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The Beginning and the End Serve Only to Confirm Eternity.

*Hans Urs von Balthasar: The Last Act***

(Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Teodramatica*, Târgu-Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2022, 360p)

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Galaxia Gutenberg Publishing House assumed a major cultural project in translating in Romanian Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* in a brief period of only two years. This monumental endeavour was made possible by Maria-Magdalena Anghelescu who translated with great accuracy the entire series. The first four volumes, *Prolegomena*, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, and *The Action*, were published in 2021. Our review will focus mainly on the fifth volume of the series, *The Last Act*, which was released in 2022.

The thematic composition of the series envisioned by the author starts with a critical introduction (vol. I), there follows an anthropological methodology (vol. II), then a Christological one (vol. III), a soteriological (vol. IV), and finally, a trinitarian one (vol. V). Hans Urs von Balthasar takes us, therefore, in the *Theo-Drama* series, on an initiatory path that begins with the basics and leads to some of the most complicated problems of theology. As an important precaution, he states that although *The Last Act* contains many quotations from the writings of Adrienne von Speyr, it by no means represents an exhaustive theology of this writer. These fragments are nothing more than ideas that prove the fundamental agreement between the author's vision and that of his mystical confidant.

From a structural point of view, the volume is built on the following stages: the *INTRODUCTION* has two divisions, A. *The Idea of a Christian Eschatology* and B. *The Subject Matter of This Volume*; Part I - *THE WORLD IS FROM GOD* has two main chapters, A. *The World Is from the Trinity* and B. *Earth Moves Heavenward*; Part II - *ASPECTS OF THE FINAL ACT*,

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includes A. *The Final Act as Tragedy*, B. *The Final Act: A Trinitarian Drama* and C. *Man in God's Undergirding*; finally, Part III - *THE WORLD IN GOD* contains A. *Embedded in God*, B. *Reciprocity*, C. *In the Triune Life*, and D. *"If You Comprehend It, It Is Not God"*¹. The *Index Nominum* proves the magnitude of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological erudition.

The INTRODUCTION opens *The Last Act* scenario by launching some challenges aimed at highlighting theological issues related to *eschatology*. It is approached as follows, meticulously and not less definitive, the problematic situation of the end of the world, in which the Christian vision prevails. Some comparisons with the Jewish point of view are also made in this sense, highlighting both the „inheritance” and the „amendments”. Temporal distinctions, those who differentiate between human time and Christ's time, are also treated in the set-out context: Christ is the mediator between God's time and the world's time. The paradox, as an *apparatus* for a mystical approach to theology, makes its presence felt right away: in Christ, the future merges with the present, the future is contained in the present. Thus, the Christian *realized eschatology* and the Jewish *futurist eschatology* are demarcated: the first is vertical, and the second is horizontal.

The reason this volume is truly valuable will be obvious to the reader from this very moment. Hans Urs von Balthasar stages the monumental concept of *imago trinitatis*, one that he only now proposes to define, at the end of the *Theo-Drama* series: „Theo-drama, in its final act, in its final aspect, can only be trinitarian” (p. 39).

The first part of *The Last Act* examines the act of creation. In this framework, *processio* and *missio* have both the opportunity to prove their conceptual endurance. The two essential concepts are rigorously treated by distinguishing between the two existential planes that intertwine, divine and human. The paradox makes its presence felt here as well: motion and rest are both present in God (p. 54); in his death, Christ is alive, and in his life, he dies (p. 87); in Holy Mass life and death coincide (p. 88). The aspect is not at all negligible because it exposes on an ideological (and even stylistic) level the notes of mysticism on which the text of Hans Urs von Balthasar is so strongly dependent. As for the aspects related to the theorization of the Trinity, the author somehow leads us to understand that its revelation is the Son. The Trinity within the Son is particularly evident on the cross. Christ opens from his humanity a pathway to his divinity and thus to the whole Trinity. The *Eucharist* is therefore the meeting point between heaven and earth. The role of each of the fundamental Christian virtues is also theorized by the author, and the *Parousia* concept is carefully examined. The text of Hans Urs von Balthasar thus consolidates a rather personal theological perspective, a perspective that does not fail to consider visions like those of Teilhard, Bloch, or Péguy. Some ideas from the positions and writings of cultural figures like Goethe, Hegel, and Kierkegaard also appear in this context, the author thereby proving his erudition not only

theologically, but also philosophically and literary. However, it should be noted that the most pertinent arguments offered by Hans Urs von Balthasar are generally based on quotations from the writings of Adrienne von Speyr. All these works are indexed at the beginning of the volume in a consistent list of abbreviations. The first part of *The Last Act* most probably contains more references and arguments of Adrienne von Speyr's writings.

