. Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982) 22–23 n. 4.

²⁰ *The Glory of the Lord* 1.373–75, 378. For more on the range of the Ignatian "application," see Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius the Theologian*, trans. Michael Barry (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 181–213; originally published as *Ignatius von Loyola als Mensch und Theologe* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964) chaps. 11–16.

²¹ *Ibid.* 368–71.

²² Jeffrey Kay, "Aesthetics and a Posteriori Evidence in Balthasar's Theological Method," *Communio* (U.S. edition) 2 (1975) 289–99 *passim*; Williams, "Balthasar and Rahner" 23.

²³ *The Glory of the Lord* 1.406.

ensouled and that it presents to the intellect intuitions that immediately correspond to the real order of Being.

Moreover, an incarnational metaphysics is established by the act of faith, which renders the corporeal form of the God-man actually efficacious for the individual Christian. Faith allows the Christian to penetrate into the content of the Incarnation, to perceive that the image of Jesus contains more than the mere humanity that manifests itself to sensation. The person of faith perceives this image precisely as the Christ-form constituted by the immanent form of the divine Logos.²⁴ This immanence means that sensible forms are redeemed. They are endowed with the potential to become vehicles of grace because the Word of God, the very principle of Being through whom "all things were made" (John 1:3), has taken corporeal form onto itself.²⁵

To be noetic in a fully Christian way, however, faith must confer its assent on all that the Christ-form implies. Since this form necessarily includes the Father and the Spirit, the Trinity, even more than the Incarnation, becomes for Balthasar the ground of metaphysics. Accordingly, Balthasar, finding inspiration in Bonaventure, asserts that the theological reason justifying why the lower corporeal forms of sensation and imagination can mediate the higher spiritual forms of faith must be that the Trinity itself is a self-mediating form in which the Son represents the Father as his Image.²⁶ Moreover, not only does the Trinity, the primordial origin of Being, express itself immanently; it does so extrinsically or "economically" in its work of creation and redemption. Because it is through the Son that all things are made and saved, the Son becomes the formal cause, "the archetype, idea, exemplar of all things outside God."²⁷ The Son thus mediates the Father to the created order, which in some vestigial sense must bear the Son's mark just as any artifact incarnates the creativity of its artisan. A trinitarian metaphysics thus asserts that mediation is an a priori law of Being.

Herrlichkeit thus derives its argument for the religious significance of sensation and imagination from the Christ-form, which reveals a radically nondualist notion of Being as a sacramental form. Within this form, the higher orders express themselves immanently in the lower orders that become the forms within which the higher orders are grasped. The lower orders are thus ontologically efficacious since they make the higher orders present. Accordingly, the Trinity immanently expresses itself; the Christ-form definitively expresses the Trinity; sen-

²⁴ For further analysis, see John Riches, "Balthasar and the Analysis of Faith," in *The Analogy of Beauty* 35–39.

²⁵ *The Glory of the Lord* 1.419–20, 423–24.

²⁶ Balthasar finds the following texts of Bonaventure especially inspiring (citations in parentheses refer to the Quaracchi edition of the *Opera omnia*, 10 vols. [1882–1902]): *Scholion* (1.603b–04a); *Hexameron* 3, 8(5.344b); 12, 9 (5.386a); 12, 14 (5.386b); *I Sentences* d36, 2 q1 c (1.623–24); 1 d7 dub. 2 (1.144b); *Itinerarium* I, 15 (5.299b) (see *The Glory of the Lord* 2.282–308 passim).

²⁷ *The Glory of the Lord* 2.293.

sible reality implicitly expresses Christ; the corporeal forms of the

power of the soul, and faith, by incorporating sensation and image

Sensation can function as a religious medium, therefore, precisely because the entire sensible world has been rendered "a monstrosity of

particular object as existing independently of its subjective immanence. This reunion occurs in the conversion to the phantasm.³⁰

The conversion to the phantasm, however necessary, is still insufficient to account fully for the judgment's affirmation of the broader range of reality. Judgments affirming the existence of God intrinsically transcend the intelligibility that the sensate phantasm presents to the intellect. Such judgments affirm an infinite mode of Being and thus must be grounded in a capacity of the intellect that opens onto an ontological range beyond the merely finite.³¹ Rahner therefore posits a second condition necessary for the judgment: absolute Being constitutes the goal or final cause of human intelligence. Rahner grounds this condition in an analysis of the intellect's finality.

