THEOLOGICAL Studies

Article

Is There an End to the Theatrical Play? Hans Urs von Balthasar's Understanding of the Beatific Vision in Relation to the Theo-Drama

Theological Studies
2024, Vol. 85(2) 216–239

DOI: 10.1177/00405639241245927
journals.sagepub.com/home/tsj

Li-Wei Liu
Wycliffe College, University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract

Hans Urs von Balthasar's teaching on the beatific vision has been drawing scholarly attention. By building upon the works of Thomas Dalzell, Aidan Nichols, and Anne Carpenter, I advance the discussion by demonstrating that the dramatic and artistic-poetic grounding of Balthasar's theo-drama shapes the way he understands the beatific vision. In his later work, Balthasar transposes the Catholic understanding of the beatific vision according to the art form and logic of drama. Specifically, using the notions of the *visio immediata Dei* and the *visio mortis*, he transposes the meaning of the beatific vision such that the divine essence is understood as a union of love in conversation with the Thomistic perspective of an immediate knowledge of God.

Keywords

Hans Urs von Balthasar, beatific vision, Christ's consciousness, Christ's mission, the descent, Irenaeus, Maximus the Confessor, recapitulation, theological aesthetics, theo-drama

Corresponding author:
Li-Wei Liu, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto, 5 Hoskin Ave., Toronto, ON M5S 1H7, Canada
Email: lw.liu@mail.utoronto.ca

Traditional Roman Catholic theology teaches that all throughout his earthly life, Jesus Christ, in his human soul and intellect, possessed the beatific vision.[1] To possess the beatific vision means that Jesus Christ is capable of seeing "the divine essence by intuitive vision" and of enjoying "the same divine essence."[2] As the Incarnate Lord, Jesus is able "to enjoy an intimate and immediate knowledge of his Father"—a "vision" (i.e., an inseparable union with the Father) that ultimately surpasses the scope of "faith."[3]

Considering the way in which the beatific vision is upheld in traditional Catholic theology, Hans Urs von Balthasar's critics have charged him with deviating from this teaching. In this context, Alyssa Lyra Pitstick's controversial work on Balthasar's teaching on Holy Saturday and its relation to the beatific vision has spurred extensive discussion regarding the shape and content of Balthasar's thoughts in this area of his theology for more than a decade.[4] At the core of the debate, critics of Balthasar worry

1. The beatific vision is the fulfillment of one's anticipation to see and know God face-to-face in his glory. For the Catholic tradition deeply grounded in the theology of Thomas Aquinas, the beatific vision involves seeing the divine essence—it is the fulfillment of one's anticipation to acquire a perfect and unmediated knowledge of God beyond the veil of faith. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.9.1, ad. 1 (hereafter cited as *ST*).
2. Heinrich Joseph Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St. Louis: Herder Book Co., 1957), no. 530.
3. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ: Jesucristo liberador. Lectura histórico-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret and La fe en Jesucristo. Ensayo desde las víctimas*"* (November 26, 2006), §8, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_notification-sobrino_en.html. Also see Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (June 29, 1943), §75, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html. The encyclical states, "Now the only-begotten Son of God embraced us in his infinite knowledge and undying love even before the world began. . . . He assumed our nature in hypostatic union. . . . But such a most loving knowledge as the divine Redeemer from the first moment of his Incarnation bestowed upon us, surpasses all that the human mind can hope to grasp; since through that beatific vision, which he began to enjoy when he had hardly been conceived in the womb of the Mother of God, he has the members of his mystical body always and constantly present to him, and he embraces all with his redeeming love."
4. Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007). The debate centered on Balthasar's view of the descent is well documented, and I shall not recite it in this article. See, for a few examples, Alyssa Pitstick and Edward Oakes, "Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy: An Exchange," *First Things* (December 2006), https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/12/balthasar-hell-and-heresy-an-exchange; Paul Griffiths, "Is There a Doctrine of the Descent into Hell?," *Pro Ecclesia* 17, no. 3 (2008): 257–68; Alyssa Pitstick, "Development of Doctrine, or Denial? Balthasar's Holy Saturday and Newman's *Essay*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 2 (2009): 129–45, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2008.00383.x; Edward Oakes, "*Descensus* and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 1 (2011): 3–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2010.00542.x. Pitstick reiterates her view

that his revisionist account of Christ's vision of God in accordance with Christ's immediate vision of God (*visio immediata Dei*) and his vision of death (*visio mortis*) have betrayed the traditional teaching of the beatific vision by sundering the union between the Father and the Son during Christ's earthly life, and, especially, during the descent.

According to a more traditional Catholic understanding, the beatific vision and the *visio immediata* share the same meaning; Christ's perfect knowledge of God implies an immediate vision that is synonymous with the beatific vision. However, Balthasar defines Christ's immediate vision of God in a different way. In the context of the Incarnation, Balthasar avoids hastily concluding that Christ's vision of God is timeless and perpetual. Instead, Balthasar emphasizes that, at every stage of his earthly life, Christ's consciousness of his sonship was immediate. Balthasar underscores Christ's unwavering faith, manifested through constant reliance on the guidance of the Spirit and genuine learning in human knowledge through fellowship with the Father in prayer. In addition, Balthasar appropriates from Nicholas of Cusa the expression of a "vision of death" to convey the idea that, during the descent, Christ, by dying for and standing in solidarity with the sinful human race, had an "experience of sin as such."[5] By "made to be sin" (2 Cor 5:21 NRSV, used throughout unless otherwise noted), Christ experienced a moment in which the punishing consequence of death (*poena damni*) overshadowed his vision of God, while full redemption awaited.[6]

Recent scholarship has suggested that Balthasar's Christology and dramatic soteriology do not necessarily sunder the ontological union between the Father and the incarnate Son. In his work on the teaching of beatific vision in the Christian tradition, Hans Boersma observes that "rather than [insisting] on a Thomist understanding of a vision of the divine essence (or . . . an Eastern understanding of participating in the divine energies), Balthasar opts for a more personal approach in which human beings will freely come to participate within the communion of the free exchange of love in the interpersonal, triune life of God."[7] Moreover, in contrast to Pitstick's very critical assessment of Balthasar's position on the beatific vision, Joshua Brotherton has been

in her more recent monograph *Christ's Descent to Hell: John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger, and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016). Assessments of Pitstick's claims are also provided by, for example, Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 11; Michele Schumacher, *A Trinitarian Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 342–47; Mark Yenson, *Existence as Prayer: The Consciousness of Christ in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 188–91; Joshua Brotherton, *One of The Trinity Has Suffered: Balthasar's Theology of Divine Suffering in Dialogue* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus, 2019), 41–78; Matthew Levering, *The Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 213; Sigurd Lefsrud, *Kenosis in Theosis: An Exploration of Balthasar's Theology of Deification* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 119–21.

5. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 161, 172.
6. Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 165.
7. Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 29.

critically engaging with Balthasar's perspective on the beatific vision both from a more irenic position and with a more appreciative posture.[8] Brotherton draws on Lois Miles's research on Adrienne von Speyr to show that although Balthasar has reoriented the Thomistic conception of the beatific vision to align more closely with a Scotistic perspective, emphasizing it as primarily a union of love rather than an immediate knowledge of God, he still affirms this Catholic teaching.[9]

The aim of this article is to advance beyond what Brotherton (among others) has done regarding Balthasar's understanding of the beatific vision. I concur with Brotherton in that, essentially, Balthasar does not reject the beatific vision, even though there are places where—at least taken at face value—Balthasar seems to deny Christ's possession of it.[10] However, Brotherton's attempt to defend Balthasar's position has a shortcoming. This shortcoming is that his reading of Balthasar's understanding of Christ's beatific vision does not seriously take into account the dramatic nature of Balthasar's soteriology. As a result, Brotherton's reasoning of Balthasar's affirmation of the beatific vision, I think, is unable to fully resolve the seemingly contradictory statements Balthasar makes in the *Theodramatik*.[11]

