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Act and Event in Rahner and von Balthasar: A Case Study in Catholic Systematics[1]

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Abstract

In Benedict XVI's *God is Love* §1 humanity's relationship with God is described as an encounter with an 'event', the Christ-event. I argue that this shift in Catholic theology towards language of act and event signalled a relationship to existentialism, which, taken broadly, entailed an emphasis upon subjectivity and freedom uncharacteristic of the focus upon objectivity common to neo-Scholastic thought. As we shall see with Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, however, this newfound emphasis on subjectivity and freedom did not necessitate an abandonment of all the elements of the more 'objective' perspective. Rather, the task during the ascendancy of existentialist thought became the integration of human subjectivity with the objective and independent reality of the world and God. I suggest that Rahner and von Balthasar use notions such as act and event as a way of being mindful of the role of the subject's creativity and freedom in its encounter with the world, God, and other persons, without thereby undermining the freedom and creativity of that which is other than the subject.

Keywords

Act, Event, Rahner, Balthasar, Revelation

1. Introduction

In keeping with the Second Vatican Council's personalism,[2] Pope Benedict XVI's *God is Love* enjoins: 'Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a

[1] Versions of this paper were given as lectures at the Universities of Bonn and Oxford. Special thanks are owed to Revd. Prof. Paul Fiddes for critical comments and encouragement.

[2] *Dei Verbum* and *Lumen Gentium* are considered the clearest examples of this.

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person, which gives life a new horizon and decisive direction'.[3] That event is the giving of God's only Son, Jesus Christ, who first loved us (1 Jn 4:10).[4] Accordingly, Benedict continues, the ethics of self-love and love of neighbour is now 'no longer a mere "command";' since God loved[5] us first,[6] 'it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us'.[7] God's self-gift in Christ unto death gives humanity a new direction; this directional alteration is a once-for-all event, an occurrence in history which institutes a new ontological possibility which begins working its way into the fabric of creation: union with God, but union eternally preservative of the real distinction between Creator and creature.[8] We come to share in this newness, most intimately, though by no means exclusively, in the Eucharist.[9] When the God-human relationship is presented as an event of personal encounter Christianity's ethical and intellectual aspects are less likely to be unmoored from their place in the larger narrative of God's pursuit of humanity.

Recall the words of Irenaeus: Christ 'brought all [possible] novelty, by bringing Himself who had been announced'.[10] Here is Irenaeus in his anti-Marcion mode, trying to hold together in unity the Old and New Covenant.[11] In so witnessing to the continuity of divine

[3] Pope Benedict XVI, *God is Love* (London: CTS, 2006), §1: 'cum quis christianus fit, nulla est ethica voluntas neque magna quaedam opinio, verumtamen congressio datur cum eventu quodam, cum Persona quae novum vitae finem imponit eodemque tempore certam progressionem.'

[4] Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* [= *GL*]*: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. I: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), pp. 217–18; *Herrlichkeit* [= *H*]: *Eine Theologische Ästhetik*, vol. I: *Schau der Gestalt* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1988 [1961]), p. 210.

[5] Cf. Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünemann (eds.), *Enchiridion Symbolorum* [= DH], 37th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), §4780; Pope John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* §10: 'Deus in vita sua intima "caritas est"…'; Gregory of Nyssa, *De an. et resurr.* 4, 9; PG 46, 96C: 'Love is the life of the supreme essence'; quoted in H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory* [= *TL*], vol. 2: *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 154. Cf. also H.U. von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), pp. 93, 95–96.

[6] Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology* [= *ExT*], vol. II: *Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 72; *Love Alone is Credible* [= *LAC*], trans. D.C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), pp. 111–17.

[7] Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, §1. Cf. *GL* VII, p. 399; *H* III/2.2, p. 373.

[8] Cf. *GL* I, pp. 472–73; *H* I, pp. 454–55; *GL* VII, p. 36; *H* III/2.2, p. 32.

[9] Cf. Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, §17; Henri de Lubac, *Theological Fragments*, trans. Rebecca Howell Balinski (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 84, n. 32, for the Augustinian background to the 'event-character' of the Eucharist.

[10] Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.34.1: 'omnem novitatem attulit, seipsum afferens qui fuerat annuntiatus'; English translation from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, *The Apostolic Fathers – Justin Martyr – Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 511. Cf. *GL* II, p. 85; *GL* VII, p. 89; *The Theology of Henri de Lubac: An Overview*, trans. Joseph Fessio (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 61.

[11] Cf. *GL* I, p. 303.

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revelation (Christ was 'announced'), Irenaeus also gives credence to the unanticipated, unforeseen, and truly novel aspect of Christ's coming. He fulfils what was promised, but the promise never operated as an outright prediction. It is in fact the *felix culpa* that further accentuates the unexpected nature of the divine self-gift fulfilling and beckoning all of creation toward new life: humanity, although prepared by the divine pedagogue (cf. Is 30:20) for the event of the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection, never could have foreseen the superabundance given in Christ.[12] He becomes the ontic[13] bond of union (*vinculum substantialis*) *in quo omnia constant* (Col 1:17).[14] Irenaeus rightly urges us to return continually to this source if we are to enter into, and so come to know, if only in shadows, the divine logic.

Irenaeus[15] and Benedict XVI remind us that we encounter Christ most fully in the breaking of bread and in the works of mercy that flow naturally from this union[16]: 'A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented'.[17] The natural flow advanced in partaking of Christ is the transference of those restful ever-active waters of the divine life (Ps 23:1–3; 42:1; Jn 7:37–8)[18] from oneself to the world and ultimately as a return-gift to God.[19] 'The Eucharist', writes Benedict, 'draws us into Jesus' act

[12] Cf. Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2002), pp. 40–41 for the importance of divine pedagogy for von Balthasar.

[13] Cf. *ExT* II, p. 78: Christ as 'ontic bond' already involves the Church, for he is no 'private person, but rather the incarnate personality of God'.

[14] Cf. Maurice Blondel, 'The Letter on Apologetics' [= LA], in *Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma* trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (London: Harvill Press, 1964), pp. 125–208, here 160; *Œuvres complètes,* II, *1888–1913: La philosophie de l'action et la crise moderniste* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), pp. 97–173, here 131. Cf. also Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, 'Le Christ et l'énigme du monde: La christologie blondélienne 1916–1925', in René Virgoulay. ed., *Le Christ de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Desclée, 2003), pp. 85–115, esp. 93; John M. McDermott, 'De Lubac and Rousselot', *Gregorianum* 78 (1997), pp. 735–59, esp. 759; Cf. Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 36; *Gaudium et Spes* §45.