Naturally constituted by an ontological dynamism, the human spirit, though finite, yearns for an intuition of unrestricted Being as its end. This yearning means that the human person possesses an openness to the infinite that constitutes a "preapprehension" of it. Preapprehension does not mean a determined judgment but rather an intellectual "horizon": a preconceptual, nonobjective grasp of the Absolute. Determined judgments themselves occur because of the dialectical relation between the conversion to the phantasm and the horizon. This relation is constituted by a contrast between the intellect's pregrasp of infinite Being on the one hand and the conversion's grasp of sensible form on the other. This contrast causes a sensible form to be determined when the intellect sees it precisely as finite over against its preapprehension of the infinite.³²

Rahner's analysis of the dialectic that constitutes rational judgment makes sensation implicitly religious. Without any explicit act of faith, sensation implicitly mediates the object of faith, absolute Being. This mediation results from the principal conclusion of Rahner's analysis. The conversion to the phantasm, which links the intellect's knowledge of the universal concept to the sensate phantasm, reaches its term in the judgment only because the intellect can affirm the converted phantasm as a finite reality over against its preapprehension of infinite Being. Accordingly, using a metaphor, Rahner avers that the preappre-

But a key question still needs to be answered: What role does faith play in rendering sensation formally Christian? Answering this question requires discussing Rahner's theology of revelation in terms of how he understands the orders of "nature" and "grace" to be related. Even though a theologically independent analysis of human judgment can show that the existence of the Absolute as such is necessary, Rahner clearly affirms that only faith can provide insight into the nature of the Absolute. This nature is the trinitarian God revealed by Christ.³⁴ He thus delineates two types of revelation that endeavor to show how knowledge of the trinitarian God can be correlated to the faculties of the human person. On the one hand, the metaphysical analysis of rational judgment undertaken independently of theology shows that humanity is constituted by a "general" revelation. This affirms that the existence of the Absolute is a necessary but implicit condition of human intelligence. On the other hand, the explicit act of faith affirms a "categorical" revelation. This manifests Christ as the Absolute's definitive Word who reveals the Trinity and the other data of faith mediated by Scripture and the tradition of the Church.

General and categorical revelation function reciprocally. On the one hand, general revelation is the condition for the possibility of categorical revelation. Rahner believes that the human person's assent to the specific "grace" of the Absolute's self-revelation in Christ represents a development of the person's "natural" openness to the Absolute that philosophy shows to be constitutive of humanity.³⁵ On the other hand, categorical revelation is the condition for the possibility of general revelation. Although metaphysics can investigate and affirm humanity's necessary openness to the Absolute independently of any theology of grace, still Rahner claims that general revelation actually belongs to the order of grace.³⁶ According to him, the notion of a "pure" nature existing independently of grace is fictitious because the historical world of creation incarnates the world of grace. Grace thus constitutes and suffuses the world of nature.³⁷

Nonetheless, grace does not render the concept of nature redundant; nature functions usefully as a "remainder concept." This means that nature, although lacking an objective theological reality, exists nonetheless as an hypothesis that explains what humanity would be like if there were no categorical revelation in Christ. But since faith shows that such a revelation does in fact exist, faith makes it clear that general revelation exists within what Rahner calls the "supernatural existential." This means that categorical revelation shows that human

³⁴ Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," in *Investigations* 4.221–52, at 235–36.

³⁵ See Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1987) esp. chap. 4; originally published as *Grundkurs des Glaubens* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976).

³⁶ *Ibid.* 55–57; and Rahner, "Nature and Grace," in *Investigations* 4.165–88, at 178–79.