In this article, I demonstrate that Balthasar's seemingly inconsistent account of the beatific vision of Christ can be resolved when we take into account the dramatic and theatrical nature of his late soteriology.[12] In this regard, my thesis is built upon the

8. Joshua Brotherton wrote, "My goal is to sift out legitimate from the illegitimate critique of Balthasar's project, particularly with respect to divine suffering, so that his true weaknesses might be corrected and his perceived weaknesses might be shown to be more insightful than his critics have acknowledged." See Brotherton, *One of the Trinity Has Suffered*, 2.
9. Brotherton, *One of the Trinity Has Suffered*, 126–29; also see Lois Miles, "Obedience of a Corpse: The Key to the Holy Saturday Writings of Adrienne von Speyr" (PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2013), 117–21.
10. For instance, at one point Balthasar states, "we can most definitely hold fast to the idea that Jesus knew of his identity as the Son of God right from the start . . . while acknowledging that the awareness of this identity only came to him through his mission, communicated by the Spirit. This would exclude the 'beatific vision' of God, at least for periods." See *Theo-Drama, Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 195.
11. Without further explication, Brotherton's claims that "it seems fitting . . . for Christ to possess the *visio immediata* (or *visio beatifica*) during his entire earthly life (including death) . . . according to Balthasarian-Speyrian reasoning" and that Balthasar "nowhere state[s] that the '*visio mortis*' involves the loss of the *visio immediata Dei*" seem to contradict some of Balthasar's own statements. See *One of the Trinity Has Suffered*, 81, 108–9. Angela Franks also suggests that Balthasar's treatment of Christ's *visio beata* is inconsistent. See Angela Franks, "Thomistic-Balthasarian Comments on Thomas Joseph White's *The Incarnate Lord*," *Nova et Vetera*, English edition 20, no. 2 (2022): 586n29.
12. By "late," I refer to Balthasar's dramatic soteriology that matures since his *Mysterium Paschale* and *Theodramtik* period. See Edward Oakes, "Balthasar, Early and Late," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 4 (2007): 617–23. Balthasar also presents the teaching of the beatific vision in a traditional and noncontroversial way in his earlier works; see Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2, *Spouse of the Word*, trans. Edward Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 68; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, *Spirit and Institution*, trans. Edward Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 441; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (London: SPCK, 1975), 22–31.

works of Thomas Dalzell, Aidan Nichols, and Anne Carpenter. Dalzell and Nichols both point out that Balthasar has a way of understanding God's economy of salvation "on the basis of the theatre, of drama."[13] In the prolegomena of *Theodramatik*, Balthasar considers the created realm as a "world theatre" (*Welttheater*), the idea that the world is (like) a stage where individuals and all of their actions play certain roles in God's drama (i.e., the theo-drama). Balthasar makes it clear that he takes the "model" (and metaphor) of the theatre as a "promising point of departure for a study of theo-drama."[14] For him, theological aesthetics has drawn beholders of Christ into the realization that they are in and a part of God's drama, seeing themselves as participants who do not merely envision themselves on the theatre stage, but "really act on it."[15] Thus, for Balthasar, both drama and theatre are concerned with praxis and the interplay between infinite and finite freedom, the former from God and the latter from human beings. Based on this view, Nichols rightly notes that Balthasar rejects those perspectives that view God's salvation as mere "ideas, attitudes, or stories."[16] Instead, for Balthasar, the triune God calls every individual to be a participant in his drama of salvation rather than a mere spectator viewing from a distance.[17]

In addition, Carpenter has shown that Balthasar's discourse, from which the theo-drama has taken its form, has an intrinsic poetic quality alongside its propositional reasoning. In other words, Balthasar's discourse involves an "interplay" between various forms of knowledge, including both theological knowledge and artistic knowledge.[18] Thus, "any confrontation with Balthasar's work must . . . respond to his unique knowledge of both theological propositions *and* art."[19]

Dalzell, Nichols, and Carpenter have contributed to the dramatic and artistic-poetic grounding of Balthasar's theological dramatics, but none of them has extended their studies to examine Balthasar's view on the beatific vision. To this end, in this article, I go beyond the current discussion by showing that in the *Theodramatik*, Balthasar essentially rejects an overly abstract and undramatic understanding of the beatific vision, which he associates with his neo-Scholastic teachers. In the *Theodramatik*, "undramatic" is a term Balthasar uses to depict an uninvolving and overly speculative approach of understanding the reality of God and his salvific work in history.[20] Thus,

13. Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2011), 49; also see Thomas Dalzell, *The Dramatic Encounter of Divine and Human Freedom in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000).
14. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 11–12.
15. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 1:18.
16. Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar*, 49.
17. Dalzell, *Dramatic Encounter*, 123–27.
18. Anne Carpenter, *Theo-Poetics: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Risk of Art and Being* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 4.
19. Carpenter, *Theo-Poetics*, 2 (emphasis in original).
20. Balthasar uses the term "undramatic" periodically in the *Theodramatik*. See, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 81; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 53, 76, 111, 199, 327, 383.

this "undramatic" view of the beatific vision is essentially a foil that Balthasar employs to highlight where he believes the Catholic teaching of it should be located: in the setting of theo-drama wherein God is involved as the ultimate author of the whole drama of salvation. I then argue that while the notion of vision and its accompanying metaphor of "seeing" traditionally occupy a central place in the understanding of the beatific vision, Balthasar reconceives them according to his aesthetic-dramatic mode of discourse. Within this mode of discourse, he chooses to transpose what tradition refers to as the beatific vision into an art form suitable for action and performance based on the model of the theatre. This results in his depiction of Christ's *visio immediata Dei* and *visio mortis* to elucidate the meaning of the beatific vision. This elucidation primarily involves interpreting the "seeing" of the divine essence as a union of love in conversation with the Thomistic perspective of an immediate and perfect knowledge of God.

In the discussion below, I firstly identify a central motif in Balthasar's theology, namely glory. Unfolding how Balthasar comprehends human beings' realization of the objectivity of glory in the world will bring clarity with regard to why he decides to identify and frame God's redemptive glory (theological aesthetics) by the way of theodramatic theory. I then proceed to show how the church's teaching of the beatific vision is transposed within the context of the theo-drama, presented through five acts. In the first act, I lay the groundwork that Balthasar's dynamic concept of glory incorporates the notion of *visio* within the framework of drama. In the second act, I demonstrate that God's glory (as depicted by Balthasar as an active and yet kenotic reality) is manifested to us through the incarnate Son who recapitulated all things on the stage of world theatre. In the third act, I unpack how the drama substitutes the concepts of *visio immediata* and the mission-consciousness of Christ for the beatific vision. In the fourth act, I examine Balthasar's scenic depiction of the descent. And in the final act, I discuss how Balthasar addresses the church's eschatological participation in the triune life, in which the church's growth in God's life is made possible through active participation in God's drama rather than an undramatic vision of God. By incorporating the notion of "vision" within a dramatic framework, I will show that Balthasar has transposed the teaching of the beatific vision to align with the art form of drama.

