

***Personal Identity and Wholeness: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Reflection on Mission***

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**Abstract**

The aim of this essay is to argue the way the fundamental aspects of von Balthasar's distinctive theological aesthetic and dramatic model of human personal identity and wholeness fit together around his key perception of 'mission'.

Based on the perspective of von Balthasar's theological thought, a human being becomes a 'unique person' when encountering God in contemplative seeing. It is within contemplative seeing that one comes into contact with one's 'Idea', which is realized when one's personal identity is fully developed, and which it is one's 'life form', a life *telos* received from God, to conform to. Thus, in this essay I will show that how the fundamental components of von Balthasar's distinctive theological aesthetic and dramatic model of human personal identity and wholeness fit together around his core concept of 'mission'. I argue that one's personal identity is offered with one's mission, and so that it is impossible for an individual to obtain an identity by anyone apart from God. What is needed to bring a human life to fulfilment—to become 'whole'—is the acquisition of one's specific 'personhood', which is given to one, along with one's mission, by God.

Keywords: mission, personal identity, personality, wholeness, integration

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## Introduction

Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) was a Swiss theologian and one of the most important Catholic theologians in the twentieth century. He wrote over one hundred books and hundreds of articles; incredibly prolific and diverse. Most of his adult life was dedicated to writing on themes spanning theology, philosophy, literature, art, history and ethics. His most significant work consists of fifteen volumes in which he unfolds God's revelation in consonance with the characteristics befitting him: the beautiful, the good and the true: *The Glory of the Lord (Herrlichkeit)*, 1961–1969), *Theo-Drama (Theodramatik)*, 1973–1983) and *Theo-Logic (Theologik)*, 1985–1987) (von Balthasar, 1993, pp. 111–119).

In von Balthasar's view, each human individual comes with a *telos*. This understanding is in essence Christological. He believes that Christ is the *telos*, the 'ultimate model' (Barrett, 2009, p. 257). His theology fits this mode in that personal mission 'is attained by externally following Christ and internally becoming like Christ' (Barrett, 2009, p. 195). He is convinced that, to reach completion, every individual must achieve his/her *telos*. That is by means of contemplating that individual becomes readily available to God, who then unveils to someone the objective of his/her life. This revealing calls for the individual obtaining a divinely-given 'mission', making an individual a 'person' (von Balthasar, 1992, p. 207).

Put differently, each human individual results in becoming a unique person, as she/he in contemplative seeing encounters God. In *Theo-Drama vol. II*, von Balthasar remarks, 'No one is enraptured without returning, from this encounter, with a personal mission' (von Balthasar, 1990, p. 31). This theo-dramatic narrative upholds Christ as the supreme life norm and promotes 'mission' as a form of Christian life.

It is by means of a person existing in compliance alongside his/her mission he/she could be content, in which he/she achieves this by becoming increasingly Christ-like. People, as von Balthasar writes:

should consistently apply all his natural capabilities, to make certain that within this surrender to God's service he might find their particular substantial satisfaction as being a portion of an indicates exceeding his natural and defective potentialities. It's through this that his nature is unfailingly held of capabilities exceeding beyond those proper engrossed, in so doing enabled so you can get truly victorious. Within it, too, man finally (in faith) will involve and attention of themselves, as the mission itself consists of a Christ-like form, an application comparable to the word or logos. The person well intentioned to his mission fulfils their own personal being, although he could never come across this archetype and ideal of themselves by going through towards the greatest centre of his nature, his super-ego or his depths of the mind, or by examining their own tendencies, aspirations, talent and potentialities. (von Balthasar, 1961, p. 48f)

Christ is the true form of mission (von Balthasar, 1998, pp. 392–393). The Christ-like form, for von Balthasar, is the supra-form, which is the archetype of all earthly life forms, which not only is the absolute and supreme oneness, but also embraces the plentiful and rich otherness, which includes the whole of human history. Von

Balthasar here uses the word 'form' to mean

the ideal archetypal image, in Christ, from the redeemed and believing man, and, as a result, also his true individual self, in accordance with that the Father now looks upon and appraises him, and by that they, like a believer, is called to live. (von Balthasar, 1961, p. 48)

When it comes to a God-given mission, Christians cannot ignore the role of holiness. There is a critical influence on von Balthasar's conception of human holiness, as he notes:

The mission which each individual receives contains because it's foundation essentially the kind of holiness which they are granted as well as is needed of them. Their living by using this mission is comparable while using holiness that's succumbed appropriate measure and that's achievable with this person. (Henrici, 1989, pp. 306–350)

For von Balthasar, by following one's mission, one becomes Christ-like in some sense. He uses holiness to express what one's mission consists in. 'The path to holiness—to sainthood—is not principally one of withdrawal from all the contingent aspects of personhood...but doing things that are uniquely one's own to do' (Quash, 2007, p. 21). Thus, one in so doing demonstrates human holiness is of enormous apologetic significance towards the Christian belief. In following one's mission, one's behaviour runs into an exceptional change. It is the observability from the transformed behaviour that gives the potential for discerning holiness.

### **The Lifestyle of Holiness**

The fundamental attributes that comes with living an existence of human holiness, von Balthasar proposes, offers a universal type considering that the potential of human holiness is offered within the human relationship to God.

For von Balthasar, the fundamental aspect of the lifestyle of human holiness: such as, that it is the satisfaction of God's will (von Balthasar, 1990, pp. 189–334). Thus, based on von Balthasar, the satisfaction of God's will may be the only legitimate manifestation of human holiness. Furthermore, the purpose of fulfilling God's will is the essence of what the significance of 'mission' for von Balthasar. In addition, a true life change is the correct reaction to one's mission, because it is the will of God—and to be Christ-like, our obedient response must follow the way of the obedient Son to his Father. Then, on von Balthasar's consideration, how God's will is adopted is as simple as getting a personal relationship to Christ.

In so far as a personal relationship to Christ is how God's will is adopted and practiced in a personal mission, then it is constitutive of an individual's holiness. In von Balthasar's view God's will is revealed to one using the discovery of one's Idea. For one's Idea resides in Christ, God's will reveals to a person who is contemplative seeing/prayer with Christ as its object. However, for von Balthasar, the understanding prudently of human holiness is always that following God's will is not a private spiritual practice, it requires naturally engages actions directed towards others. In other words, when we say that what von Balthasar thinks is phenomenologically

noticeable, it always marks a connection between the expression of human holiness and the other regarding actions performed in obedience to God's will.

Plainly, on von Balthasar's assumption, human holiness is not that need to have considering being an ideal that is achieved in finishing one's mission by means of retrospective assessment of one's life. Instead, living a life of human holiness is possible, and it can be lived with the procedure of right after one's mission. Having said that, to live in holiness, a person must experience a critical transform. The needed prerequisite for following one's mission and as a consequence living a holy life, in von Balthasar's view, is the 'death' of one's 'personality'. It is the prerequisite for opening oneself to God's will that succeeding one's mission requires that one's personality 'die'. Of course, in order to obtain a better understanding of this perspective, it should be put in a broad context that the Christian life bears the mark of Christ's death (von Balthasar, 1998, p. 327). In death one can put a particular 'stamp' on one's existence (Nichols, 2000, p. 219). Von Balthasar elucidates that Christ's death undergirds all death; the Son's death 'is redemptive only insofar as it manifests the ultimate horizon of meaning, which is God's all embracing trinitarian love' (von Balthasar, 1998, p. 331). Christ's death displays the fulfilment of his mission through his obedience to God's will within Trinitarian love, which offers a schemata to interpret the meaning of the death of one's personality and one's personal identity.

### **Personal Identity**

Von Balthasar shows that just God can grant a person him/her identity, she/he also believes only God can grant a person his/her mission. Even though the situations that representatives or agents are frequently sent on missions by others whom they are to do something with respect to, this is not usually the way we consider someone's mission. Von Balthasar's perception of 'mission' is different from that getting a mission in the sense of getting 'an unshakeable inner conviction that ... [one] should do or propose something' (von Balthasar, 1990, p. 154). He believes that it is impossible for an individual to obtain an identity by anybody apart from God. For him no one can give himself a mission is the fact that one's personal identity is offered with one's mission. His understanding of a life's mission is much more like the way we view another's representative or agent. However, von Balthasar's perception of 'mission' would be that the individual sent on his/her mission will, like a *free* agent, think about, plan and test it (von Balthasar, 1992, pp. 154, 168).