³⁷ Rahner, "Nature and Grace" 181–83.

intelligence reaches its full term, not in the merely implicit drive of the preapprehension for the Absolute, but in faith's explicit drive for the God who reveals himself in Christ.³⁸ The supernatural existential means that through the Incarnation Christ embodies the general revelation of the Absolute in time and space. Christ becomes a mirror in which humanity can see the historical fulfillment of its implicitly constitutive orientation to absolute Being.³⁹

Rahner's view of the relation between the orders of nature and grace grounds his view of the relation between sensation and faith. If nature as a theological form does not objectively exist but rather constitutes a moment within the concretely existing world of grace, then the world of Being as it is known by metaphysics, the "natural" method of philosophical inquiry, actually belongs within the graced world. Accordingly, no qualitative difference seems to exist between the metaphysics that assents to the necessity of general revelation on the one hand and the explicit act of faith that assents to the categorial revelation on the other. In fact, Rahner defines faith as the deliberate act that renders consciously explicit the implied content of the preapprehension of the infinite, which is the trinitarian form of God revealed in Christ. Faith ratifies Christ as the fulfillment of the yearning for the Absolute prophesied by the general revelation.⁴⁰ If metaphysics and faith are thus both actually graced, in that faith becomes a conscious form of the religiously implicit content of metaphysics, then there appears to be no need for faith to restructure sensation so that it can achieve a Christian transcendence. The conversion to the phantasm, which links the worlds of sensate form and imagination to the intellect's preconceptual grasp of the Absolute, already baptizes sensation into the Christian order, albeit implicitly. In short, sensation does not require faith to give it a participation in the forms of Christian grace.

INITIAL CONCLUSIONS

The analysis describing how Balthasar and Rahner solve the paradox of Christian transcendence reveals that both thinkers affirm that human beings can think only in tandem with the sensible forms that necessarily condition them. The key difference separating Balthasar and Rahner emerges when they consider how these sensibly conditioned beings gain access to the forms of grace.

In explaining this access, Balthasar, unlike Rahner, does not use the

³⁸ Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," in *Investigations* 1.297-317, at 312-13.

³⁹ Rahner, "The Order of Redemption Within the Order of Creation," in *The Christian Commitment* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 38-74, at 49-50; originally published as *Sendung und Gnade* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1961). For a discussion of the contrast between Rahner's and Balthasar's Christologies, see Emilio Brito, "Hegel und die heutigen Christologien," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift: Communio* 6 (1977) 46-58.

⁴⁰ Rahner, "Anonymous Christian" 393-94.

method of correlation, which first conducts a theologically independent analysis of the human situation and then, on the basis of the data it assembles, endeavors to show that the object of faith answers, and even grounds, the questions posed by the data. Balthasar derives his metaphysics of the person, not from any philosophical anthropology as such, but directly from the object of faith, the Incarnation. Doing so means that the object of faith alone bears the responsibility for reforming sensation and imagination so that they can perceive what the object entails. Accordingly, the Incarnation entails an anthropology that integrally unites sense and spirit. It is Christian faith that directly manifests and affirms this union. On the one hand, faith reveals that sensation bears the potential to become a medium of grace because sensation implicitly bears the mark of the Word through whom it was made. On the other hand, the Christian's explicit act of faith consciously incorporates all the human faculties into the forms of grace.

By contrast, Rahner's method of correlation posits a mediated view of faith; it understands faith as consciously developing a potential already immanent in human nature. A first investigation, a metaphysics of the person's intellectual and sensate faculties conducted independently of theology, reveals that sensible forms are implicitly religious: the judgments affirming their existence bear the mark of the Absolute implicitly released in them. Thus, Rahner, like Balthasar, endows sensation with the potential to become a medium of grace prior to the individual person's making any explicit act of Christian faith. But whereas Balthasar grounds this potential immediately in the anthropology revealed in the Incarnation, Rahner grounds it immediately in the preapprehension of the infinite, which only subsequently is shown to be grounded in the order of grace. Accordingly, in Rahner's method, faith does not directly establish metaphysics. Rather, it renders the implicitly graced content of metaphysics explicit; and it thus allows the will to act on what the intellect affirms.