The Soteriological Context of the Theatrical Play: The Recovery of Glory

The glory of God is the central theological motif that Balthasar retrieves from the Christian tradition in the *Herrlichkeit*. Balthasar proposes to move past the impasse caused by modernity in which the transcendentality of beauty is reduced to being merely subjective. For Balthasar, the issue of the loss of beauty can be traced back to the late medieval period: when the rationalistic framework of Duns Scotus's voluntarist epistemology and the mystical theology of Meister Eckhart both intensified the increasing separation between philosophical aesthetics and theological aesthetics.[21]

21. John Dadosky, *The Eclipse and Recovery of Beauty* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 11–12.

On the one hand, Scotus's voluntarist epistemology views the concept of being as a neutral and autonomous concept that can be studied by us without explicit references to the universals, including the universality of beauty. On the other hand, Eckhart's mystical ontology, by noetically leaning toward the convergence of the Creator-creature distinction, does not explicitly provide a robust grounding for the absolute transcendence of the glory of God.[22] Furthermore, Balthasar observes that the radical subjectivization of beauty culminated in the modern era. John Dadosky, and more recently Matthew Levering, both note that Balthasar was well aware that Immanuel Kant's three critiques (*The Critique of Pure Reason, The Critique of Practical Reason*, and *The Critique of Judgement*) fortified the loss of the transcendence of beauty in modernity.[23] Since Kant's epistemology insists that it is strictly the autonomy of the rational self that prescribes the acquiring of knowledge, the noumenal world—and the possibility of the transcendental properties of being (including beauty) being disclosed by intellectual investigation—is beyond the rational purview of a human mind. This is the reason why Balthasar's trilogy (*Herrlichkeit, Theodramatik*, and *Theologik*) can be read as a theological response to how Kant's three critiques both subjectivize and relativize the transcendentality of truth, goodness, and beauty.[24]

The recovery of glory is crucial for Balthasar, because glory (i.e., beauty) is the language in and through which we speak about God and his relationship with the world according to divine revelation. In *My Work: In Retrospect*, Balthasar remarks that glory is concerned with helping and preparing us to "see God's revelation . . . because God can be known only in his Lordliness and sublimity."[25] Moreover, "God does not come primarily as a teacher for us ('true'), as a useful redeemer for us ('good') but to display and to radiate himself as the splendor of his eternal triune love . . . with true beauty."[26] In other words, the self-emptying love of the triune God constitutes his glory. It is out of the glory of God's love that the world was created *ex nihilo*; and it is also out of the glory of the kenotic essence of God that the Son is sent out by the Father to bring redemption to the fallen world that God so loved (Jn 3:16).[27]

22. Dadosky, *The Eclipse and Recovery of Beauty*, 12–13.
23. Dadosky, *The Eclipse and Recovery of Beauty*, 15. Dadosky draws his thought from Armand Maurer, *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation* (Houston, TX: University of St. Thomas, 1983), 25–26. On this point Matthew Levering similarly insists that Balthasar's *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* is an implicit "Kantian critique of Kant." See Levering, *Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 26–82.
24. Dadosky, *The Eclipse and Recovery of Beauty*, 12. Levering's categorization varies from Dadosky's view, which I am expositing here. For Levering, the *Theo-Drama* is more explicitly a "Hegelian critique of Hegel," and the *Theo-Logic* can be viewed as a "Nietzschean critique of Nietzsche."
25. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect*, trans. Brain McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 80.
26. Balthasar, *My Work*, 80.
27. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. 3, *The Spirit of Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 63–84.

According to Balthasar, the recovery of the objectivity and the revelatory content of divine glory does not mean our subjective grasp of it has become unimportant. On the contrary, he insists that divine glory also requires us to learn "to see God's revelation."[28] For Balthasar, as we seek beauty and wholeness, "the effect of beautiful forms on the soul" would direct us to encounter the good and the true along with the beautiful, and thus further direct our soul to the glory of the Lord.[29] Consequently, "the person who is touched by a ray of . . . glory and has an incipient sensibility for what . . . love is can learn to see the presence of the divine love in Jesus Christ."[30] Using Balthasarian language, the "primal form" in each of us is a unity of God-given body-spirit in existence. By the gratuitous aid of the illumination and recapitulation of the incarnate Son, as the "Christ-form," our primal form is transformed into the "life form" in which we become capable of spiritually gazing upon "the form of existence" in love and without fear (1 Jn 4:18). Through this transformation, we also gain the capacity to appreciate the beatific reality in which the triune God is for us in our union with him.[31] It will become clear that Balthasar understands our vision of God primarily as a participation in the communion of love within the life of the triune God. He develops this understanding by transposing the neo-Scholastic understanding of the beatific vision into the context of Christ's recapitulation of creation in the theo-drama.

Act I: Dramatic Glory

Balthasar's central concern regarding divine glory is primarily theological rather than philosophical. This explains why a detailed investigation regarding the development of the subjective turn of philosophical aesthetics is not within the purview of the *Herrlichkeit*. Rather, Balthasar is more concerned with how God's glory may be fully actualized by the dramatic play of the economic Trinity, made accessible to us through the covenantal history of Israel that culminated in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Through his death on the cross, followed by the descent, the Resurrection, and the ascension, Christ recapitulated the cosmos and called the church to participate in his incarnational mission until the final eschatological act. For this reason, theological aesthetics is viewed by Balthasar as the preparation for our involvement in the theo-drama.

This soteriological context as understood by Balthasar has decisive ramifications, because the play script of the theo-drama, as recorded by scriptural and Christian witnesses, contains explicit action components, in which a characteristically undramatic and nonparticipatory way of conceiving the vision does not fit. On this basis, Ben Quash rightly recognizes that, in Balthasar's view, the theological aesthetic is understood under "the rubric of contemplation."[32] On the contrary, the theodramatic theory

28. Balthasar, *My Work*, 80.
29. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009), 115.
30. Balthasar, *My Work*, 80.
31. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 1:22–24.
32. Ben Quash, "The Theo-Drama," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 143. Balthasar notes elsewhere, "God does not want to be just 'contemplated' and 'perceived' by us, like a solitary actor by his public . . . from the beginning he has provided for a play in which we must all share." See *My Work*, 97.

deals "with *action*, both God's and ours."[33] Quash further comments that Balthasar seems to believe that the aesthetics of *visio* connotes a "too-individualistic idea of contemplation" that is not "fruitful to the church," because the church's mission is to "'radiate out' into the active apostolate."[34] For Balthasar, since the aesthetic pertains to our visual perception of the beautiful object, it in the end requires another more fitting conceptual framework to take full account of the dynamic phenomenon of glory.[35] Therefore, the aesthetic must "surrender itself and go in search of new categories" that would do fuller justice to God's redemptive drama and would identify the church's participation in the theo-drama.[36]

Given Balthasar's dramatic portrayal of glory, it is unsurprising that he seeks to reorient the language of vision toward a direction of praxis. For instance, he notes that to describe "God's entrusting of Himself to us as *visio Dei* is always an inadequate and one sided portrayal of [the] open encounter" between God and human beings, "since God can never be an object totally available to our sight."[37] Moreover, "if we wish to keep the metaphor of 'vision,'" Balthasar writes, "we must speak in the dialectical terms of the highest presence of something that is 'beyond all that we can grasp.'"[38] What Balthasar means by the "dialectical presence" that is beyond our grasp is that "God's infinite life is a freedom that cannot be plumbed . . . and beheld" by the way of gazing as a bystander of the drama.[39] The self-disclosure of God's infinite life, as characteristically the free sharing of self-emptying love, is most vividly made known to us by the protagonist on the stage of world theatre, namely Christ the "mediator" who bridged the hiatus between God and human beings, between holiness and sin.[40] To sum up, Balthasar aims to reorient the notion of vision so that it aligns with a dramatic understanding of God's glory. The next act will show the underpinning reasons for which he makes this move.

