

Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988)

For death, entering the world 'through sin' (Romans 5:12), tears apart the being of man as God envisioned it. Neither philosophy nor religion can restore to the status of a rounded, meaningful whole this fragment of earthly life, slipping away as it is toward death.

Looking at this from the divine perspective, if God wished to 'experience' the human condition 'from within,' so as to redirect it from inside it, and thus to save it, he would have to place the decisive stress on that point where sinful, mortal man finds himself 'at his wits end.' And this must be where man has lost himself in death without, for all that, finding God. This is the place where he has fallen into an abyss of grief, indigence, darkness, into the 'pit' from which he cannot escape by his own powers.

If without the Son no one can see the Father (John 1:18), nor anyone come to the Father (John 14:6), and if, without him, the Father is revealed to nobody (Matthew 11:27), then when the Son, the Word of the Father, is dead, then no one can see God, hear of him or attain to him. And this day exists, when the Son is dead, and the Father, accordingly, inaccessible. Indeed, it is for the sake of this day that the Son became man—as Tradition has shown us.

By letting go of the 'form of God' that was his (and so his divine power of self-disposal) he willed to become the One who, in a remarkable and unique manner, is obedient to the Father. In the time of the Son's abasement, the Spirit (proceeding eternally from Father and from Son) receives a primacy over the Son who obeys him (and by him obeys the Father).

[In Gesthemene] Jesus falls to the ground, so as to undergo, dashed to the ground, the eschatological testing. Everything starts from within: in fear, and the horror which isolates (Mark 14:33). This is isolation vis-à-vis the God who distances himself, but has not yet disappeared, and on whom Jesus calls with pleading tenderness, 'dear Father,' *Abba*. Yet no communication from the Father follows.

Then the 'hour' and the 'chalice' become the entry of the sin of the world into the personal existence, body and soul, of the representative Substitute and Mediator. It is much more important to offer a deepened description of how the hypostatic union constitutes the condition of possibility of a real assumption of universal guilt.

It conforms to the *Verbum-Caro* of the New Testament, and to the co-humanity which it implies, that besides the Father who hands Jesus over, and the Son who is handed over, there appears a third actor the traitor who is a hander-over also. Judas, one of the Twelve, is 'he who hands over,' the traitor. On the other hand, by his action, he becomes the representation of unbelieving and faithless Israel, which rejects its Messiah, and is thereby itself delivered up (for a time, Romans 11).

Christ must be God if he is so to place himself at the disposal of the event of love which flows from the Father and would reconcile the world with itself that in him the entire darkness of all that is counter to God can be judged and overcome. In this happening, the active handing over by men can only play a subordinate role, and the very contradiction between human treason and the

love of God in the giving of his Son must be bonded together with the ‘contradiction of the Cross’ and there find its resolution.

For the redeeming act consists in a wholly unique bearing of the total sin of the world by the Father’s wholly unique Son, whose Godmanhood (which is more than the ‘highest case’ of a transcendental anthropology) is alone capable of such an office.

It can even be said that no one can suffer being forsaken by God more profoundly than the Son, whose whole life was unity with the Father, whose meat and drink was to do his will. On the cross he still does his will without realizing it any more. With every fiber of his being he clings to the God whose presence he no longer feels, because now, in the name of sinners, he is to experience what it means to have lost contact with God.

The fact of being with the unredeemed dead, in the Sheol of the Old Testament, signifies a solidarity in whose absence the condition of standing for sinful man before God would not be complete.

On the basis of what has just been said, we cannot avoid the following thought: given that the Redeemer, in his solidarity with the dead, has spared them the integral experience of death (as the *poena damni*), so that a heavenly shimmer of light, of faith, love, hope, has ever illumined the ‘abyss’—then he took, by substitution, that whole experience upon himself. The Redeemer showed himself therefore as the only one who, going beyond the genuine experience of death, was able to measure the depths of that abyss.

In this amorphous condition, sin forms what one can call the second ‘chaos’ (generated by human liberty) and that, in the separation between sin and the living man, is then precisely the product of the active suffering of the Cross. The object of the *visio mortis* can only be the pure substantiality of ‘Hell’ which is ‘sin in itself.’

More important for our purposes is the point that the emptiness and abandonment which it expresses are more profound than what ordinary human death can bring about in the world. Rather does the object consist in something unique, expressed in the ‘realisation’ of all Godlessness, of all the sins of the world, now expressed as agony and a sinking down into the ‘second death’ or ‘second chaos,’ outside of the world ordained from the beginning by God.

By it Christ takes the existential measure of everything that is sheerly contrary to God, of the entire object of the divine eschatological judgment, which is here grasped in that event in which it is ‘cast down.’ The vision of chaos by the God-man has become for us the condition of our vision of the Divinity.

What is at stake, at least in a perspective of depth, is an altogether decisive turn-about in the way of seeing God. God is not, in the first place, ‘absolute power,’ but ‘absolute love,’ and his sovereignty manifests itself not in holding on to what is its own but in its abandonment—all this in such a way that this sovereignty displays itself in transcending the opposition, known to us from the world, between power and impotence.