The difference between both thinkers' methods helps to explain the difference in their interpretations of Bonaventure's doctrine of the spiritual senses. This doctrine treats the interplay among the person's sensate, intellectual, and volitional faculties as they strive toward divine transcendence. On the one hand, Balthasar claims that Bonaventure downplays the suggestion that the spiritual senses terminate in a mystical union with God. Balthasar believes that such a goal would entail leaving behind corporeal sensation, which for him constitutes a necessary condition of the Christian's act of faith.

On the other hand, Rahner claims that Bonaventure does indeed conceive the spiritual senses as terminating in mysticism, although Rahner contends that Bonaventure frames a dualist anthropology in order to do so. Assigning the spiritual senses a mystical goal probably reflects Rahner's concern to constitute humanity as the only creature whose "natural" center lies extrinsic to itself in the Absolute. Of course the preapprehension of the Absolute, which establishes this center, is

not explicitly mystical. Because the preapprehension is known only reflexively through a philosophical inquiry, it does not constitute an immediate consciousness of the divine intimacy. Nonetheless, it is the ontological foundation for such a consciousness. Through the prayerful cultivation of a life of faith, the preapprehension can develop from an implicitly known horizon into a consciously known immediacy.⁴¹ Accordingly, if it is fair to say that sensation is implicitly religious, it is equally fair to say that the preapprehension is implicitly mystical.

BONAVENTURE

In examining Bonaventure's doctrine of the spiritual senses, both thinkers are drawn to two key texts, *Breviloquium* and *Itinerarium mentis*. In these Bonaventure examines most fully how the soul's faculties gain progressively greater access to the forms of divine knowledge. He describes three principal stages in the mind's journey into God that brings about in the sensate, intellectual, and volitional powers of the soul new habits, permanent modifications, that result from the infusion of the forms of divine grace into the soul. Disposing the soul's powers to strive toward ever higher spiritual goals, the habits consist of the three theological virtues, the four cardinal virtues, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the eight beatitudes. In the journey's first stage, called the purgative way, the grace of baptism confers a habit (*habitus virtutum*) that activates the seven virtues; these permit the soul's powers to begin to discern divine truth (*potentiae rectificantur*). The virtue of faith, for instance, generates the gift of reflective understanding so that the soul can begin to see the traces (*vestigia*) of divine truth in the data that it assimilates from the objective order of reality through sensation and imagination.

In the second stage, the illuminative way, the seven gifts of the Spirit further strengthen the soul's powers (*potentiae expediuntur*). The habit conferred (*habitus donorum*) enables the soul to see into the inner principles of faith's mysteries. This vision means that the soul knows divine truth, not merely by means of its traces in the objective order, but by means of the image of God that grace has impressed upon the soul itself. This vision reveals the truth that the Word of God constitutes the inner revelation of Christ.

In the third and final stage, the mystical or unitive way, an additional habit (*habitus beatitudinum*) brings the powers to (and beyond) their full immanent capacity (*potentiae perficiuntur*). Bonaventure divides this stage into three levels. The first level gives the soul an intellectual apprehension, a *contuitus simplex*, of the essential relation

⁴¹ See Rahner, "Experience of Transcendence from the Standpoint of Catholic Dogmatics," in *Investigations* 18.173-88, at 176-77; and Rahner, *The Spirit in the Church*, trans. John Griffiths (New York: Seabury, 1979) 11-14; originally published as *Erfahrung des Geistes* (Freiburg: Herder, 1977).

between the sensuously intuited traces of divine knowledge and the first principles that ground them, the divine ideas. Contuition results from what Bonaventure calls mediated contemplation (*contemplatio mediocris*). This means that the intellect can penetrate into the exemplary cause of creation. In so doing, it understands that what it knows through sensation represents the finite effects of an infinite cause, the mind of God, that constitutes the model of all that is.⁴²