Act II: Christ's Cosmic Recapitulation

I now turn to the way in which the theodramatic theory reframes glory through a christocentric script that centers on the Incarnation. A foundationally Irenaean feature of salvation—in which the Incarnation is viewed as a process of Christ's recapitulation of the corrupted Adamic race—is a theodramatic trope that Balthasar retrieves from the patristic tradition in order to illustrate the realization of God's glory in human

33. Quash, "The Theo-Drama," 143 (emphasis in original).
34. Quash, "The Theo-Drama," 144.
35. Quash, "The Theo-Drama," 144–45. Also see Dalzell, *Dramatic Encounter*, 200–222; Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 1:16–17.
36. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 1:16.
37. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), 395–96.
38. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:396.
39. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:396.
40. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:17. In Balthasar's understanding, the church, which models after Christ, is another main actor. See *Theo-Drama*, 2:11–17.

history.[41] Kevin Mongrain has shown that Balthasar retrieves the theology of Irenaeus because he is convinced that he and Irenaeus both faced the same kind of intellectual opponents, namely (and on Balthasar's part, analogically speaking) "gnosticism." Whereas the gnosticism of Irenaeus's time had a distorted theory of redemption, Balthasar detects a different version of it in an influential strand of neo-Scholastic thought.[42]

Thus, Balthasar juxtaposes ancient and contemporary "gnostics" to argue that both are troublesome, because their shared "abstract theories of redemption" have inversed "the glorification of creation" into "the negation of creation."[43] Balthasar uses this sort of rhetoric to charge his opponents with turning humanity's embodied participation in divine glory into abstract and overly rationalistic speculations about glory.[44] Thus, his uneasiness with a neo-Scholastic view of understanding of the beatific vision stems from his reaction against the tendency that this strand of thought has abstracted Christian theology into fragmented dogmatic depictions.[45] In Balthasar's view, this

41. See Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad, 2002). The sources that shaped Balthasar's thoughts are multifaceted, ranging from the Church Fathers to diverse figures such as Henri de Lubac, Karl Barth, and Adrienne von Speyr. See Aidan Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 23–123. Quash comments that Balthasar is "an inveterate *typologiser*, especially in his ecclesiology," and Irenaean theology does not relate to "everything" that Balthasar wrote. See Ben Quash, review of *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, by Kevin Mongrain, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62, no. 1 (2009): 133–34. Nevertheless, on how Balthasar understands the progression of God's redemptive drama, it seems to me that it is central that Balthasarian soteriology views Christ as the New Adam, and the aim of Christ's mission is recapitulation—by which the God-man relationship is reconciled. Balthasar repeatedly addresses Christ's identity as the New Adam who redeems creation in the *Theodramatik*. See *Theo-Drama*, 2:140–49, 187, 406–9; *Theo-Drama*, 3:34–35, 232, 269, 283–311; *Theo-Drama*, 4:66–67, 110, 172, 187, 335–36, 352, 474, 487; *Theo-Drama*, 5:30, 280, 506–7. Also see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 147–50; Mongrain, *Systematic Thought*, 42, 88, 94; Nicholas Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 102, 104, 154; Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness*, 154–55, 215, 235, 309; Lefsrud, *Kenosis in Theosis*, 197–98, 203–4.

42. Mongrain, *Systematic Thought*, 2–3. For further discussions on Balthasar's sweeping criticism of many of his neo-Thomist teachers, see Levering, *Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 208; Christopher Ruddy, "*Ressourcement* and the Enduring Legacy of Post-Tridentine Theology," in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, ed. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 185–201.

43. Mongrain, *Systematic Thought*, 37. Balthasar charges the "gnostics" to try to "trace [the Christian mystery of the God-man, the Incarnation] to a source in the Absolute, so rendering it accessible to reason." He also suggests that "this suppression of Christian faith by speculation begins as early as the second century . . . post-Christian Gnosticism." See *Theo-Drama*, 2:419.

44. Mongrain, *Systematic Thought*, 37.

45. Regarding the estrangement between neo-Scholastic and *ressourcement* theologians, Levering advocates a "rapprochement" between them. See Levering, *Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 227.

approach of theologizing has dismantled the cohesion of the unabridged theo-drama. As a result, he categorizes the aesthetics of *visio* in an undramatic way and has conveyed his skepticism about what his neo-Scholastic teachers refer to as the "beatific vision." In short, the backdrop of Balthasar's unease with an undramatic view of the beatific vision originates from his concern regarding how the teaching is being understood within an abstract and nonparticipatory framework.

Furthermore, Balthasar not only draws from the pre-Nicene theologian Irenaeus but also relies on the pro-Nicene and neo-Chalcedonian theologian Maximus the Confessor.[46] Maximus's interpretation of Chalcedonian Christology is the foundation on which Balthasar grounds his understanding of the mission-consciousness of Christ.[47] Similar to Irenaeus and Maximus, Balthasar conceives Christ as the New Adam whose mission is to recapitulate the errors made by the Old Adam. In doing so, God may be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28) through his redemptive glory, bringing healing to the corrupted *imago Dei*.[48]

Although Balthasar follows the Irenaean script in spotlighting the Incarnation according to the lens of Christ's redemption of the Adamic race, he nevertheless elaborates the Irenaean doctrine of recapitulation in accordance with his own theodramatic theory. Irenaeus's depiction of the drama of salvation strictly focuses on the incarnation of the Word in a particular duration of human history. This specific period serves as a context in which Christ recapitulated the fallen Adamic race.[49] By contrast, Balthasar's peculiar understanding of the history of theology enables him to juxtapose "Christ time" (or, "supra-time") in the trinitarian procession with "created time" (or, "human time") in which Christ's salvation is wrought in the economy.[50] In doing so, Balthasar extends the Irenaean depiction of Christ's redemption from explicitly the duration of the Incarnation all the way *back* to the trinitarian procession. The theodrama in play, thus, is in effect displaying a glimpse of the soteriological context of the incarnate Son beyond the historical event of the Incarnation: all of human history is a

46. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 207–75; Mark McIntosh, *Christology from within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1996), 39–43; Cyril O'Regan, "Von Balthasar and Thick Retrieval: Post-Chalcedonian Symphonic Theology," *Gregorianum* 77, no. 2 (1996): 227–60.

47. See Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 7–10.

48. After all, the Second Adam has stepped "forth to provide a new start for the whole race." See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:187.

49. See Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, bk. 3, trans. Dominic Unger (New York: Newman Press, 2012), 103–10 (*AH* III.22–23).

50. See Gerard O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 88–109. Also see especially the first chapter ("Christ's Mode of Time") of Hans Urs von Balthasar's *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994) as well as *Theo-Drama*, 4:85–135. Balthasar views Christ as both the cosmic Logos and a particular human person who, in his oneness, unites the dialectics between the universal and the particular.

part of "Christ time," and the impetus of the Son's mission in human history is grounded upon his eternal procession.[51]

Based on this theological difference between Irenaeus and Balthasar, the latter views the notion of "God's humanity" as a dramatically unfolding axiom, by which Christ's mission-consciousness is essentially the economic extension of his procession. Balthasar wants to emphasize that in the Adamic experiences and decisions that the incarnate Son had to make on earth, the Son proved "that existence in [the] tension [of the human struggles of inhumanity] is livable, in fact, that it is the solution to the riddle of the 'Old Adam' and brings release from his torment."[52] Although Christ's humanity has only been showcased in particular acts of the play, Balthasar's rationale is that all active participants in the theo-drama would realize that the "true humanity" of Christ encompasses not only "the humanity of man but also the humanity of God."[53] Through this backdrop, the centrality of the Son's mission holds a prominent place in the theo-drama. And once participants recognize that the trinitarian processions form the backdrop of the theo-drama, they will come to understand that Christ's possession of the beatific vision need not be denied.

For Balthasar, the "theodramatic war" inaugurated by the Incarnation is another elaboration based on the doctrine of recapitulation that is incorporated into the theodramatic play.[54] Christ's consistent decisions to say "yes" to divine commands and say "no" to satanic temptations mean that he "recapitulated the warfare we wage with our enemy," and that "he has not dispensed us from fighting our own battle."[55] Since

51. See Yenson's discussion on "Trinitarian Inversion" in *Existence as Prayer*, 137–47. Balthasar's peculiar Christology also raises questions about how one understands components in his Christology that lean toward the (dramatic) scheme of (what Karl Barth scholars call) "actualism." Junius Johnson, for example, observes that "Balthasar's own reflection [on the Incarnation] privileges reflection on the incarnate Christ over reflection on the pre-incarnate Christ." And "in making the incarnate Christ the inner meaning of Christ the exemplar quickly raises the supralapsarian question" (i.e., whether God's election is prior to creation and fall, and whether the Incarnation is a necessity). See Johnson, *Christ and Analogy: The Christocentric Metaphysics of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 124. Perhaps the theodramatic theory's prioritization of God's act in Christ in the economy, being predominantly definitive of who God is, as well as Balthasar's revolt against and revision of Hegelian metaphysics, as a combination, would qualify his complex thought in the scheme of "actualism." On Balthasar's engagement with Hegel's thought, see Levering, *Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 83–149; on (theological) actualism, see, for example, Paul Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); Shao Kai Tseng, "Barth on Actualistic Ontology," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, vol. 2, ed. George Hunsinger and Keith Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 739–51. Besides Johnson's and Yenson's preliminary explorations, Balthasar studies have thus far been relatively quiet on this (perhaps "Barthian") dimension of Balthasar's thinking.
52. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:406.
53. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:406, 4:427.
54. Mongrain, *Systematic Thought*, 42.
55. Mongrain, *Systematic Thought*, 42; Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:21.

the incarnate Son's "yes" that glorifies the Father is essentially a series of acts of "faith" arising from the Son's mission-consciousness in this act of the theo-drama, Balthasar sought to reconceive the neo-Scholastic understanding of Christ's beatific vision from his conception onward, so that this Catholic teaching suits the format of drama and the model of the theatre as well.