Putting the meaning of the term 'person' in the context of ancient Greek theatre, it originally meant 'mask', after which came to achieve the extra concept of 'role'. Thus, in his *Theo-Drama vol. III*, von Balthasar discusses the connection of 'person' and 'mission' by way of equating 'mission' with a 'role'. As he says:

within the identity of Jesus' person and mission, we have the conclusion component superiority of what's meant with a dramatic 'character' ... Within the scenario of Jesus Christ, we have, within the relation to real existence, the truth of what is found on the stage, that is, the utter and total identification from the character as a consequence of his utter and entire performance of his mission. Thus, in theo-drama, he isn't just the principal personality however the model for those other actors and the one that provides them their very own

identity as figures. (von Balthasar, 1990, p. 201)

As Jesus unveiled God by means of his 'role' (his mission) and because Christ grants to everyone her mission and identity, then 'those who've been personalized with the roles they've been granted may also share be part of his [Jesus'] purpose of revealing God' (von Balthasar, 1990, p. 258). To some extent, briefly, those who live out their missions will disclose holiness.

Living out one's mission is not simply living based on a self-given endeavour, nor is it just carrying a natural inclination. The need that a shift happens from 'personality' to 'person'—quite simply, as to a person is in God's Idea, that is uncovered inside a personal relationship to Christ. As we have mentioned the idea of the 'death' of one's 'personality', what should die within the 'personality' is 'untruth', which means exactly what is against God. Briefly, the 'personality' should be cleansed of these things for a person to achieve the situation of 'personhood'. Von Balthasar causes it to be obvious that 'personhood' is just achieved when one's own 'truth' is equivalent to God's 'truth'.

For von Balthasar, as truth is crucial, then the same with humility. Humility is vitally significant because it clues that the person is becoming so corresponded to Christ that the superficial figures from the 'personality' happen to be overcome so much that God's will could be unveiled within the person. A moderate individual is just as she is in God's Idea. Moreover, in approaching to her Idea, a person experiences an improvement of growing personal integration.

### **Human Holiness and Personal Integration**

Von Balthasar reflects personal integration in the results of conforming to one's individual Idea. This thought opens to a way of approaching the type and probability of human holiness. In his treatise 'The Perfectibility of Man' (von Balthasar, 1982, pp. 43–72), von Balthasar deals with this issue of the perfectibility of persons. Two vital assertions come in this treatise: firstly, von Balthasar asserts that the issue of the perfectibility of people is actually an issue of the possible wholeness; and secondly, he proposes that what is in due course at concern is the prospect of redemption.

In this treatise, von Balthasar begins with a description of 'that which mediates itself to itself' to raise the issue of self-awareness (von Balthasar, 1982, p. 76). This self-awareness, in von Balthasar's evaluation, is an essential among people and all that other creatures. Besides, he points out a fact that key to the situation of human is the necessary tension in human's being between the infinite and finite. The possible explanations of the tension between the infinite and finite, for von Balthasar, cannot be achieved by human reason, but only be given by being himself, revealing himself from himself. He then states that when they exist as limited (finite) beings in a limited (finite) world, each is open to what is unlimited (infinite)—namely, God (Scola, 1991, pp. 30–38). For von Balthasar, this openness for people to what is limitless further distinguishes them from all of other creatures.

Von Balthasar realized that human beings are composed of two significantly different substances: spirit and nature. For von Balthasar, the wholeness of people can be possible is due to human's openness towards the infinite. As he writes, 'the more we

hand ourselves over to God...the more fully human we become and the more sensitive to others and to the whole of created reality' (Pinckaers, 1995, p. 90). For this reason, he assumes that the substances of spirit and nature must be united in a relationship—that is, simultaneously the foundation and final purpose of the two substances (von Balthasar, 1982, p. 79f). In von Balthasar's view, this is a relationship with God that meets the human's deepest needs and makes it possible for us to conceive the potential for human wholeness. However, this perspective leaves a question that one may doubt: can a human being be a whole (von Balthasar, 1982, p. 81)?