The two subsequent levels of the third stage move the soul beyond knowing God through anything created. They occur when the soul receives a directly infused grace that allows its powers to enjoy union with God as he exists in himself. In the second level, ecstasy (*excessus ecstatici*), the intellect becomes darkened while the will attains a loving union (*contemplatio perfecta*). In the third level, rapture (*raptus*), the intellect receives an extraordinary vision (*actus gloriae*) such as St. Paul experienced on the road to Damascus.⁴³

The key question that the stages of Bonaventure's journey pose for Balthasar and Rahner concerns how the spiritual senses define the relation among the corporeal senses, the intellect, and the will as they move more deeply into divine knowledge. Both thinkers want to discern the stage in the mind's journey where these senses are fully activated because this stage would offer insight into how faith brings the soul's faculties into a new synthesis. On the one hand, Rahner offers an apophatic interpretation that focuses on the journey's third and final stage. He understands Bonaventure to dissociate the spiritual senses from the corporeal senses and to align them with the soul's higher powers. Accordingly, as the physical senses become darkened or negated, the intellect and will attain a mystical union with the utterly Transcendent. On the other hand, Balthasar offers a kataphatic interpretation that focuses on the journey's second stage. The spiritual senses, always aligned with the corporeal senses, reach their perfection when they perceive the full meaning of the Christ-form, the Word sensibly incarnated, and assent to it.

RAHNER ON BONAVENTURE

According to Rahner, Bonaventure conceives the spiritual senses, not as acts of the corporeal senses that have been elevated by grace, but as grace-aided acts of the intellect and the will in a soul essentially independent of the body. According to Rahner, the doctrine centers on the perceptions of these faculties rather than on the faculties themselves. These perceptions function as the last of the three stages of

⁴² For more on Bonaventure's understanding of contuition, see Leonard Bowman, "A View of St. Bonaventure's Symbolic Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 48 (1974) 25-32.

⁴³ The analysis of the three stages of the mind's journey follows "Spiritual Senses" 111-13, 117.

the mind's journey.⁴⁴ When the habit of beatitude activates them, the spiritual senses grasp their object, which Rahner defines as contact with God's transcendence.⁴⁵ In positing this object, he criticizes both *Breviloquium* and *Itinerarium mentis*, which he believes misguidedly specify the object of the spiritual senses as existing at the second stage. Here the object is not God's transcendence but the Word of God incarnate in Christ.

According to Rahner, this misguided specification degenerates into a mere contrivance because each spiritual sense must arbitrarily receive a rationale justifying its mode of perceiving the Word in Christ. Hearing, for instance, is said to perceive the harmonic voice of the uncreated Word. Sight is said to perceive the Word's uncreated light and beauty; taste is said to savor the sweetness of the Word. Smell is said to perceive the sweet aroma of the inspired Word, and touch is said to grasp the incarnate Word in an intimate union. Although Rahner praises these texts for their ingenuity, he claims that only sight, taste, and touch enjoy a credible alignment, and only when their object is God's transcendence as such.⁴⁶ Rahner justifies this change of object by evidence he finds in other texts of Bonaventure, including *Sentences, Commentary on John*, and *Hexameron*.⁴⁷

The force of Rahner's analysis focuses on showing how sight, taste, and touch designate the specifically mystical perceptions of the first two levels of the unitive way, contuition and ecstasy. Sight and taste apply to contuition. Sight is activated when the beatitude of purity of heart builds on the virtue of faith and the gift of understanding in order to cause the intellectual vision of mediated contemplation. Spiritual sight is mystical because contuition grasps that the exemplary causes of the finite order are the divine ideas present in the mind of the God revealed in Christ. This relation of effects to cause is a necessity that can be known only through grace. Even so, the perception of spiritual sight does not penetrate directly into the divine essence because its object continues to be mediated by the finite order. Taste is the volitional act that savors what sight understands; it appreciates the goodness of the sensible order of reality as it flows from the loving providence of God. Sight and taste, which perceive divine knowledge as it is mediated through the effects of God's activity, prepare the soul for the perfect contemplation that knows him immediately through ecstasy. Since ecstasy, like taste, is a volitional act, taste more closely approximates ecstasy and thus is superior to sight.⁴⁸