Act III: Christ's Mission-Consciousness

The theo-drama has thus substituted the more temporal concept of the *visio immediata* for the beatific vision. Balthasar believes that this move is appropriate, because based on the perspective of the drama, having "a certain kind of not knowing is a paradoxical perfection of the very *human* expression of Jesus's divinely originated mission from the Father."[56] Within the framework of drama, Christ's mission-consciousness and his immediate vision of God have been highlighted.[57]

Although Balthasar dismisses what he views to be an undramatic understanding of the beatific vision, his preferred way of thinking about Christ's mission-consciousness and his immediate vision of God nevertheless retain the meaning of what the tradition refers to as the beatific vision. Here, Thomas Aquinas's view that Jesus (in his human soul) "enjoyed the beatific vision even in his pre-resurrectional earthly life" is in view.[58] For Aquinas, all throughout the Incarnation, Christ possesses the beatific vision. Due to the hypostatic union, Christ is capable of seeing the divine essence. Placed in conversation with Aquinas's understanding, Balthasar's dramatic rendition of the *visio immediata* does not, I believe, contradict what the Angelic Doctor teaches. It is just that, in this act of the play, the persona of Jesus Christ only wishes to reveal certain aspects of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Thus, by conceiving Christ's vision in terms of the *visio immediata* in the play, "whereby Jesus knows whatever the Father chooses to reveal to him in the moment," Balthasar essentially aims to avoid "both a naïve conception of [Christ's vision] as well as an overly abstract understanding of it."[59]

In fact, the notion of mission-consciousness allows Balthasar to retain the classical Thomistic position that the "Son's *missio* is his *processio* extended in 'economic' mode," even though Balthasar combines this Thomistic teaching with his own peculiar christocentric understanding of history.[60] In his view, the Son's mission-consciousness

56. Christopher Hadley, "The Archetypal Faith of Christ," *Theological Studies* 81, no. 3 (2020), 684, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563920958147 (emphasis in original).
57. See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:149–261.
58. See Hadley, "Archetypal Faith of Christ," 684. On important discussions of Thomas's understanding of the beatific vision, see Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 236–74; Robert Llizo, "The Vision of God: St. Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision and Resurrected Bodies," *Perichoresis* 17, no. 2 (2019), 19–26, https://doi.org/10.2478/perc-2019-0014.
59. Brotherton, *One of the Trinity Has Suffered*, 119.
60. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:356; Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 182.

is grounded upon the procession of the Second Person of the Trinity in the mode of *Logos ensarkos* (rather than conceptually the *Logos arsarkos*) in relation to the Father.[61] Through a dramatic soteriology on display in human history, Christ's mission-consciousness is enacted by the humanity of God in Jesus Christ on stage, revealing the character traits of the God-Man and his theandric activity in this act of the theo-drama.

Although Balthasar decides to underscore the freedom of Christ's human consciousness and will in the theo-drama, studies have shown that his position does not regress into "verbal monophysitism," but shows doctrinal continuities with Maximian neo-Chalcedonianism.[62] Balthasar does not hold to the Monothelite position that fuses Christ's human nature with his divine nature into a singular divine-human nature consisting a singular consciousness and will.[63] Instead, Balthasar's point of emphasizing the mission-consciousness of Christ in the drama needs to be understood within the christological framework of Maximus, in which Christ is a Person (hypostasis) consisting of two natures and two wills without confusion and mixture. Here, Balthasar aims to show that, within the dramatic context of "mission," in this act of the play, Jesus Christ has only showcased the human aspect of his consciousness and will.[64] Balthasar makes this move despite clearly knowing that "the mission of which Jesus is aware is the mission of the only Son. He knows that, as man, he freely does what, as Logos, he wills to do."[65] Thus, Balthasar continues, "as Irenaeus says, [the Son] 'takes up his dwelling' as a man among men, measuring the immeasurable realm of the *analogia entis* as the strides through it, identifying himself (who is God) with this being (man) on the verge of the void."[66] The protagonist acting in human history is the incarnate Son. This Person (hypostasis), the Son, is the concrete analogy of being that reveals not only to creation the attributes of the Creator but also that the Son is ultimately one with the Divine Author of the whole drama.[67]

Two further remarks to supplement this understanding of Balthasar's move: first, he views the doctrinal concept of *enhypostasis* as the basis upon which the full human nature of Jesus Christ is safeguarded in the eternal Logos.[68] Christ's humanity does not have an independent existence apart from the Logos. Second, Balthasar follows a Chalcedonian pattern, basing *enhypostasis* upon the logic of the hypostatic union, such that Christ's mission-consciousness and immediate vision are, ultimately, pertaining to

61. See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:410, *Theo-Drama*, 3:228, 256; Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 90, 99, 143.
62. Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 12; O'Regan, "Von Balthasar and Thick Retrieval," 229–54.
63. Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 126.
64. For Balthasar, the notion of mission "creates an inner bond between the doctrine of the immanent Trinity and the Three Persons revealed in revelation and in the economy of salvation." Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:515n1.
65. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:227.
66. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:227.
67. See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:203; *Theo-Drama*, 3:222; Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 80–84; Dalzell, *Dramatic Encounter*, 75–78.
68. See Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 230–31; Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:216–19; Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 35–38, 88–90.

the Person (hypostasis) of the Son rather than to merely his human consciousness and will.

In *Cosmic Liturgy*, Balthasar follows Maximus in outlining what he thought to be an optimal way of understanding the "mechanism" of the hypostatic union in his operative Christology.[69] On the one hand, Balthasar disregards the Monothelite way of understanding the mechanism of the hypostatic union as a "synthesis through a 'prevalence' or 'domination' of the divine will (and being) over the human."[70] On the other hand, the hypostatic union also should not be understood in a Nestorian fashion as the synthesis of two "persons." Following Maximus, Balthasar's solution to both the Alexandrian and the Antiochene impasses is to return to the foundation of Chalcedon and make hypostasis axiomatic. Balthasar notes, "It is certainly the Word becoming flesh, considered 'from above,' who is the power behind the synthesis; he is this power, both in his freedom as a person and in the absolute reality of his divine being that is inseparable from that freedom."[71] On this view, the synthesis between Christ's human nature and the Divine Person of the Son does not result in the overshadowing of the former to the latter. This is because nature, as such, is not a person (e.g., a "real existence" in relation); but at the same time there also cannot be a person without nature.[72] Divine and human natures are what constituted the person of Christ. Therefore, in the case of the Incarnation, there is no such thing as a Person of the Logos without two natures. Moreover, the person of the incarnate Son does not "produce" a "synthetic nature," divine and human, because doing so would imply that the Son is not of "the same nature as the Father, and we would have been forced . . . to become Arians."[73] Christ does not produce natures; he is a Person of two natures. Essentially, the relationship between person and nature is defined by the communication of idioms, in which there is "interpenetration without mixture" and "unity without confusion."[74] As such, the synthesis between divine Logos and the human nature and mission-consciousness of Christ are capable of interpenetrating "each other without being diminished in themselves."[75]