[15] Cf. *TL* II, p. 302 for Irenaeus on the Eucharist.

[16] Cf. Peter Reifenberg, 'Blondel und Balthasar – eine Skizze', in Walter Cardinal Kasper, ed., *Logik der Liebe Herrlichkeit Gottes: Hans Urs von Balthasar im Gespräch. Festgabe für Karl Kardinal Lehmann zum 70. Geburtstag* (Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2006), pp. 176–203, esp. 202, n. 54 for mention of this theme in *God is Love* and the thought of Maurice Blondel, von Balthasar, and Henri de Lubac.

[17] Benedict XVI, *God is Love* §14. Cf. Ferdinand Klostermann, 'Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity', in Herbert Vorgrimler et al., eds., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. III, trans. Lalit Adolphus et al. (London: Burns Oates, 1967), pp. 273–404, at 333: 'Without this "embodiment of love" [cf. *GL* I, p. 575; *H* I, p. 553] the celebration of the Eucharist loses its innermost meaning; without it an essential feature of the community of Jesus is lacking and it is no longer recognizable as his community. And so the activity of love is the duty and the privilege of the Church, which she can never renounce.'

[18] Cf. Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, §19; John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, §1.2.

[19] Cf. *GL* VII, pp. 421–22, 428.

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of self-oblation. More than just statically [*immobiliter*] receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic [*motus*] of his self-giving.'[20] Once one enters into this dynamic, blockage of the oblative flow can only occur on the side of humanity: the 'floodstream of the love of humanity passes through the heart of God'.[21] But notice Benedict's contrast between immobility, the static, with motion, the dynamic. A too narrow focus on the static would render union, and neighbour-love, a mere intellectual exercise, whereas the love-story of Christianity involves the whole person.

The English translation of this passage is a little weak. We do not simply 'enter into' the divine dynamic of self-giving. The Latin word here is 'involvimur': it indicates a being-rolled-in, envelopment, being wrapped up, or covered. We become enrolled in the Trinity.[22] This enrolment is a participation[23] in the economy of divine self-giving that draws forth from the participant a love-response with consequences in the world.[24] 'Through the Word of God, which is Christ, the whole world, in association with his taking flesh, begins itself to be God's body and word',[25] it begins to be divinized.[26]

I mentioned earlier that this way of thinking was old *and* new. So, you may ask, what is new? It trades on a view of revelation introduced into Conciliar Roman Catholic thought at Vatican II. Benedict XVI was a *peritus* of the Council and worked closely on the document *Dei Verbum* ('On Divine Revelation')[27] with, among others, Karl Rahner. In his commentary on the document shortly following the publication of the Council documents, the then Joseph Ratzinger clarified that the *periti* wanted to avoid one thing in composing *Dei Verbum*: the intellectualism[28] and doctrinalism commonly found in

[20] Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, §13.

[21] Karl Adam, *Two Essays*, trans. Edward Bullough (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930), p. 62; translation amended. Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy* [= *CL*]*: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), pp. 339–43.

[22] Cf. *GL* VII, pp. 385, 400; *H* III/2.2, pp. 359, 374.

[23] Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* [= *Foundations*], trans. William Dych (New York: Herder and Herder, 1982), p. 201; *Sämtliche Werke* [= *SW*] XXVI (Freiburg: Herder, 1999), pp. 1–446, here 194.

[24] Cf. Joseph S. O'Leary, 'The Gift: A Trojan Horse in the Citadel of Phenomenology?', in Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy, eds., *Givenness and God: Questions of Jean-Luc Marion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 135–66, esp. 136: 'Jean-Luc Marion's theological writings do not fuss about ontological claims of classical dogma but initiate the reader into a space, an enveloping event, something like Teilhard's *milieu divin*'.

[25] *ExT* I, p. 177. Cf. *GL* VII, pp. 478, 506 for the eucharistic aspect of transfiguration; *TD* II, p. 202; *TD* IV, p. 333.

[26] *Foundations*, p. 181; *SW* XXVI, p. 177. Cf. *CL*, pp. 257, 324–25, 352; *TL* III, pp. 161, 185–205.

[27] DH 4201–35.

[28] Cf. Adam, *Two Essays*, pp. 41, 45; Y.M.J. Congar, *La Foi et la Théologie*, Collection 'Mystère Chrétien', No. 381 [Suppl. I] (Paris: Desclée, 1962).

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neo-scholastic manuals of theology.[29] Such intellectualism can be illustrated by an exclusively propositional[30] view of revelation as well as by a too narrow focus upon the unchanging 'essences' of reality.[31] Without jettisoning concepts and propositions, *Dei Verbum* presented revelation as an invitation by God to share in the divine life.

Dei Verbum fittingly begins on a Barthian note,[32] that is, with an accent on divine freedom, by using the words of the First Vatican Council and reformulating them in a personalistic[33] direction; it speaks of God's *goodness* and then of [God's] wisdom: '*placuit Deo, in sua bonitate et sapientia*'.[34] Beginning thus with God's free initiative permits the focus of attention to move from intellectual 'assent' to a view that Ratzinger[35] fittingly calls 'union'.[36] In the rest of this essay I shall demonstrate the distinctive contribution offered by Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar to Catholic openness to more dynamic concepts of humanity and divinity.

In the thought of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar the notions of *act* and *event* came to play a crucial role in retrieving as well as expanding early and mediaeval Christian doctrines within twentieth century theology. Let us take the doctrine of revelation as a preliminary, and particularly illuminating, example. Both attempted to move beyond a doctrine of revelation modelled solely on the

[29] Joseph Ratzinger, 'Revelation Itself', in Herbert Vorgrimler et al., eds., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. III, trans. Lalit Adolphus et al. (London: Burns Oates, 1967), pp. 170–80, here 172.

[30] For trenchant and seemingly contemporary criticism of an exclusively propositional view of revelation, see George Tyrrell, *A Much-Abused Letter* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906), pp. 39, 51, 52; cited in René Latourelle, *Théologie de la Révélation*, 2nd edition (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966), p. 303, n. 1. Further relevant texts can be found in Tyrrell, *Nova et Vetera* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), pp. 1–3, 169, 334; *Through Scylla and Charybdis* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), pp. 213, 280–87; *Medievalism* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), p. 129. For critical remarks on Tyrrell's relation to Rome, see H.U. von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, trans. Andrée Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), pp. 106–12.

[31] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* [= *TI*], vol. XX, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), pp. 117–18.