The relation of ecstasy to touch becomes, for Rahner, the pivot of Bonaventure's doctrine. As a volitional act that joins the soul lovingly with its transcendent object "without any intermediate perception," ecstasy is constituted more by *sentire*, feeling, than by *cognoscere*, con-

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 110, 112.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 114–15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 115–17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 114.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 113–28 notes 42–106 *passim*.

ceptual knowledge.⁴⁹ As a direct, volitional experience of God, touch can be distinguished from the other mystical forms and from the beatific vision. Unlike contuition, touch does not depend on the intellect or on the mediation of finite effects. Unlike rapture, which grasps God through a direct, intellectual vision, ecstasy is volitional; but like rapture, it grasps its object directly as a result of infused grace. Finally, although ecstatic touch remains two stages removed from the beatific vision that directly grasps God both intellectually and volitionally, it bears an analogous relation to this vision because of its directness.⁵⁰

Thus exercised in the ecstatic middle ground of the unitive way, touch confers peace, the highest beatitude. Rahner believes that Bonaventure locates peace in the soul's core (*apex affectus*), the ontological ground of both the intellect and the will. Ecstatic peace confers on the soul the state of "learned ignorance" (*docta ignorantia*) in which, according to Rahner, the divine essence touches only the ground of volition, essentially excluding the intellect. As a result, the intellect remains in a darkness that, unlike the apophatic mysticism of the Carmelites, does not prepare the soul for ecstasy; rather, intellectual darkness constitutes ecstasy. Paradoxically, therefore, ecstasy is both learned, because it is volitionally experienced, but ignorant, because it remains intellectually opaque.⁵¹

BALTHASAR ON BONAVENTURE

Balthasar's reading of *Breviloquium* and *Itinerarium mentis* challenges Rahner's dualist interpretation of sense. Balthasar understands Bonaventure to dissociate the spiritual senses from the mysticism of the unitive way and to associate them with both the higher and the lower faculties of the soul: with the intellect and will and with the corporeal senses. Balthasar believes that they are activated in the second stage of the mind's journey where their object is the Word in Christ rather than the divine transcendence as such.

Balthasar derives his interpretation from Bonaventure's Christian anthropology that, he asserts, views the soul as unable to attain any sort of disembodied perfection. On the contrary, the nature and purpose of the human soul is to be embodied. Consequently, body and soul are oriented to each other. The mutuality of body and soul implies that both exist for the sake of the unity that they compose, the person, who thus possesses a dignity greater even than that of the soul. The elevated dignity of the person also derives from its being the medium of the Incarnation. By assuming matter, the lowest ontological principle, the Word of God chooses to bypass the possibility of revealing itself in a more elevated ontological form, the purely spiritual form of an angel. The human person thus manifests God's compassion: the utterly Tran-

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 119.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 122–26.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 117–21.

scendent takes on the more inferior creature in order to give it the life of the source of Being.⁵²

Balthasar thus asserts that any analysis of Christian transcendence in *Breviloquium* and *Itinerarium mentis* must be grounded in Bonaventure's view of the person as unity-in-duality. As a result of its duality, the person possesses a double range of senses, one inner or spiritual, and one outer or corporeal. As a result of the person's unity, this double range is not organized as two coordinated parallel faculties. On the contrary, both ranges constitute an integrally united continuity. Like soul and body, both ranges are oriented to the unity that they compose. As part of this continuity, the spiritual senses bind the person's lower powers, sensation and imagination, to the higher powers, intellect and will. They thus allow a mutual mediation to function between lower and higher powers.⁵³

This mediation means that sensation and imagination implicitly express the activity of spirit. Conversely, it means that spirit, even when perceiving the higher ranges of divine knowledge, still remains grounded in corporeality. The intellect and the will act only in tandem with sensation and imagination, and only in tandem with them do they perceive both the empirical and the transcendent orders of reality.⁵⁴ Consequently, the spiritual senses for Balthasar constitute the range of the continuum that, once elevated by the virtues, the gifts, and the beatitudes, perceives the suprasensuous, transcendent world precisely within the sensuous, empirical world.⁵⁵ Balthasar thus understands the spiritual senses to be analogous. Any human perception of divine knowledge, even though principally involving the intellect and will, still necessarily remains ontologically linked with bodily form.