To answer the question above, we should consider von Balthasar's views on the mystery of being and wholeness of human being. Compared with the natural world, human being is superior. The idea that human being is superior is based on that human's reason allows them the possibility to transcend nature and reach for wholeness. To some extent, the book of *Genesis* provides powerful evidence that this is so. However, von Balthasar argues that if the assumption that human is actually being wholeness is only based on the comparison between human and nature, then we would be ignoring the 'person' of human's nature (von Balthasar, 1967, p. 44). Human being is not only a natural being but also a personal being. Namely, human has individual and historical existence. The fact that human's natural existence, in von Balthasar's view, is a part of the whole existence of all things in the cosmos means human's existence has a type of absolute universality. However, the existence of the individual personhood of human indicates absolute uniqueness. 'Both in his natural being and in his personal being man finds his completion and his happiness only in communion with another human being' (von Balthasar, 1967, p. 45) That is, it is necessarily open to the whole world with the task of participation to establish the world. Nevertheless, again how can human be a whole? Von Balthasar here points it out:

Neither the other person as the beloved, chosen one, nor the universe as a place of work and achievement, nor the unattainable totality of all persons answers man's deepest needs. Ultimately, it is only Absolute Being, itself spiritual and personal, that can do that, beyond the difference between the personal (as absolute uniqueness) and being (as absolute universality and totality). Within man no transition is possible between the two poles. (von Balthasar, 1967, p. 46)

### **The Strategy to Integration**

Von Balthasar writes that a person 'manifests something uncompletable which points beyond himself to some type of integration – undiscoverable to him by himself alone – that is formally suggested for the regards to God' (von Balthasar, 1982, p. 82). To assert that the potential of human integration exists inside a purely formal way enables von Balthasar to carry the content of the integration remains open by God. Von Balthasar insists this content 'must remain open, when the relationship between God and man will be determined and formed in dramatic dialogue by God alone' (von Balthasar, 1982, p. 82). In 'The Perfectibility of Man', von Balthasar (1982) reveals human 'perfection' as 'wholeness' or, namely, 'integration'. Based on his Christocentric view, such integration can only be performed by means of a relationship with God.

To achieve human's integration, von Balthasar proposes the way of revelation or the way of love. The 'revelation' and 'love' are mainly based on God's revelation and His salvation plan. Von Balthasar claims that it is only through Jesus Christ that the way from fragments to wholeness can be really revealed to us (von Balthasar, 1967, p. 62). By claiming this, he argues that it is because:

the salvation event occurred in history, that God does not set a sign or speak a word to man, but uses man [Jesus] in all his existential doubtfulness and fragility and imperfectability as the language in which he expresses the world of redemptive wholeness. (von Balthasar, 1967, p. 63)

With the thought of integration in mind, von Balthasar writes:

hence, the man Jesus, whose existence is this sign and word of God to the world, had to live out simultaneously the temporal, tragic separating distance and its conquest through (Augustinian) elective obedience to the choosing will of the Eternal Father, in order to realize mysteriously the essentially irrefragable wholeness within the essentially uncompletable fragmentary. (von Balthasar, 1967, p. 63)

As the author of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, Jesus could really experience the true meaning of anthropology and can legitimately therefore solve the issue of human's existence (von Balthasar, 1967, p. 63). As von Balthasar writes, 'he is, in a historical sense, the 'Son of Man', a man who was really born and really died, a man who [was] like all men' (von Balthasar, 1967, p. 65). And, it is because of that only through Jesus Christ, as fully man and fully God, as the highest form of revelation, can the unreachable abyss between finite human and infinite God be overcome (von Balthasar, 1967, p. 65).

### **Integration within a Mission**

Now we should consider von Balthasar's understanding of integration and his perception of 'mission'. It is in following one's mission that one involves attaining an integrated existence. In von Balthasar's view, what it takes to cultivate an individual life to satisfaction is his/her 'personhood', which is provided to him/her together with his/her mission by God. We have seen that neither personhood nor mission is just given at birth. Instead, they are given when a person enters a proper relationship to God. It is, for von Balthasar, the necessary outcome of an encounter with God that one gets one's mission.

Once a person enters the proper relationship with God and encounters God, he/she, according to von Balthasar, lives in a divine drama with the awareness of a personal mission. Moreover, behind every action must lay that internal gift, that initial and essential renunciation of oneself in service to one's mission. For von Balthasar, every action bears testimony to the divine. Although the fundamental significance of these actions remains hidden to us, this is only the result of our finitude: 'In this transient world, it may seem that the wind has blown [these testimonies] away, but all testimony is eternal in God' (von Balthasar, 1997, p. 265).