[32] Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1: *The Doctrine of God*, trans. T.H.L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), pp. 297–321, 337, 351–52. For Barth's influence on article 2 (DH 4202), see Ratzinger, 'Revelation Itself', p. 170. Cf. also *LAC*, pp. 44–46; *ExT* II, p. 54.

[33] Cf. René Latourelle, *Christ and the Church: Signs of Salvation*, trans. Sr. Dominic Parker (New York: Alba House, 1972), p. 9.

[34] René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Cork: Mercier Press LTD, 1966), p. 458; translation amended.

[35] Ratzinger, 'Revelation Itself', p. 175.

[36] Cf. DH 4781.

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communication of ahistorical[37] propositions.[38] Rahner and von Balthasar rather saw how a doctrine of revelation ought to reflect the finite subject's creative[39] historical[40] participation[41] in an encounter with Infinite freedom. Yet the objective nature of revelation could not be jeopardized lest the distinction between finite and Infinite be lost;[42] within a doctrine of revelation, the balance of the subjective and objective poles must be maintained.[43] We can call this a 'Chalcedonian' emphasis: 'From the moment that Chalcedon in its sober and holy wisdom,' writes von Balthasar, 'elevated the adverbs "indivisibly" . . . and "unconfusedly" . . . to a dogmatic formula, the image of a reciprocal indwelling of two distinct poles of being replaced the image of mixture.'[44] The use of notions such as *act* and *event*, I shall demonstrate, gave Rahner and von Balthasar the needed parameters for developing a theology mindful of this Christological development, entailing the balancing of polarities whereby the human and the

[37] Cf. Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, 1st ed. [= *HW* I], trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp. 5, 7; *SW* IV, pp. 16, 22; *TI* I, pp. 79–148, esp. 86f.; *SW* IV, pp. 352f.

[38] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II q. 1 a. 2 ad 2: the act of believing 'non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem'; Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics: Seven Lectures on Being* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1939), p. 4; *Foundations*, p. 146; *SW* XXVI, p. 145.

[39] Cf. *TL* III, p. 74.

[40] Cf. *ExT* II, p. 298.

[41] Cf. Karl Rahner, s.v. 'Grace', in Karl Rahner, et al. (eds.), *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 2 (London: Burns and Oates, 1968), pp. 415–22, esp. 415; *SW* XVII/2, pp. 1053–64, esp 1053.

[42] Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* [= *TD*]*: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. II: *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 123.

[43] In *ExT* I, p. 123, von Balthasar calls the harmonization of opposites a particularly 'Catholic' method. He finds the notion of holding together 'contrary realities within the world as a symphony and harmony of opposites' as early as Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses* II, 25, 2: cf. *TD* II, p. 142, n. 8; *TL* I, pp. 158–63; *TL* II, pp. 182–84, 187–218. Cf. *CL*, p. 91 for knowing as a 'suspension between poles'. Rahner and von Balthasar owe much of their emphasis upon 'polarity' to the work of their mentor Erich Pryzwara. A very thorough examination of Pryzwara's work can be found in John R. Betz, 'Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analogy of Being (Part One)', *Modern Theology* 21 (2005), pp. 367–411; 'Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analogy of Being (Part Two)', *Modern Theology* 22 (2006), pp. 1–50. Despite the influence of Pryzwara, the notion of 'polarity' has an ancient, usually 'cosmic' pedigree in Christian theology; we cannot limit its use in Rahner and von Balthasar to the influence of Pryzwara. See the critical discussion of polarity in Michel R. Barnes, *The Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), and the more positive appraisals in James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), *passim*, and H. Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 12–13.

[44] *CL*, p. 63. Cf. *ExT* II, p. 79; *LAC*, p. 123; *TD* II, pp. 201, 267–68; *TD* IV, p. 373, 380; Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 640.

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divine remain unmixed, yet dwell reciprocally within one another.[45] In an exposition of how de Lubac understood the supernatural, John M. McDermott well expresses this Lubacian inheritance: 'In Jesus' person are held together all the tensions of the concrete universal: finite and Infinite, time and eternity, diversity and unity, natural and supernatural. This personal center [sic] grounds all the paradoxical tensions in the Church, Christ's Body and Sacrament: visible and invisible, particular and universal, human and divine, plurality and unity, etc'.[46] Christ founds the sacramental vision of Catholicism whereby the finite sign is effective in communicating the Infinite.[47]

Speaking most generally, I associate an *act* with rational spontaneity[48] and deliberation arising from a free conscious subject whereby intellect and will operate in unison. An *event* indicates a moment (in time) when the conscious subject has been taken hold of[49] by something independent (or other) than itself,[50] even if this 'other' is occasioned by one's own actions (a propos von Balthasar's stress on the 'dramatic' nature of the divine-human relationship, which is meant to express the event-character of this relationship, Ben Quash notes that drama 'shows the passivity (or 'passion') of the subject in relation to the very deeds which he or she has authored. A deed made objective

[45] Cf. *TD* II, pp. 201, 222. On the double polarity of beauty in von Balthasar's work see Paul Gilbert, 'L'articulation des transcendantaux selon H.U. von Balthasar', *Revue Thomiste* 86 (1986), pp. 616–29, esp. 624. On paradox as central to Henri de Lubac's theological vision, see Georges Chantraines, 'Paradoxe et mystère Logique théologique chez Henri de Lubac', *Nouvelle revue théologique* 115 (1993), pp. 543–59; 'Henri de Lubac. Pourquoi ses œuvres nous parlent', *Nouvelle revue théologique* 121 (1999), pp. 612–29.

[46] McDermott, 'De Lubac and Rousselot', p. 755. Cf. Dulles, *Catholicity*, pp. 9, 32–34, 38, 55.

[47] Cf. John M. McDermott, 'The Theology of John Paul II: A Response', in John M. McDermott, ed., *The Thought of John Paul II: A Collection of Essays and Studies* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1993), pp. 55–68, esp. 68; 'La Struttura Sacramentale della Realta', *La Scuola Catholica* 128 (2000), pp. 273–99; 'Dialectic Analogy: the Oscillating Center of Rahner's Thought', *Gregorianum* 75 (1994), pp. 675–703, esp. 703; 'Person and Nature in Lonergan's *De Deo Trino*', *Angelicum* 71 (1994), pp. 153–85, esp. 183–84; 'Maritain on Two Infinities: God and Matter', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1988), pp. 257–69; 'Karl Rahner on Two Infinities: God and Matter', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1988), pp. 439–57, esp. 439, 450, 456; 'Jesus and the Kingdom of God in the Synoptics, Paul, and John', *Église et Théologie*, 19 (1988), pp. 69–91, esp. 70, 76, n. 15, 90; 'The Christologies of Karl Rahner', *Gregorianum* 67 (1986), pp. 87–123, 297–327, esp. 87; 'A New Approach to God's Existence', *The Thomist* 44 (1980), pp. 219–50, esp. 246, 249.