This analogous understanding explains why Balthasar sees the spiritual senses as reaching their full development in the second stage where faith enables the Christian to discern the hidden transcendence of God within the manifestly perceptible Jesus.⁵⁶ Balthasar criticizes their use in the unitive way as an "extravagant" concession to analogous language.⁵⁷ Even when spirit undergoes an apophatic mystical experience that supposedly negates the corporeal senses and the imagination, it must remain bound to faith's sensible perception of the Christ-form. Only because the intellect and will, integrally united with corporeal sensation and imagination, first perceive the Word in Christ, and through Christ perceive the broad range of trinitarian revelation, can the intellect and will extend themselves further within their union with corporeality to reach ecstasy or rapture. Only on the basis of faith's sensible perception can the theological virtue of love activate spiritual touch in order to lead it beyond its ordinary use as an embrace

⁵² *The Glory of the Lord* 2.315–17.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 317–18.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 320.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 324.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 318.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 320–21.

of Christ to the levels of mysticism.⁵⁸ When ecstasy and rapture occur, they arise necessarily out of the sensible continuum. They spring forth from the mutuality of the inner and outer senses "like fire from sticks that are rubbed together."⁵⁹ In just such a fashion, affirms Balthasar quoting Bonaventure, did Francis of Assisi enjoy ecstasy. The stigmata, palpably touching him with the wounds of Christ, led him into direct contact with God.⁶⁰

Balthasar's interpretation of the darkness that occurs in the learned ignorance of the third stage presents a final contrast with Rahner. According to Rahner, intellectual opaqueness is a necessary constituent of ecstasy; it results when touch, which brings the spiritual senses to full activation, excludes the intellect while engaging the will. According to Balthasar, learned ignorance results when all the spiritual senses, having reached their full activation in the second stage where they assimilate the Word in Christ, enter into an ascetic negation in the third stage. This negation occurs when the spiritual senses lose the keen pleasures in prayer that they have enjoyed in the second stage from their habitual contemplation of Christ, the object of their loving perception. The darkening occurs for an explicitly Christological reason: so that the spiritual senses might vicariously conform to the paschal mystery. They must undergo a Good Friday so that, like the senses of the crucified Christ, they may be darkened in a death.⁶¹ They must undergo a Holy Saturday so that, like the Christ who waited, seemingly forsaken, for the Resurrection of Easter Sunday, they may wait in hope, seemingly deprived of their beloved object, for the beatific vision.

Balthasar's Christological interpretation of mystical darkness means that it is not, as in Rahner, an intrinsic constituent of ecstasy, the second level of the unitive way. It is rather a function of the transition from the illuminative way to the unitive way. This transition entails pain and grief since the spiritual senses, in losing their accustomed object, become passive after the stage of their full activation. Balthasar emphasizes that when the spiritual senses become passive so that they might conform to the paschal Christ they do not enter, as some apophatic mystics would claim, into a state of "non-experience" that entails a thorough negation of all created form. On the contrary, the third stage of the mind's journey constitutes "an *'experience of non-experience'*" because it derives its religious validation precisely from the experience of Christ.⁶² Accordingly, the darkening of the spiritual senses in the third stage means for Balthasar that, when Bonaventure's mysticism becomes apophatic, it loses general theological interest.⁶³ It becomes esoteric because the relation of apophaticism to Christ is less clearly demonstrable than the relation of the illuminative stage to Christ.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 321-23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 321.