According to this Maximian understanding of the mechanism of the hypostatic union, "the synthesis of the person, then, consists only in the fact that the positive subject—the Divine Person, who is God in very essence—has the freedom to be himself even outside himself: that is, in the created realm."[76] On the basis of the freedom of the Divine Person, Balthasar then would affirm that in the "space" between the Divine Person and the human nature, one can speak of the freedom of nature as well.[77] Although the freedom of the nature of Christ is grounded upon the freedom of

69. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 207–75. Relevant discussions can also be seen in *Theo-Drama*, 3:214–29 and *Theo-Logic* 2:128–57.
70. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 251.
71. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 253.
72. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 212–13.
73. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 213.
74. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 233.
75. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 234.
76. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 255.
77. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 255.

the will of the hypostasis of Christ, the former is not being acted upon "passively" by the hypostasis, as Monophysites have argued.[78] According to Balthasar's understanding, it is pertinent to assert that Christ, in the freedom of his human nature and will, is capable of having a beatific vision (in the mode of the *visio immediata*). The fact that Christ possesses a vision of God in both his human will and his divine will (as the Divine Person) should be understood together in a complementary, noncompetitive manner. This is analogous to Maximus's argument that the Christ who walked on the sea of Galilee was and is a "superhuman"; and yet he was and is also a human: being a "superhuman" capable of walking on water does not demolish the fact that he is a full human being.[79] Again, according to the logic of the communication of idioms, "the two wills remain themselves, unconfused, as far as they can be united in a single [theandric] actively."[80]

As mentioned, Balthasar's appropriation of Maximian logic suggests that the ontological interpenetration (e.g., the *perichoretic* movement) between Christ's divine and human natures, as a unity, does not result in a confusion of the two natures and wills.[81] As a result, the point of convergence between Christ's divine consciousness and his human consciousness is located in the person of the incarnate Son, and, thus, in the very (apophatic) essence of the triune God in which the Father-Son relationship is revealed in this act of the play as "mission," in a dramatic fashion.[82] In doing so, Christ's interiority—whether it is his self-understanding of mission through Mary or "his unique sense of being the Son of his heavenly *Abba*"—"belongs to the order of person, not to the order of nature."[83] To sum up, Mark Yenson rightly insists that "what we encounter in Jesus of Nazareth is none other than the person of the Son *as* a human individual, who has made himself subject to the economy."[84]

Based on how Balthasar understands Christ's mission-consciousness, as I have explicated above, it could be argued that because Christ is a person, there is *no* period in the Incarnation when he did not have the consciousness of the beatific vision.[85] Although Balthasar wants to avoid an undramatic understanding of the beatific vision, I maintain that his trinitarian and christological thought is positioned to retain this Catholic teaching. In this act of the drama of the Incarnation, some aspects of Christ's

78. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 228.
79. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 261.
80. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 262.
81. According to a Maximian understanding, the eternal perichoresis of divine and human natures, respectively, "differ at the root level, in conformity with the essences of their respective natures." That is, they "cannot be alike" and should be understood in a noncompetitive way. See Elena Vishnevskaya, "Divinization as Perichoretic Embrace in Maximus the Confessor," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael Christensen and Jeffery Wittung (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 133.
82. Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 126.
83. Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 126.
84. Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 126–27 (emphasis added).
85. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:509.

divine attributes have yet to be showcased. Thus, Balthasar decides to talk about Christ's possession of an immediate vision of God instead of the beatific vision.

In the *Theodramatik*, Balthasar clearly acknowledges that Christ's mission-consciousness involves an a priori dimension (his self-evidential knowledge of God). However, Balthasar also notices that there is another dimension of Christ's mission-consciousness that is "not always explicit," and is "only obscurely and indirectly felt or left entirely to the Father's guidance."[86] This strong tension between Jesus's a priori knowledge of God and his passive reliance on the Father's guidance as an act of obedience is another reason why in this act Balthasar prefers to speak of the *visio immediata* instead of the *visio beatifica*. For Balthasar, Christ's *visio immediata* affirms that he "has a basic consciousness of his divine sonship, but this basic consciousness is not necessarily available in explicit, categorical terms: it . . . affords the possibility of genuine advancement and learning in human knowledge."[87] Again, in this act of the theo-drama, the economic characteristic of the Son's mission is revealed.

By speaking of the *visio immediata*, Balthasar is essentially reorienting the language of vision in accordance to the logic of drama. Thus Christ's faith in the drama implies that he possesses an immediate vision. In the *Theodramatik*, Balthasar notes that "faith itself is a seal of the vision of God," it is the "*inchoatio visionis*."[88] In other words, at the beginning of Christ's earthly life, his vision of God was indirect. The theo-drama is thus plotted in a way that although Christ is the eternal Son of God, he is—in the kenosis—also a human being who needs to go through the process of immersing himself in the paideia of being trained to acquire a perfect knowledge of God (that is, to see God). In this act of the play, what becomes evident is thus Christ's reliance on fellowship with the Father through prayer, guided by the Spirit.[89]

To be sure, one should not (falsely) suggest that a Thomistic perspective on the beatific vision would either deny the Son's shared fellowship with the Father or underestimate the Spirit's irreplaceable co-mission alongside the Son. That would be far from accurate. Yet here is an instance where, although Balthasar seemingly rejected the neo-Scholastic view of the beatific vision (understood as a perfect knowledge of God), Balthasar nevertheless purposefully transposes the way in which the beatific vision is understood by the Catholic tradition into (metaphorically speaking) a kind of "play script" (as the *visio immediata*) that can be performed by the main actor in the theo-drama. On the basis of the co-mission between the Father's sending forth of the

86. Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 128.
87. Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 130–31.
88. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:148.
89. See Mark McIntosh's remarks on Balthasar's understanding of the Spirit's role in Christ's mission, noting that "during the time of [Christ's] earthly ministry . . . the Spirit as the bond of freedom and love of the Father and Son becomes the One who 'sends' the Son into the world and continues to send and direct him. What Balthasar wants to make clear from this is that the Spirit's guidance and rule in Jesus's life is not a diminution of Jesus's freedom, because the Spirit remains 'within' him; his predisposition to receive and send the Spirit ensures that his human experience of the Spirit is not heteronomous." *Christology from within*, 49.

Son and the Spirit, the obedience of the Son, and the Spirit's role alongside with the Son recorded by scriptural witnesses in salvation history, the drama has captured scenic depictions of Christ's awareness of his trinitarian mission. The pre-Resurrection period of the theo-drama does not directly reveal whether Christ possesses the beatific vision during the duration of the Incarnation or not. Christ's mission in the mode of kenosis seems to convey that he only possesses an indirect vision and knowledge of God, despite the fact that (in dialogue with the Thomist tradition) Balthasar does acknowledge that Christ's indirect vision is—retrospectively speaking—nevertheless a perfect one (but one that the theo-drama wants to keep concealed for a moment) due to the irreducible revelation that Jesus Christ *is* a trinitarian Person.

The theo-drama tends not to showcase Christ's beatific knowledge anytime prior to the Resurrection. Balthasar certainly thinks that according to the narrative of the theo-drama, it is fitting to envision the persona of Jesus Christ performing on the stage of world theatre primarily as a man who can be tempted. Following the logic of drama, we can say that spectators of the drama might not know the Son's true identity (that he is impeccable). But for active participants (i.e., the church) who have been persuaded by the whole gospel message of the theo-drama, they are, as Nichols rightly mentioned, not mere viewers of the drama but faithful actors in the play. Thus, they recognize that although Christ was facing temptation, he remains immune to sinning. Balthasar further explains:

> Jesus is aware of an element of the divine in his innermost . . . self-consciousness; it is intuitive insofar as it is inseparable from the intuition of his mission-consciousness, but it is defined and limited by this same mission-consciousness. It is of this, and of this alone, that he has a *visio immediata*, and we have no reason to suggest that this *visio* of the divine is supplemented by another . . . purely theoretical content, over and above his mission. Of course, the particular shape of the mission . . . can contain a wealth of content, successively revealed, but its source and measure remain the mission itself.[90]

Balthasar then goes on to note that "we can most definitely hold fast to the idea that Jesus knew of his identity as the Son of God right from the start . . . while acknowledging that the awareness of this identity only came to him through his mission, communicated by the Spirit. This would exclude the 'beatific vision' of God, at least for periods."[91]

Here, I have argued that what Balthasar essentially rejects is an undramatic understanding of the beatific vision. He has transposed Christ's beatific knowledge of God with snapshots of Christ, in his earthly life, possessing a *visio immediata*. Christ's immediate vision does not necessarily imply that Balthasar outright denies what tradition refers to as the beatific vision (i.e., the seeing of the divine essence via the possession of an immediate knowledge). I suggest one could also turn the tables and argue that Balthasar only wishes to "transpose" (rather than to "deny") the meaning of the beatific vision based upon the situatedness of the protagonist in the play. The eternal

90. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:166.
91. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:195.