[48] Cf. *TD* II, p. 224 where von Balthasar argues that Augustine understood the nature of a spiritual creature to be freedom, or what amounts to the same thing, 'rational spontaneity'.

[49] On the subject being overwhelmed by revelation, see *TD* II, pp. 128–30; *TL* II, pp. 105–07; Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 23, citing *SW* III, p. 216.

[50] Cornelius Ernst calls 'Ereignis' an 'illuminating event' in Ernst, s.v. 'Theological Methodology', in Karl Rahner et al., eds., *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 6 (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), pp. 218–24, here 221.

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occasions *effects*, of which a dramatic agent may be the recipient').[51] When treating of the doctrine of revelation, for instance, theologians directly face the paradox of maintaining the finite subject's free *act* before the infinitely freer *event* of divine self-communication. 'The word of revelation,' writes von Balthasar, 'is the Word in the mode of action: God is apprehended in the act of self-communication.'[52] Our participation in Christ is a participation in the activity of divine condescending in the mode of self-communication.[53] What follows fits well within discourse on the relationship between divine and human freedom, itself a topic relevant to the larger matter of a theology of revelation.

The shift in Catholic theology towards language of *act* and *event* signalled a relationship to 'existentialism',[54] which, taken broadly, entailed an emphasis upon subjectivity and freedom uncharacteristic of the focus upon objectivity common to neo-Scholastic thought.[55] As we shall see with Rahner and von Balthasar, however, this newfound emphasis on subjectivity and freedom did not necessitate an abandonment of all the elements of the more 'objective' perspective.[56] Rather, the task during the ascendancy of existentialist thought became the integration of human subjectivity with the objective and independent reality of the world and God. I am suggesting that Rahner and von Balthasar use notions such as act and event as a way of being mindful of the role of the subject's creativity and freedom in its encounter with the world, God, and other persons, without thereby undermining the freedom and creativity of that which is other than the subject.

2. The Dilemma for the Catholic Theologian

In 1939 Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar initially collaborated upon a 'new dogmatics' for Catholic theology.[57] Rahner later

[51] Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 44, n. 31.

[52] *ExT* I, p. 11.

[53] Cf. Barth, *CD* II/1, pp. 354–55; *ExT* I, pp. 179–80.

[54] Cf. von Balthasar, *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele: Studien zu einer Lehre von Letzten Haltungen*, Bd. I: *Prometheus* (Salzburg: Verlag Anton Pustet, 1937), p. 419; *CL*, pp. 215–16.

[55] Cf. John M. McDermott, 'Spiritual Theology and Religious Life Before and After Vatican II', *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 8 (2001), pp. 51–75, esp. 65.

[56] Cf. McDermott, 'Spiritual Theology and Religious Life Before and After Vatican II', p. 65.

[57] Cf. Karl H. Neufeld, *Die Brüder Rahner: Eine Biographie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1994), pp. 178–86; 'Somme d'une théologie – Somme d'une vie', *Nouvelle revue théologique* (1984), pp. 817–33, esp. 819–21. This project later became the multivolume *Mysterium Salutis* (1965–76); Rahner and von Balthasar remained editors. Cf. Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer, eds., *Mysterium Salutis*: *Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, vol. 1: *Die Grundlagen Heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik* (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1965), p. xix.

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published this work under the title 'The Prospects for Dogmatic Theology',[58] and admitted that he could no longer distinguish between his contribution and von Balthasar's.[59] Despite von Balthasar's departure, this dogmatic sketch nevertheless displays a remarkable convergence of ideas for the early Rahner and von Balthasar.

After a series of critical comments and concrete examples of textbooks, historical studies of Christian dogma, and theological studies of special or marginal topics, Rahner comes around to his own positive proposals, firstly by articulating the distinguishing marks of Catholic theology:

> Every Catholic theology must be a theology of both essence and existence, or putting it simply, it must both look for necessary and intrinsic structures and connexions and it must report what in fact, without metaphysical or logical necessity [*frei und unableitbar*], took place in saving history. The second requirement needs no explanation. But the first retains its truth in spite of every kind of Existentialism. For theology is thinking; and it is quite impossible to think irreducibly atomized facts. For even what is freely posited has its nature [*Wesen*] and structure, its connexions, homologies and analogies. Thus in the very midst of the report that this or that took place [*das geschah*], it has always to be said what intrinsically it was that took place [*so geschah*]. And this *what* is never absolutely incommensurate with other things. There are structures which persist even in the most surprising novel event [*bei aller überraschenden Neuheit der Ereignisse*].[60]

For Rahner, this 'cooperation and interpenetration of theologies of essence and existence' is the unity of theological ontology and historical report.[61] While such a passage may sound eerily similar to Lessing's ditch[62] that philosophy deals with 'necessary truths of reason' and theology with 'accidental historical truths', Rahner does not consider the events of salvation history to be 'accidental historical truths' open to the so-called objectivity of the historical sciences.[63] Both Rahner and von Balthasar consider Christianity to be a religion bound to historical facts, but neither think 'exact scientific method'

[58] Cf. *TI* I, pp. 1–18; *SW* IV, pp. 404–18.

[59] *TI* I, p. 14, n. 1; *SW* IV, p. 415.

[60] *TI* I, pp. 14–15; *SW* IV, p. 415. Cf. Krystian Kałuża, *"Der absolute Heilbringer" Karl Rahners fundamentaltheologische Christologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 32f; Michael Schulz, 'Die Logik der Liebe und die List der Vernunft: Hans Urs von Balthasar und Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel', in Walter Cardinal Kasper (ed.), *Logik der Liebe Herrlichkeit Gottes: Hans Urs von Balthasar im Gespräch. Festgabe für Karl Kardinal Lehmann zum 70. Geburtstag* (Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 2006), pp. 111–33, esp. 126.

[61] *HW* I, p. 5; *SW* IV, p. 16: Scholastic theology 'is always essentially based upon God's freely proffered self-revelation, upon positive theology, upon the theology that listens'.

[62] Cf. Henry Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1956), p. 53.

[63] Cf. *GL* I, p. 74; *H* I, p. 70.