⁶² *Ibid.* 1.413.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 323.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 325.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 373.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

These two widely diverging interpretations make it seem likely that Bonaventure lacks a consistent doctrine of the spiritual senses. Both Rahner and Balthasar in fact cite the 1929 study of J. Bonnefoy, *Le Saint-Esprit et ses dons selon saint Bonaventure*, which affirms that Bonaventure in his writings does not give the spiritual senses a univocal meaning.⁶⁴ It is thus reasonable for both thinkers to seek some fixed point to serve as a guide when they read the texts. For Rahner, this guide becomes a definition of sense that sees the spiritual senses reaching their summit in the learned ignorance of mysticism's touch. For Balthasar, the guide becomes an anthropology of unity-in-duality that sees the spiritual senses reaching their full activation when they perceive the Word in Christ and assent to it. These interpretive guides finally govern each thinker's evaluation of Bonaventure's handling of the spiritual senses. On the one hand, Rahner accuses Bonaventure of a fundamental inconsistency. He claims that, although *Breviloquium* and *Itinerarium mentis* work out a consistent definition of sense, they fail to specify appropriately the object of the spiritual senses. On the other hand, Balthasar criticizes Bonaventure's mystical doctrine as being dangerously close to un-Christian.

The deeper question that this article asks concerns why Rahner and Balthasar choose their particular fixed points, especially when Rahner, in choosing mysticism, ignores the subtle interplay between sense and spirit in Bonaventure's anthropology; and Balthasar, in choosing an anthropology of unity-in-duality, shows a muted appreciation of Bonaventure's highly developed mysticism. The answer may be found by placing each thinker's interpretation within the broader context of his theology of Christian transcendence. A study of these theologies reveals that each thinker's resolution of the paradox between spirit and matter also centers on a fixed point. According to Rahner, this is the preapprehension of the Absolute, which is implicitly mystical and renders the corporeal senses and the imagination implicitly religious because they are intrinsically linked to it. The act of faith thus makes explicit the graced implications of the preapprehension. According to Balthasar, the fixed point is the anthropology revealed by the object of faith, the Christ-form, which integrally composes body and spirit into a unity-in-duality. The act of faith alone reforms the corporeal senses and the imagination so that they can perceive what the object entails.

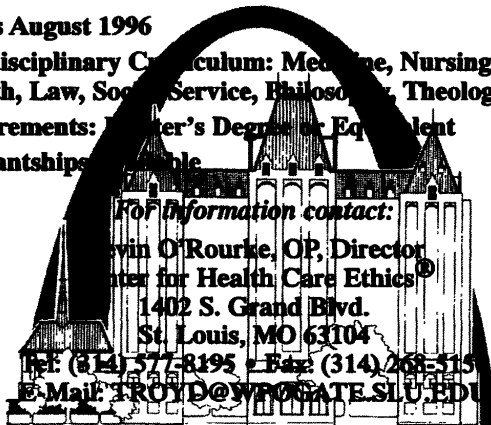
In sum, the two sets of fixed points converge. It seems likely, therefore, that Rahner assigns a mystical goal to Bonaventure's doctrine of the spiritual senses because his own theology of Christian transcendence hinges on an implicitly mystical preapprehension. It seems

⁶⁴ Jean François Bonnefoy, *Le Saint-Esprit et ses dons selon saint Bonaventure* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1929) 212-14 (cited in "Spiritual Senses" 110 and *The Glory of the Lord* 2.325).

equally likely that Balthasar assigns Bonaventure's doctrine a Christological goal because his theology constitutes anthropology by an explicit act of faith in the Christ-form. Accordingly, these two studies on Bonaventure, too long neglected by scholars, constitute touchstones for the thought of 20th-century Catholicism's two greatest theologians.⁶⁵ The question that still lingers concerns which thinker works out the better resolution of the paradox of Christian transcendence. The answer must wait for a future study that would bring into further dialogue their theologies of the relation of nature to grace.

⁶⁵ Bonaventure's mysticism may have inspired Rahner's notion of the preapprehension. Rahner was working on *Spirit in the World*, his doctoral dissertation that expounds the preapprehension, about the same time as he was studying Bonaventure. The article on Bonaventure was published in 1933; he submitted the dissertation to Martin Honecker, his mentor in Freiburg, who rejected it in 1936 (see Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner* 58–62).

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