Son of God was playing a lead role in an act about the Incarnation on the stage of world theatre. So does he have to spoil the plot and give away all of the scripts given to him? I think not. But as the narrative of the theo-drama unfolds, the true identity of Jesus as the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, and his possession of the beatific vision becomes fully apparent.

Nonetheless, it is certain that in the theo-drama, since Christ was called to recapitulate the First Adam, he was limited by his mission-consciousness in this act of the play. Christ the New Adam, as the main actor on the stage of world theatre, only plays the parts of the script given to him. Through the dialectic of "this Christology of consciousness," we come to know that Christ "is the one who gives meaning to the entire play . . . he embodies mankind's whole dramatic situation in its relationship to itself and to God."[92] Balthasar thus writes, it is "through the whole world drama that [Christ] actually *becomes* the Omega that . . . he always is. Only when the last enemy, death, is vanquished, when he has fulfilled his mission in the world in every last detail, can he lay at the Father's feet the kingdom he has thus won back, so that the Father may be 'all in all'" (1 Cor 15:28).[93]

Act IV: Christ's Descent

The kenotic impetus of the mission-consciousness of Christ led him to the very depth of human beings' existential estrangement. In Balthasar's view, the cross of Christ does not mark the end of the theodramatic war. Rather, the theodramatic war reached its culmination as Christ suffered in solidarity with the human race during Holy Saturday.

It has been said that Balthasar's understanding of Christ's descent is *sui generis*[94] in that it has no equivalent in the Catholic or broader Christian tradition.[95] According to Balthasar, Christ not only had the mode of *visio immediata* throughout his earthly ministry before the Resurrection but also experienced a "vision of death" (an act of engagement with the horror of sin, which represents everything polar opposite to life) during the descent.[96] Christ's vision of death implies that "the 'beatific vision of God' does not prevent the most spiritual parts of the soul of Christ from . . . suffering, since the entire sinful soul must be healed" and recapitulated.[97] The Pauline teaching in Philippians 2 on Christ's kenosis supports this view: Christ, who experienced the

92. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:201.
93. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:201–2 (emphasis in original).
94. See White, *Incarnate Lord*, 380.
95. Pitstick succinctly summarizes the standard Roman Catholic teaching on the *descensus* as follows: "Christ descended in his soul united to His divine Person only to the limbo of the Fathers. . . . His power and authority were made known throughout all of hell" and "thereby accomplished" the dual purposes of liberating "the just by conferring on them the glory of heaven and [proclaiming] his power"; after all, Christ "did not suffer the pain proper to any of the abodes of hell." See *Light in Darkness*, 342–43.
96. Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 170–73.
97. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:103–4.

condition of the "Godlessness" of the First Adam, was—like a sin offering—sacrificially "made sin" (2 Cor 5:21, DRB).[98]

Balthasar's understanding of Christ's descent into hell has thoroughly shown the dramatic tension in this act of the theo-drama. Since Christ's *visio mortis* is "an experience of the sinner, an experience of the furthest alienation of the creature from God," he essentially experienced a "second" (or, double) death in the descent.[99] Christ had experienced a prolonged state of forsakenness compounded by the events of both the cross and the descent in which he experienced the so-called second death.

Christ's *visio mortis* fits into the dramatic narrative of recapitulation. For Balthasar, this low point of the plot in God's redemption is juxtaposed with the theodramatic climax, revealing that "the descent of One alone into the abyss became the ascent of *all* from the same depths. . . . Without the Resurrection, Christ would sink into the abyss, but 'all' would not be raised. He must be, then, the 'first fruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20), the 'first-born from the dead' (Col 1:18)."[100] According to this hyper-dramatic expression of the descent, God's infinite love in Christ is acutely recognized by us as Christ experienced the condition of the deepest abyss which separates life and death. In consequence, Christ possessed a *visio mortis* during the descent, and his *visio Dei* (that is, his immediate vision of God during the duration of the Incarnation) seems to have been suspended until the Resurrection.

Here, the question in play is this: does Christ's vision of death imply the denial of his beatific vision? In *One of the Trinity Has Suffered*, Brotherton avers that Balthasar has never "affirmed outright that Christ's soul suffered the pains of Sheol while his body lay in the tomb . . . also nowhere does he state that the '*visio mortis*' involves the loss of the *visio immediata Dei*" (and the beatific vision).[101] Brotherton argues that even if Christ's "psychological awareness of his own blessed state of grace was temporarily suspended in becoming the object of the infinity of his Father's righteous anger" toward sin, Christ did not lose the "grace [and] charity" that are "connatural to his beatified soul."[102] By maintaining that Christ's vision of God is not totally lost during the descent, Brotherton offers an irenic reading of Balthasar's understanding of Christ's descent that is not ad hoc from a Thomistic point of view.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Brotherton valuably notes that Lois Miles's detailed study on Speyr's theology offers insightful perspective for us to ponder the inner logic of Balthasarian-Speyrian dramatic soteriology. Miles's analysis suggests that Speyr and Balthasar's understandings of the beatific vision are "more Scotistic than Thomistic, that is, as primarily a union of love rather than of knowledge," even if they have also incorporated elements of Thomistic thought.[103] As

98. Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 51.
99. Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 173; Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 170. This point is also made by Pitstick, see *Light in Darkness*, 202–10.
100. Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 53.
101. Brotherton, *One of the Trinity Has Suffered*, 108–9.
102. Brotherton, *One of the Trinity Has Suffered*, 109; also see Miles, "Obedience of a Corpse," 117–21.
103. Brotherton, *One of the Trinity Has Suffered*, 126.

a result, while Speyr and Balthasar "may deny the presence of the beatific vision in Christ's earthly consciousness when they are confronted with the Thomist conceptualization of it, they nonetheless *preserve* the doctrine in a Scotistic manner" by stressing Christ's beatitude as "a perfect union of love."[104] In other words, Speyr and Balthasar have reconceptualized the Thomistic articulation of the beatific vision, transposing it into a framework that construes Christian soteriology based upon the centrality of divine love. I suggest Brotherton and Miles offer valuable readings of Speyr-Balthasar. Although Balthasar aimed to rework a Thomistic understanding of *visio* as perfected knowledge in accordance with his theodramatic theory, his incorporation of kenosis consistently remains an overarching theme (if not *the* overarching theme) that penetrates through the core thrust of his works. This thrust underscores the idea that the self-emptying love of the trinitarian procession propels the trinitarian mission, and in doing so reincorporates creation into God's eternal love. Although Christ's *visio Dei* (whether it is understood as the beatific vision or Balthasar's dramatic reorientation of it, as the *visio immediata*) was not visible in this act about the descent, the theme of kenosis not only has continued but has become the soteriological climax. This climax of cosmic recapitulation is at its narrative apex even though it is epistemologically mystical. The kenosis of Godself is narratively most clearly made known to participants in the theo-drama; that is, the sinless Christ, in the movement of kenosis, actually had been emptied to an inconceivable state through which he became, once and for all, the sin offering on human beings' behalf.[105]

Moreover, what sinners encounter in Jesus Christ is the person of the Son, as a man, at work in the economy of salvation. Thus, according to the patristic axiom of the Great Exchange ("that which is not assumed is not healed") that Balthasar follows, "it is not simply Christ's divine nature *qua* nature, but the trinitarian mission constituting Christ's person that grounds the complete ontological exchange of places between Christ and the sinner."[106]

Thus according to this Balthasarian logic based on the Great Exchange, the death of Christ has become the entryway through which the kenosis of the person of the Son, who is one with the Godhead, has entered into the realm of death in order to both defeat death and resolve the issue of sin from within their own dominion. In this way of understanding, although this act on the *descensus* suggests that Christ had a vision of death instead of either a beatific vision or an immediate vision of God, it is clear that the person who defeated sin and death must be the trinitarian Son. The Son's union of

104. Brotherton, *One of the Trinity Has Suffered*, 126 (emphasis added). Also see Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:135.