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(*exaktwissenschaftlich*) can uncover the true nature and structure of those facts.[64] One needs the 'eyes of faith' (Rousselot)[65] to see them as truly *theological*.[66] Since the revealing God of Christianity is not bound by the necessity Lessing grants to philosophical thinking, but is infinitely free and *also* the Logos of history, the content of God's saving acts in history can be known by analogy with other worldly metaphysical and logical structures.

If the intelligibility of salvific events resides in the content, Rahner nevertheless understands this content (the 'what' of the event) to be more than the communication of mere information; revelatory events truly impart God's very own self to the world. This is again why Rahner and von Balthasar argue that only through participation in God's grace can we come to see history as filled with the saving acts of God. The content presenting itself in salvation history is inseparable from the 'essence' of God. Barth phrases the matter thus: 'God's being is his loving'.[67] If God's nature remains the same even in the most surprising and novel event, then it is possible to apprehend those aspects of God's eternal nature which are freely revealed in history, such as God's love shown forth in the Christ-event. Note the word 'freely', for Rahner, asserts that what takes place in salvation history does so without metaphysical or logical necessity. Lest Catholic theology succumb to Neoplatonic theories of the divine necessarily and uncontrollably emanating itself, Rahner justly directs us to divine freedom.[68] He further holds that the logic of divine freedom is itself intelligible. This is why he emphasises the persistence of structures even within free and spontaneous events in history.[69]

As important as 'facts' of salvation history are, then, Rahner does not want to say that they are irreducibly 'atomized', dissociated from a wider socio-historical context. To argue thus would severely hobble the authority rightly accorded 'nature', one of two valid orders of

[64] Cf. *GL* I, pp. 75, 181–2; *H* I, pp. 71, 175.

[65] Cf. Pierre Rousselot, S.J., 'Les yeux de la foi', *Recherches de Sciences Religieuses* I (1910), pp. 241–59, 444–75; *The Eyes of Faith*, trans. Joseph Donceel, ed. John M. McDermott (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), pp. 21–81. Cf. also Bernard Pottier, 'Les yeux de la foi après Vatican II', *Nouvelle revue théologique* 106 (1984), pp. 177–203; John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 174–76; *GL* I, pp. 175–76, 190; *GL* VII, pp. 14–15, 18, 28, 368; *LAC*, p. 60.

[66] Cf. *GL* I, pp. 175–7; *TD* II, p. 89.

[67] Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 351. Cf. *GL* I, pp. 234–35; *LAC*, pp. 55–60.

[68] Cf. *Foundations*, pp. 75, 78; *SW* XXVI, pp. 76, 79; *CL*, p. 316; *TD* II, pp. 191, 200.

[69] Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison and J. Gordon Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 354 argues that speculative knowledge ought to be grounded in knowledge of a specific person or thing, yet never exhaustive, can be traced back to the 'true' Aristotle; Richard A. Lee, Jr., *Science, the Singular, and the Question of Theology* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 3.

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reality ratified by the First Vatican Council (the *duplex ordo*).[70] The order of nature (variously defined by Rahner and von Balthasar) provides us with material for making sense of what happens in a divine-human encounter. Rahner's comments well represent *one* Catholic attempt to bring about balanced ecumenical dialogue with theologians, such as Karl Barth, who furthered event-centred theology, which tended to devalue natural structures known outside of explicit revelation. Rahner would have been reminded of the centrality of the events of salvation history for the theological enterprise, but not at the expense of the analogous content reason could bring to the table.

In the context of Rahner's theology, 'history' must be taken in a particularly anthropocentric sense. In 'The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology', Rahner writes:

> when we take our concepts from the history of revelation and biblical theology, we shall have to add that it is by his *action* [*handelt*] upon us that God imparts truths to us. The wider concept [than that of propositional revelation] is that of a revelation which is action and event [*des Offenbarungshandelns und Offenbarungsereignisses*]. This follows at once from the fact that in the actual order of things revelation, even as the communication of truth, only comes to us as the salvific action of God's grace in which he must first bestow on us the capacity of hearing his word of revelation and in which he imparts to us the reality of which the word of revelation speaks. The reality is spoken of only in the grace by which the reality itself is communicated [*so daß diese Wortmitteilung über eine Wirklichkeit in diesem Falle sich immer nur ereignet in der gnadenhaften Mitteilung der geoffenbarten Wirklichkeit selbst*] . . .[71]

A revelation which is 'action and event' envelops us with divine reality. Revelation adopts us into the trinitarian life and makes our connaturality with the divine and our growth in grace possible.[72] As Rahner says of the revelation of Christ, the 'ultimate meaning of this revelation is a calling of the human being out of this world into the life of God, who leads his personal life as the Being exalted above the whole world, as the tri-personal God, in inaccessible light'.[73] Since Rahner claims that grace imparts to the human being the reality of which it speaks, this incorporation into divine life occurs here and now, and not merely in the resurrection of the dead. This incorporation is richer and in fact inclusive of propositional content.

[70] DH 3015. Cf. LA, p. 185; *Œuvres complètes,* II, p. 153.

[71] *TI* IV, p. 39; *SW* XII, pp. 103–04.

[72] On salvation as forgiving and divinizing love, see *TI* I, pp. 299, 322 [grace as *donum increatum*]; *TI* II, pp. 81, 240; *TI* III, pp. 143, 163, 165; *TI* V, pp. 97–114, 98, 105.

[73] *TI* III, p. 285; *Skizzen zur Theologie* III (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1956), pp. 329–48, here 339.

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Rahner understood Catholic theology to be tempted by the error of equating revelation solely with propositional, dogmatic, formulae. In 'The Word and Eucharist' he noted that the Denzinger index at that time had no entry on 'The Word of God'. Rather, everything came to be subsumed under 'De Revelatione' and dominated by a propositional understanding of revelation. He found the same error in fundamental theology:

> in contrast to present-day Protestant *and* Catholic biblical theology, revelation is always taken in the theology of the schools as a purely doctrinal revelation couched in statements, not as a revelatory action and event [*nicht als ereignishafte Tatoffenbarung betrachtet*], in which God acts creatively to bestow grace upon men, uttering his word in it and for it, as in inner moment of this action on man – or in which, to put it biblically, the action is the word, because God's word must produce what it says.[74]

We can see that Rahner is consciously framing his understanding of revelation in terms of 'act and event' in opposition to an imbalanced view propagated by the then dominant Catholic theology. In contrast, he offers the insights of biblical theology as a means of overcoming this imbalance. Yet the 'word', the propositional content, we might say, remains. It remains as an 'inner moment' of divine action on humanity.