The second part of this monumental theological study brings to light a much more "hands-on" approach, aiming at more "human" but no less complicated theological issues. We can record in such a register a very important aspect, indifference, but especially the *categorical refusal* of certain human beings to enter the kingdom of heaven. Hans Urs von Balthasar tactfully lays out the fate of human beings who, despite the magnanimous love poured out by God in the world, still prefer to close their souls. The reader may find out in this part of the book if the attitude of Ivan Karamazov can represent concretely a "defeat" of God in his work of salvation. The issue is very difficult since the one who magnifies his own word above the word of God represents the greatest enemy of divinity. Obviously, in such a context, research dedicated to matters related to *heaven* and *hell* is required. The „places“ that are determined to separate the rescued from the doomed are therefore addressed as well. It is presented how man may struggle against the devil to secure his salvation. The aspects in question are exposed in the light of an extremely harsh concept that is also paradoxical, that of "God's pain", a *theo-dramatic* „feeling“ manifested in relation to the man whose stubbornness exceeds any kind of limit in the attitude of rejection of divine love. Slight hints of existentialism make their presence felt. Hell is the benchmark that provides conceptual and, by implication, ontological support for the persistence of a so-called "God's pain". The writings of the Fathers of the Church are taken here as testimonies in analyzing the relevance of such a vision. Here are just a few important names in this regard: Cyril of Alexandria, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory the Thaumaturge, and Maximus the Confessor. Even if they are on the other side of de barricade, Hegel or Nietzsche won't be ignored either. Although Hans Urs von Balthasar's criticisms are very skillful, the problem remains, because if man's pain is not felt by God also, there is a risk of Epicurus being accepted. But suffering cannot fail to result from the forsakenness of the Son by the Father. The author's understanding of this problem will delight the reader by revealing possible solutions, relying on the role played by Jesus Christ in this *theo-dramatic* scenario.

The issue of apokatastasis is also discussed in this second part of *The Last Act*. Regarding the final judgment, the difference is in fact that in the *Old Covenant* the Father judges, but in the *New Covenant* the Son will replace him. In this hermeneutical context, one of Hans Urs von Balthasar's statements stands out straight away: for centuries, if not millennia, the assumption that God hates sinners has poisoned theology (p. 194). The

work of salvation performed by Christ is not intended only for some individuals, but for all. God has enough time to wait until his light will touch every soul. The Son's judgment is a love-based judgment. Those who refuse this love-based judgment risk facing the Father's judgment. Lastly, they are the ones who demand justice rather than love and Christ did not come into the world to be denigrated by men. In this circumstance, the theme of the dead being „weighed” is revealed, which, as the author specifies, is older than Christianity itself (p. 206). This representation is trivial: it cannot be about the number of sins, but only about their quality.

The analysis shifts subtly from the point of damnation to the point of salvation. As a result, the text gains some brighter tones: in eternal life man receives the embrace of Christ. Purgatory serves as a mediator (ideologically, but also narratively) in the intended sense. The second part of *The Last Act* concludes by emphasizing the significance of theological paradox once again: if we live, for God we live; if we die, for God we die; therefore, whether we live or die, we do it for God.

At last, the third section of the book is primarily concerned with eternal life, understood as the *embedding* of the human being into God. This kind of „experience” should not be defined as a continuation of earthly life. The holy „places” opened by Christ will not be „located” in the old cosmos, because the Trinity cannot be contained spatially. The *embedding* into God cannot be understood as a process of entering from *outside* to *inside* either, because God is everywhere. The third part of the book also theorizes about the relationships that can be established between the souls of the saved and God. As a result, the notion of *visio Dei* emerges. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, this concept can only have an improper semantic value because God is not an object that can be encompassed in a view frame. Furthermore, since the soul is *embedded* after salvation, he cannot preserve a *face-to-face* relationship with God. God's vitality represents an abysmal freedom whose spaces can only be crossed, not examined by the eye. The redeemed soul's desire to participate in the divine being never ends, and its closeness to it grows perpetually over time. It is certain that heavenly happiness cannot be limited to a simple *visio* but must include a continuous creative activity.

In the *Communio Sanctorum*, human love is transformed into divine love. The divine *spark* placed in the human being by God in the moment of creation is now discovering its source. The author specifically wants to clarify what role the *spark* plays in the human being's chance to know God, and the reader can easily deduce this from the text.

In dealing with the extremely difficult problems of an eternal afterlife, Hans Urs von Balthasar employs the mystical theological perspectives proposed by Erkhart, Tauler, Seuse, and Ruysbroeck. Significant distinctions are made, and possible correlations are identified. The theses stake out the idea of the birth of man from God. The human

soul is an image of the Trinity and a copy of eternity. The Son is crucial for human participation in God's nature. Also discussed in this context are the two feminine principles which hold an important place in theological discourse with predominant nuances of mysticism. The Virgin Mary is praised because she represents the maternal archetype who gave birth to Jesus Christ, and the Holy Mother Church is praised because she gave birth to believers through baptism. The two feminine principles are inseparable: the Virgin Mary serves as the archetypal female model for the Holy Mother Church.

In the description of paradise, the author invokes the famous traditional topics of the meal and marriage. In earthly life, they represent situations of self-surrender, reciprocal nurturing, fruitfulness, and joy. However, to "exist" on the celestial plane, these topics must be deeply allegorized. From this perspective, Christ's sacrifice plays an extremely important role, because it constitutes the key to resolving the issue.

The final sections of the book, those listed in the chapter "*If You Comprehend It, It Is Not God*", represent a very honest meditation in which the author expresses his own „failure” to explain God's nature. Is the image of the "Christian theatre", as represented in the pages of this book, capable of indicating even a small part of what God is? Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological approach provides more questions than answers, a fact that makes it even more valuable.

Notes

¹ The English translation was based on *Theo-Drama. Theological Dramatic Theory*, „Volume V: The Last Act”, translated by Graham Harrison, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1998.