



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
FOR THE CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF  
FR HANS URS VON BALTHASAR**

*Your Eminences,  
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

With great pleasure I join you in spirit in the celebration of the centenary of the birth of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the distinguished Swiss theologian whom I knew and had the joy of meeting regularly. I consider that his theological reflection keeps its deep actuality intact to this day and still stirs many to penetrate ever further into the depths of the mystery of faith, holding the hand of this most authoritative guide.

On such an occasion, it might be easy to succumb to the temptation to recall personal memories, on the basis of the sincere friendship that bound us and all the tasks we undertook together in answer to the many challenges of those years. The foundation of the review *Communio* immediately after the Second Vatican Council continues to be the most obvious sign of our common commitment to theological research.

It is not to memories, however, that I wish to refer, but rather, to the riches of von Balthasar's theology.

He made the mystery of the Incarnation the privileged subject of his study, seeing the *Easter triduum* - as he significantly entitled one of his writings - as the most expressive form of God's entrance into human history. In Jesus' death and Resurrection, in fact, the mystery of God's Trinitarian love is revealed in all its fullness.

The reality of faith finds here its matchless *beauty*. In the *drama* of the Paschal Mystery, God lives to the full his becoming man, but at the same time renders man's action significant and gives a

content to the commitment of Christians in the world.

Von Balthasar perceived in this the *logic* of revelation: God becomes man so that man can live the communion of life with God. In Christ, the ultimate and definitive truth is offered in answer to the question that everyone asks himself or herself.

The theological aesthetic, dramatics, and logic constitute the trilogy where these concepts find ample room and a convinced application. I can testify that von Balthasar's life was a genuine quest for the truth, which he understood as a search for true Life. He sought everywhere for traces of God's presence and truth: in philosophy, in literature, in the religions, always managing to break those circuits that make reason a prisoner of itself and opening it to the spaces of the infinite.

Hans Urs von Balthasar was a theologian who put his research at the service of the Church, since he was convinced that theology could not but have ecclesial connotations. Theology, as he conceived it, had to be married to spirituality; only in this way, in fact, can it be profound and effective.

Reflecting on this precise aspect, he wrote: "Does scientific theology only begin with Pietro Lombardo? And yet: who spoke more satisfactorily of Christianity than Cyril of Jerusalem, Origen in his homilies, Gregory of Nazianzus or the Areopagite, that master of theological reverence? Who would dare take exception to any one of the Fathers? People knew then what theological style was, the natural, obvious unity both between the attitude of faith and the scientific attitude and between objectivity and reverence.

"As long as theology was the work of saints, it remained prayerful theology. This is why its rendering in prayer, its fruitfulness for prayer and its power to generate prayer were so immeasurably immense" (*Verbum Caro. Saggi Teologici* I, Brescia, 1970, 228).

These words lead us to reconsider the proper place of research in theology. Its need for a scientific approach is not sacrificed when it listens religiously to the Word of God and lives the life of the Church, strong in her Magisterium. Spirituality does not attenuate the scientific charge, but impresses upon theological study the right method for achieving a coherent interpretation.

A theology conceived in this way led von Balthasar to a profound existential interpretation. For this reason, one of the central topics on which he would voluntarily linger was that of showing the need for conversion. For him, the change of heart was a key point. Only in this way, in fact, is the mind freed of the limits that prevent its access to the mystery, and the eyes become capable of focusing on the face of Christ.

In a word, von Balthasar deeply understood that theology can only develop in prayer that accepts God's presence and entrusts itself to him in obedience. This is a road that deserves to be followed

to the very end. It implies avoiding unilateral paths that can only lead away from the destination, and commits us to shunning ways that fragment interest in the essential.

Rather, the example that von Balthasar has bequeathed to us is that of a true theologian who had discovered in contemplation coherent action for Christian witness in the world. Let us remember him on this significant occasion as a man of faith, a priest who in obedience and concealment, never sought his own personal affirmation, but in a truly Ignatian spirit always desired the greatest glory of God.

With these sentiments, I hope that you will all continue with interest and enthusiasm to study von Balthasar's work and will find ways to apply it effectively.

I invoke from the Lord abundant gifts of light upon you and upon the work of the Congress, as a pledge of which I impart a special Blessing to you all.

*From the Vatican, 6 October 2005*

**BENEDICTUS PP. XVI**