Biblical theology, it would seem, offers fundamental theology a means for developing a theology of 'act and event', due to its focus upon the 'acts' of God in human history.[75] The particularly 'Catholic' theology of 'act and event' requires that these 'acts' be understood as, in some sense, *theandric*,[76] i.e., as an intimate union between God and the human person such that divine revelation could never be separated from a 'mediating' historical structure that stands in direct continuity with the 'event of revelation', the life-death-Resurrection of Christ that extends in time beyond the Ascension to the end of the 'apostolic age'.[77]

We cannot view revelation as 'act and event' as the negation of propositional content, for Rahner states that theology can take its

[74] *TI* IV, pp. 253–311, here 255–56; *SW* XVIII, pp. 596–626, here 598.

[75] What one means by God's 'acts' in Scripture, i.e., if what is recorded can be considered in all cases as having literal-historical bases, is a problem that such a view of Biblical theology would have to work out. A theology of event is perhaps more flexible in its ability to consider certain 'events' to be divine illuminations in a person, thus committing the theologian to a methodology less dependent upon a Rankean view of the past as 'what actually happened' (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*): Leopold Von Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, ed. Roger Wines (New York: Fordham University Press, 1981), p. 58.

[76] Cf. *CL*, p. 262 where Maximus' understanding of the two wills of Christ is said to constitute a single 'organic interpenetration' and 'theandric activity'.

[77] Cf. *TI* V, pp. 219–43, esp. 231; *SW* X, pp. 605–25, esp. 615.

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concepts from the history of revelation and biblical theology, which means that conceptual and propositional content can arise from within this inclusion in God's way of being and acting. Yet this inclusion will always be more than a merely propositional relation of mind communicating to mind. This is because the whole and entire human being is involved in the act and event of revelation and never just one human faculty (e.g. the mind) artificially isolated from all the rest.

In fact, Rahner argues that the human faculty of knowledge reaches its fullness only when it is self-transcendent. Knowledge ought to pass over into an act of love, given freely to an object that is more than knowledge.[78] Only something that is more than intellectual knowledge, that is, something infinitely love-worthy and inexhaustible, can offer knowledge its perfection. This is because the faculty of knowledge is ordered to an object that can be known, but known only as that which is greater than the faculty itself. Rahner accordingly asks, '[W]hat but the incomprehensibility of mystery can be such an object of knowledge, since it forces knowledge to surpass itself and both preserve and transform itself in a more comprehensive act, that of love'?[79] If the human knower could grasp all that God is, then knowledge would not have to be transcended; knowing would simply unite the knower with God. Rahner asserts otherwise: knowing must transcend itself in loving, through which it receives itself and is renewed in its efforts to further understand the object of love. Rather than dominate and master the object of love, knowledge gives itself over to a form of loving, which is the awe and wonder of being in the presence of that which is ever greater. The fuller act, the act that somehow embraces God without circumnavigating God's eternal nature, is the act of love which encourages knowledge to see more deeply into its relationship with the God of incomprehensible mystery.

Rahner understands revelation as 'act and event' to be the inclusion of the human being in this relationship, though he was careful to guard against too quickly appealing to supernatural elevation or divinization in accepting the validity of such a construal of revelation.[80] Divine revelation brings to us God's very own self as mystery so that the divine-human relationship can be one of mutual self-gift. Rahner's version of Catholic theology thinks from within this relationship and therefore requires both essential and existential concepts to make sense of the mutual interaction between divine and human natures.

Hans Urs von Balthasar parallels Rahner's insistence on the interplay between divine and human freedom in his book *The Theology of*

[78] Cf. *ExT* I, p. 146; *GL* I, p. 175; *TD* II, p. 89; *TL* II, p. 177, n. 9.

[79] *TI* IV, p. 43; *SW* XII, p. 107.

[80] *HW* I, p. 16 speaks of obediential potency as not necessarily implying 'ontic elevation'.

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Karl Barth (1951). Remarking on how philosophical categories are to be used in theology, von Balthasar avers:

> we find a certain age-old tension between two types of theology: a more concrete and positive theology that builds upon the historical facts of revelation and thus makes greater use of the categories that apply to *events* [*Ereignishaften*] (although it is not always aware of doing so); and a more speculative theology that steps back into a certain contemplative distance from these immediate events [*unmittelbaren Ereignis*] and takes for its object the events' rationality or the implied connections between the individual truths of revelation . . .. An either/or between a theology of the actual and existential and a theology of the prior capacities and essences [*Essentiellen*] is impossible. For both forms overlap and condition each other: first of all, because that is the very essence of worldly being and thinking [*vom Wesen des weltlichen Seins und Denkens*], but then, and even more importantly, because revelation is two-sided: action and contemplation, faith as deed [*Tat*][81] and faith as vision [*Schau*], obedience and prayer.[82]

Both Rahner and von Balthasar see revelation as two-sided. The actual and existential are concerned with *events*, whereas the prior capacities and essences are concerned with the *rationality* of events, the intelligibility (or 'content') of revelatory events we mentioned earlier. Whereas Rahner tends to emphasise the persistence of structures, von Balthasar highlights the notion of mutual overlap and the conditioning of essential and existential categories. Both however draw our attention to the necessity of remaining open to the possible revision of our understanding of worldly being and thinking, not only in light of what we learn of ourselves through history, but more importantly, in light of what God chooses to reveal about God's own self in that history.

The emphasis upon the two-sided nature of revelation accentuates the necessity of the human being involving the whole self in coming to know who God is: although contemplation of so-called 'static' principles draws one deeper into who God is, Rahner and von Balthasar further stress the need to bring into play the dynamism of the will, and so, the willingness to put into practice what is learned

[81] *ExT* I, p. 146: love surpasses knowledge by going beyond thought into act, the act of God in us, which is faith.

[82] H.U. von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* [= *TKB*], trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 258; *Karl Barth, Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* [= *KB*] (Köln: Hegner, 1951), pp. 269–270. For further reference to the 'event-character' of being, see *TKB*, pp. 62, 64–68, 70–2, 75, 81–5, 88, 95–113, 122–67, 170–72, 184, 189–98, 214, 222, 255–56, 258, 274, 277–78, 281, 287–89, 295–302, 309, 311, 335–43, 351–52, 363, 369, 371, 384. Cf. Bernard Pottier, 'La "Lettre aux Romains" de K. Barth et les quatre sens de l'Écriture', *Nouvelle revue théologique* 108 (1986), pp. 823–44, esp. 827–29; Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, p. 178.