It is among von Balthasar's principal contentions that some people are given their

Idea by God. In von Balthasar's view, human's Idea, which is given by God, is actualized when one's personal identity is full-grown. For von Balthasar, the Idea that is exclusive to every individual is one striving to become actualized. When one is offered an individual identity together with one's mission, that identity is offered within a developing form. It develops only as one lives out one's mission, for keeping with one's mission is the strategies by that one's Idea is actualized. That is to say, for von Balthasar, living out one's mission is the means by which one turns into a full-grown person, which is an integrated one.

All the characteristics of mission we have discussed above share the specific form of Christ. In von Balthasar's view, mission, 'specifically created for and personalized to each individual', is 'always a kind of participation, through grace, within the unique, universal mission of Jesus' (von Balthasar, 1992, p. 249). The Christ-form has the power to 'illuminate the perceiving person' (von Balthasar, 2009, p. 454). The visibility of the form of Christ completes God's self-expression. For von Balthasar, the form of Christ is the definitive and determinant form of God in the world; this is because the Word of God is both the divinity which expresses and reveals itself in the Trinity's eternity and in the economy of time and the man Jesus Christ, who is the Incarnation of that divinity. He is Word as a flesh; a visible flesh, which in its human totality and in the life-figure in which it exists is the concrete presentation of this Word (von Balthasar, 2009, p. 148).

For von Balthasar, due to the visibility of the form, the interior light of the form, the oneness of the form, and the otherness of the form, Christ is the form and measure of human's mission. Christ's form of human action provides the measure by which we judge human action. Christians seek to 'attune' their form to the measure of Christ because Christ is both at once. Von Balthasar explicates that 'There is between his mission and his existence a perfect concordance: these two things "are in tune"' (von Balthasar, 2009, p. 456). The significance being that only based on the form of Christ being visible can the humans who encountered the resurrecting Christ see the form; similarly, it is only on the basis of the visibility of the form that humans' lives can be changed. More precisely, it is only by the humans undergoing such a terrific satisfaction with their mission can they grasp the significance of the form of Christ and therefore can their lives be changed and integrated.

Moreover, while living out one's mission leads one to achieve one's own personal growth and development, it unites one with other people in the greater whole. In doing this, the integration achieved by following one's mission embraces a twofold-facet: one concerning internal and the yet the other pertaining to external integration. Mission is not an element that only fits to the individual's existence; living out one's mission communicates one to others. Due to the facts that mission underlies the plurality of human existences and directs them to some extent of unity, following one's mission requires the individual within an immutable dedication to worldly authenticity. People may incline straightforwardly to propose that human holiness is showed in personal integration, however, von Balthasar is way from promoting an approach of human holiness which advocates denial of, and flight from, life reality (Sheldrake, 1987, pp. 28–31). We receive and we respond.



## Conclusion

We have seen in this essay that in von Balthasar's view, each human individual comes with a *telos*. He believes that Christ is the *telos*, the ultimate model. His theology fits this mode in that personal mission is achieved by following Christ and becoming like Christ. He is convinced that, human holiness—displayed with the living from a mission that agrees with Christ's—offers in the world a noticeable expression from the image of Christ. This means that, human holiness show what it is accustomed to becoming conformed to Christ.

We then have showed that living out one's mission is not simply living based on a self-given endeavour, nor is it just carrying a natural inclination. For von Balthasar, the need that a shift happens from 'personality' to 'person' as to a person is in God's Idea, which is disclosed inside a personal relationship to Christ. We concluded that a moderate individual is just as a person is in God's Idea. Moreover, in approaching to a person's Idea, a person experiences an improvement of personal identity and perfecting integration.

In a nutshell, mission, as von Balthasar proposes, specifically given by God for and personalized to each person, is always a kind of participation, by grace, within the unique and universal mission of Jesus. The characteristics of mission share the specific form of Christ. According to von Balthasar's understanding, only based on the form of Christ being visible can humans who encountered the resurrecting Christ see the form and humans' lives be changed and integrated. Human holiness is showed in personal integration, on a Balthasarian portrayal; nonetheless, following one's mission always requires the individual within a commitment to worldly reality.

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