105. Carpenter suggests that Balthasar's writings utilize a "hybridized structure" that incorporates a "poetic logic" in "theological-metaphysical presuppositions." Carpenter, *Theo-Poetics*, 137–38. In my view here is an instance where Balthasar's "poetic logic" and his metaphysical claim have collided together.

106. Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 176. Here, Balthasar's rationale is that "the person of the Son is the subject of the exchange of places, and that the experience of sin and suffering" involving the drama of his descent "entailed by such an exchange cannot be limited to his human nature." See Yenson, *Existence as Prayer*, 176.

love with the Father is not lost during the descent. They in fact co-entered into the lowest realm of existence in order to bring redemption from within it.[107] Balthasar thus has transposed the neo-Scholastic understanding of the beatific vision by pronouncing a trinitarian and dramatic framework, in which scenic depictions of various modes of Christ's vision are understood according to the theme of mission. It is according to this nuanced perspective that I suggest Balthasar's theodramatic theory in fact retains the teaching of the beatific vision, understood primarily as the procession of love shared by the Father and the Son for the whole human race. In the final act, I will consider how the union of love between the Father and the Son is shared with the church.

Act V: Eschatological Participation

In the final section of *Theodramatik*, Balthasar views the church's eschatological participation in the triune life by highlighting that the radiance of God's glory is realized through faith, hope, and love—the greatest of them, as informed by St. Paul, is love.[108] In addition, St. John also shows the church that God's infinite love is the ground upon which the church attains its knowledge of God (Jn 3:16), and Christ's mission has shown the church what sacrificial love is and has redeemed the church into God's eternal life, as love per se.[109] Participatory languages are used in the theo-drama to encourage the church to partake and grow in God's eternal blessedness.

Again, Balthasar's reluctance to frame the telos of human life using the language of *visio* stems from his move away from an undramatic understanding of it. He instead chooses to retell the narrative of Catholic ecclesiology in a dramatic way. According to this view, the church's "eternal life in God cannot consist merely in 'beholding' God," because God is "not an object but a Life that is going on eternal and yet ever new."[110] On the contrary, "scripture promises us even in this life a participation—albeit hidden under the veil of faith—in the eternal life of God: we are to be born in and of God, and [to] possess his Holy Spirit."[111] Since the church is currently living in the dual realities of both heaven and earth, its faith—as acts of participation—is needed. Mary is regarded by Balthasar as the archetype of the church faithful, because she is considered to be the New Eve who recapitulated the Old Eve, and her "yes" to God "represents the pure faith of Abraham and the people."[112] As such, Mary is thus the "mediatrix of the graces of the Trinity," because she "mediates in and with the

107. Balthasar repeatedly argues that the entire drama is of the Trinity, and as such "the Father was never without the Son, nor were the Father and the Son ever without the Spirit" even during the event of the descent. See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:327.
108. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:408–9.
109. Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, 3:431–48. In *Love Alone Is Credible*, Balthasar also offers an extensive elaboration of the meaning of God's kenotic love in Christ.
110. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:425.
111. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:425.
112. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 4:352.

church . . . as the Model of the church."[113] The church's "eschatological transformation" also needs to model itself on Mary as it grows in faith and purity.[114]

Balthasar views "meal" and "marriage" as two of the central eschatological scenes that capture the blessed state of the church's union with God the Bridegroom. To eat the "eucharistic meal" as an "eternal meal"[115] is to realize that the church is currently "participating in eternality."[116] Following the meal imagery, Balthasar then notes that "the mystery of the marriage between heaven and earth that is celebrated in the Eucharist is both *now* and *in eternity* a mystery of body and spirit."[117] The theo-drama ends with these two scenes, conveying the impression that the continuing activities of the created life in the eschaton point toward the full realization of the church's shared life with God. As a result, the eschatological meaning of what is known as the beatific vision in the tradition has a dramatic and scenic effect. The effect conveys that to be face-to-face in God's eternal presence (i.e., having a beatific vision) is an animated reality. This reality brings the church to partake in God's union of love. In this final act on eschatological participation, the animated scenes would once again extend an invitation to us to engage as active participants in the theo-drama.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined Balthasar's soteriology in relation to the beatific vision according to his own aesthetic-dramatic mode of discourse. By way of "reading between the lines," I have considered how the dramatic and artistic-poetic grounding of the theo-drama shapes the way he views the beatific vision. He has transposed the teaching of the beatific vision into a format that is compatible with the logic of drama that can be performed on the stage of world theatre. In the context of the theo-drama, Christ's possession of the beatific vision has been reconceived according to various dramatic and scenic components: first, Balthasar views the gospel play along the christological lines of mission-consciousness, spotlighting the narrative of the incarnate Son on the center stage of the theo-drama. As a result, Balthasar's soteriology depicts the Son's mission in terms of the *visio immediata* instead of the beatific vision.

Second, Christ's "made to be sin" on the cross and during the descent for the sake of recapitulating the fallen human race prompts Balthasar to speak about Christ's vision of death. Despite claims that Balthasar denies the beatific vision during the descent, I have shown that he in fact retains the teaching. He has done so by locating Christ's mission-consciousness enhypostatically in the trinitarian Son, who is one with the Godhead. This move suggests that Balthasar acknowledges that Christ's indirect vision of God on stage is, nevertheless, a perfect one. In considering the context of the theo-drama, it is understandable that Christ's identity as the eternal Logos was hidden

113. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:467–68.
114. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:469.
115. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:470–71.
116. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:484.
117. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 5:472 (emphasis in original).

in acts of the play. Yet I have shown that Balthasar knows that the person of the Son is always able to enjoy a direct and immediate fellowship with the Father. The fact that Balthasar's Christology remains within the bond of Chalcedon and does not end up in Adoptionism indicates that his dramatic soteriology has only seemingly but not substantially rejected the beatific vision. His reinterpretation of the beatific vision according to the logic of drama has retained the theme of the union of love between the Father and the Son in the eternal "Christ time." During the descent, it is in fact the Trinity who entered into the lowest realm of existence in order to bring redemption from within it.

Lastly, the scenic components of the theo-drama have caused a lasting effect; that is, they emphasize the eschatological continuity of created life (e.g., the meal imagery) over the discontinuity between the created order and the heavenly mystery. Balthasar's soteriology thus holds a noticeable eschatological implication: according to the theo-drama, a fully loving, sanctified, and perfected earthly life somehow resembles heaven. In this final act of the theo-drama, all actors in the play are invited to reflect on the question of whether there is an ending to the entire dramatic narrative. From a Balthasarian perspective, what is certain is that, since no actors in God's salvific plan are mere spectators situated outside of it, the "play" does not "end" because the beatific vision has to do with our eternal contemplation of and fellowship with God.[118]

ORCID iD

Li-Wei Liu https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5985-7816

Author biography

Li-Wei Liu is a PhD candidate in systematic theology at Wycliffe College in the University of Toronto. His areas of interests include trinitarian theology, Christology, atonement, hamartiology, the interface between theology and the arts, Balthasar studies, and Torrance studies.

118. I am grateful to Joseph Mangina, Gill Goulding, Hans Boersma, John Sampson, Eugene Schlesinger, Christopher Steck, and anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback of previous drafts of this article.