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through study, contemplation, and prayer.[83] In these spiritual motions the human person faces the event of God's revelation with his own subjectivity and strives to abide in that dialogical encounter with God, learning what the personal address of the event of revelation entails.

When divine revelation meets a person thus in his or her wholeness, it unfailingly recasts our understanding of the human person. But it never completely replaces what we have come to know prior to the historical encounter with divine revelation. Grace perfects but does not supplant nature (*gratia perfecit sed non supplet naturam*);[84] or in Bonaventure's terms: grace presupposes nature just as accidents presuppose a subject (*gratia praesupponit naturam sicut accidens praesupponit subiectum*).[85]

Von Balthasar suggests that this unity of the essential and existential forms of theology need not be limited to Catholicism. (Barth used similar language to distinguish between two types of Evangelical theology within the one Evangelical church: the Lutheran and the Reformed deal respectively with dynamic and static categories.)[86] In fact, he states, 'Here Catholic and Protestant theology find themselves caught up in the same tension: between being led on to the central event and a serene meditation on this event in contemplative distance. 'Indeed,' he continues, 'the parallel cuts deeper, since the question arises of where the actual event really is to be found'.[87] According to von Balthasar, we cannot say that the event is *either* only in 'history' *or* in the remote abstraction of contemplation characteristic of the Scholastics and mystics. The event rather arrives somewhere

[83] Cf. Maurice Blondel, 'What is Faith?', *Communio* 14 (1987), pp. 163–92, esp. 187–88: faith in God is a divinizing love.

[84] Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I q. 1 a. 8 ad 2.; I q. 2 a. 2 ad 1; I q..65 a. 5 co.; *In Boetium de Trinitate*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2um; *TKB*, p. 167; *KB*, p. 181; *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994 [1963]), pp. 22–23; *Theologie der Geschichte: Ein Grundriss*, 2nd ed. (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1958), p. 20; *ExT* I, pp. 72, 276; *Verbum Caro: Skizzen zur Theologie I* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960), pp. 77, 177, 179; *ExT* II, pp. 172, 478; *ExT* III, p. 322; *GL* I, pp. 295–96, 476–77, 610; *TD* I, p. 116; *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 88; *Homo Creatus Est: Skizzen zur Theologie* V (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1986), p. 102; *TL* I, p. 11; *TL* II, p. 80; *Epilogue*, p. 17. We ought to note Barth's reaction to the political use of the concept of *gratia perfecit sed non supplet naturam* in Nazi Germany, which he saw as providing the grounds for a diabolical rapprochement between the Vatican and the Nazi regime: cf. Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), p. 183.

[85] St. Bonaventure, II Sent. d. 9, a. 1, q. 9 ad 2 (ed. Quaracchi II 257 b). Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, 'Gratia praesupponit naturam: Erwägungen Über Sinn und Grenze eines Scholastischen Axioms', in *Einsicht und Glaube*, eds. Joseph Ratzinger and Heinrich Fries, 2nd edition (Freiburg: Herder, 1962), pp. 151–65, here 156.

[86] Barth, *CD* I/2, p. 171; it is unclear which theology is the dynamic and which the static.

[87] *TKB*, p. 258.

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in between, where the concrete[88] and the universal,[89] the existential and the essential, come together in a unified tension where theology must always remain rooted: the person of Jesus Christ.[90] The real issue for both Catholic and Protestant theology, writes von Balthasar, 'centres around what Barth tried to accomplish with his actualism: to pursue theology in the incomparable uniqueness of a theological *scientia de singularibus* or, as Barth says, of the *concretissimum*, where we get beyond the contrast of the mere historical fact and purely transhistorical doctrine; *where*, in other words, *the essence of event as well as doctrine is embedded in the person and activity of Jesus Christ*'.[91] For von Balthasar, acknowledgement of the unparalleled uniqueness[92] of the Christ-event preserves theology from opposing essence and existence.[93] Theology should rather take the person and activity of Christ as the perfect unity of the two and seek to think from the temporal manifestation of God's eternal nature in its singular,[94] definitive form.[95] In describing the *a posteriori* nature of von Balthasar's understanding of the 'singular' in relation to aesthetics, Elisa Oberti writes that the 'metaphysically universal, the absolute, the transcendental and the transcendent are to be grasped in the sensible itself, which must be seen in its own proper nature, and rank,

[88] Stanisław Grygiel, '"Existence Precedes Essence": Fear of the Gift', *Communio* 26 (1999), pp. 358–70, here 359, n. 2: 'The word 'concrete' comes from the Latin verb *concresco—concretum*, 'to join together with,' 'to become dense by virtue of union with something other'.

[89] According to W. K. Wimsatt in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1954), p. 72, notions such as the 'concrete universal' can be found in 'most metaphysical aesthetic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'. Cf. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1981), pp. 124–30, 147, n. 83. On the concrete universal in Rahner and von Balthasar, see *inter alia Foundations*, pp. 310–11; *SW* XXVI, pp. 295–96; *TD* II, p. 122.

[90] David C. Schindler, in *The Dramatic Structure of Truth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), provides an extensive exposition of the philosophical implications following from the event-character of being in von Balthasar. 'Unity-in-tension' is a Przywaran expression of the *analogia entis*; for select examples of its many appearances in Rahner and von Balthasar, see *Foundations*, pp. 16–17, 19, 81, 176; *ExT* II, p. 83.

[91] *TKB*, p. 266. Cf. *TD* II, pp. 270–71.

[92] Cf. *CL*, p. 246; *ExT* I, p. 154; *ExT* II, p. 93; *TD* II, p. 122; *TL* II, pp. 311–16; *Foundations*, p. 277; *SW* XXVI, p. 264.

[93] Cf. *ExT* I, pp. 169–73.

[94] For a diagnosis of late-modernity as concerned with singularity, see Stephen Fields, 'The Singular as Event: Postmodernism, Rahner, and Balthasar', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (2003), pp. 93–111; Edward T. Oakes, 'The Scandal of Particularity: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Limits of Ecumenical Dialogue', in David S. Cunningham, Ralph Del Colle, Lucas Lamadrid, eds., *Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 231–40.

[95] On the importance of holding together essence and existence in Chalcedonian Christology for both Rahner and von Balthasar, see particularly *CL*, pp. 48–49, 245–55, 258–60; *TKB*, pp. 17, 88, 106, 115, 266, 270, 272, 273, 332, 336; *TI* I, pp. 149–200, esp. 170, 170–71, n. 2; *TI* XIII, pp. 213–23; *TI* XVII, pp. 24–38.

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in its referential character and its limitations'.[96] The singularity of the Christ-form is the starting point of theological reflection.

Von Balthasar so emphasises this singularity that Christ's uniqueness renders him 'without analogy',[97] particularly in the Resurrection event.[98] Perhaps it is here that we can see into the differences that caused von Balthasar to cease collaboration with Rahner on the project for a new dogmatics. Certain aspects of the person and work of Christ remain without analogy for von Balthasar, such as Christ's descent into hell, which means that something like Holy Saturday is not thinkable in connection with other experiences. Rather, the uniqueness of Christ's objective person and activity must be entered into subjectively by each person in a mode of loving contemplative participation.[99]

Von Balthasar nevertheless shares with Rahner the notion that the human being can only think theologically from within the reality itself, from within the gift of grace, and his emphasis upon contemplation makes this clear.[100] The event of Christ 'is not mute or a-logical but is the source of all the meaning in existence and nature, justifying and fulfilling them. And within the various interpretations of this event (best circumscribed by the category of contemplation), we find room for the use of universal concepts, categories, properties and finally of Being itself'.[101] Von Balthasar thus reminds us that all conceptual systems, all human models, all world views can be used in theology as long as they are subservient to the 'logic' that is ultimately presented in the revelation of Christ.[102] As he says of all human philosophical constructs and schemas, they must be judged 'by God's own concrete dealings with history'.[103] The event of Christ continually bestows novelty in history in the form of new missions and charisms offered to individuals for the renewal of the church and the world.

3. Conclusion

Let me conclude by returning full-circle to Benedict XVI and Irenaeus via von Balthasar. As we noted in the beginning, Irenaeus consistently directs our attention to God's concrete dealings with

[96] Elisa Oberti, s.v., 'Art', in Karl Rahner et al., eds., *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 1 (London: Burns and Oates, 1968), pp. 102–09, here 109.
[97] Cf. *GL* I, p. 619; *Epilogue*, p. 96.
[98] Cf. *TD* II, p. 157.
[99] Cf. *TI* XVII, p. 56; *Foundations*, pp. 310–11; *SW* XXVI, pp. 295–96.
[100] Cf. *GL* VII, p. 394; *H* III/2.2, p. 368.
[101] *TKB*, p. 384.
[102] Cf. *TL* I, pp. 128–29.
[103] *TKB*, p. 385.

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history; he directs us particularly to the Christ-form. Accordingly, von Balthasar states that with Irenaeus 'theology emerges as a reflection on the world of revealed facts'.[104] This 'newness', this 'novelty', argues von Balthasar,

> means the opposite of the Gnostic 'new'; it is that 'ancient truth' of God's intimacy in paradise which is now found again after all the estrangement, more welcome and better understood . . . What has to be seen is the creative movement of *fulfilment* (*adimplere*) . . . the Christian counterpart of the Gnostic pleroma. In addition to the correspondence and the intensification there is Christ's divine quality and his efforts to transpose everything verbal and symbolic into living existence and so to recapitulate it by giving it concrete form in such a way that its reality is enhanced. With this creative event in view the Father gave this 'hour' the character of the fullness of time. In this fullness not only the Old Covenant but also all human and physical nature is fulfilled, because now the Word is present within the flesh.[105]

Here are two different types of 'novelty': Irenaean[106] and Gnostic.[107] Von Balthasar's theology has been dubbed (aptly) an 'Irenaean retrieval'[108] ; he sets his face against what he perceives to be the novelty of Valentinian Gnosticism,[109] a novelty that excludes the control of a guiding principle. The novelty Christianity introduces is not 'ex nihilo' in the sense of being disconnected from whatever has come before.[110] Rather, it is novelty continuous with recurrent themes in salvation history, a novelty understood as superabundant 'fulfilment'.

Benedict XVI tells us that 'Jesus united into a single precept' the commandment to love God above all in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4–5) and the commandment to love neighbour in the Book of Leviticus (19:18).[111] The novelty of the Old and New Covenants lies, not only in abstract notions of God, but in the divine activity, which in Christ, 'takes on dramatic form'.[112] Christ is the exemplar of novelty, and he sends the Spirit to bring about even greater works. When we

[104] *GL* II, p. 31; *H* II, p. 31.
[105] *GL* II, pp. 85–86; *H* II, pp. 85–86.
[106] Cf. R.A. Markus, 'Pleroma and Fulfilment: The Significance of History in St. Irenaeus' Opposition to Gnosticism', *Vigiliae Chritianae* 8 (1954), pp. 193–224.
[107] *CL*, p. 87 offers a brief comment on Gnostic novelty.
[108] Cf. Mongrain, *The Systematic Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, passim. For a thorough listing of the occurrences of 'gnosis', 'Gnostic', and 'Gnosticism' in *GL*, see Mongrain, *An Irenaean Retrieval*, pp. 47–48, n. 32.
[109] Cf. Cyril O'Regan, 'Balthasar and Gnostic Genealogy', *Modern Theology* 22 (2006), pp. 609–50.
[110] Cf. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 158–59.
[111] Benedict XVI, *God is Love* §1.
[112] Benedict XVI, *God is Love* §12.

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enter into this newness, in our neighbour, in works of mercy,[113] in the Eucharist, we enter into a living event of love that calls for our active participation; we cannot remain aloof, detached from *this* love. An encounter with Christ establishes a relationship that can be aptly described, in the words of the very early Rahner, as the 'religious event itself'.[114] Wrapped into the heart of the Trinity, we are enrolled in the divine service wherein our transformation from glory into glory (2 Cor 3:18)[115] requires a dynamic[116] turning away from ourselves toward the face of Christ in the unity of contemplation and action. If Catholic systematics is going to make disciplined use of concepts like 'event', then it requires a rigorous science of the *conversion to the phantasm*, particularly the conversion to the image fashioned by the divine imagination.[117]

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[113] Cf. *TD* IV, p. 486.

[114] Karl-Rahner-Archiv, University of Innsbruck, I. B. 308; cited in Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 2.

[115] Cf. *ExT* II, p. 121; *GL* I, pp. 242, 485; *GL* VII, pp. 24, 264, 293, 367, 459, 471–72, 478, 520; *LAC*, p. 123.

[116] *ExT* II, pp. 106, 118; *CL*, pp. 329–30.

[117] Cf. *GL* I, p. 172; *H* I, p. 165: the *Gestalt Christi* is the 'Meisterstück göttlicher Phantasie'. See Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 13: Christ is the 'masterpiece of the Spirit of God'.

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