

1999

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Ronald Novotny

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Recommended Citation

Novotny, Ronald (1999) "Recent Dissertations: Mary, Fulfillment of Person in the Annunciation--A Study of the Dialogic Principle of Martin Buber and Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Proposed Re-Reading of the Annunciation (as a Dialogic Event): Dissertation Abstract," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 50, Article 18. Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol50/iss1/18

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**MARY, FULFILLMENT OF PERSON IN THE
ANNUNCIATION—A STUDY OF THE DIALOGIC
PRINCIPLE OF MARTIN BUBER AND HANS URS
VON BALTHASAR: A PROPOSED RE-READING OF
THE ANNUNCIATION (AS A DIALOGIC EVENT)**

Dissertation Abstract

*Ronald Novotny**

As the title indicates, this study proposes the Virgin Mary, as presented by Luke in the Annunciation scene, as the fulfillment of person—as defined in the works of Martin Buber and Hans Urs von Balthasar. The focus of the study is the Virgin Mary and the possible use of the dialogic principle as an aid to understanding theological personhood.

The paper posits three hypotheses: 1) the human being is understood only through the dialogic event, since dialogue furnishes the necessary elements for attaining theological personhood; 2) since a person achieves its fulfillment through the dialogic principle, Mary should be a model for all, 3) the dialogue between Mary and God is the exemplary human relation. These three hypotheses supported the idea of re-reading the Annunciation scene from the perspective of the dialogical principle.

Prior to this study, the Annunciation was usually examined as a marvelous birth announcement¹ or as a call narrative.² This present study includes both those aspects, but elaborates the concept of call or vocation. The examination of the Annunciation from the viewpoint of Buber and von Balthasar's anthropology of the human person is a further development of what the Scripture has held within itself and only comes to light in modern times as theologians and exegetes look for the genesis of person and the basis of uniqueness of personhood.

Martin Buber developed the philosophical foundation of the dialogic principle, while von Balthasar stressed the theological facets. Buber's I-Thou development is a

*Ronald W. Novotny, Ph.D., is a practicing psychologist and director of the Cenacle of Our Lady of Divine Providence School of Spirituality (Clearwater, FL). Mr. Novotny received the Licentiate in Sacred Theology (with Specialization in Mariology) from the International Marian Research Institute in 1998.

¹Raymond Brown, "Luke's Method in the Annunciation Narrative of Chapter One," in *Perspectives on Luke—Acts*, ed. by Charles H. Talbert (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. T. Clark, Ltd., 1978).

²Klemens Stock, "La vocazione di Maria: Lc 1, 26-38," *Marianum* 45 (1983): 94-126.

singular contribution, as von Balthasar's insight, that the Annunciation as a dialogic event bears theological personhood for Mary, is a singular insight. The Annunciation holds within itself all the elements of dialogue: the exemplary meaning of God's free choice, unmerited grace, the divine plan in relation to the creature's uniqueness, the human yes given in freedom, and the response to call which determines role and mission.

Mary is at the center of the history of salvation, because God forms the covenant with her. As Ignace de la Potterie wrote, "[It was] not necessarily so because she accomplished it, but more simply because of her acceptance."³ Therefore the investigation of Mary as model of personhood, of necessity, involves her acceptance of God's covenant and her mission in it. From the time of the conversations in the Garden of Eden, throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament, God relates to persons through dialogues which constitute covenants. The discussion of covenant demonstrates how dialogue has shed light upon the God-human relation in the Bible.⁴

Chapter One ("Dialogue and the God-Human Relationship") situates the dialogue as a philosophical/theological tool and as a necessary element for the covenant. Mary's highly personalized dialogue with God, through Gabriel, is presented as the archetype of the God-human relation not only because it includes all of the dialogic elements, but also because of its uniqueness. Chapter Two ("Martin Buber and Hans Urs von Balthasar") investigates the contributions of both men to the study and exposition of the dialogic principle. Both agree that dialogue is a neglected tool in understanding individuals. Both men believe that a person becomes whole in relation to another, thereby fulfilling his/her own uniqueness. Von Balthasar sees the person as emerging from the dialogic encounter with God, and fulfilling God's plan through the concept of mission. Chapter Three ("God-Human Relationship in the Annunciation") examines the Annunciation scene in light of the work of some well-known exegetes, as they addressed elements that relate to the God-human relationship, i.e., I-Thou dialogue, uniqueness, vocation and freedom. The Annunciation scene of Luke provides the perfect example of the dialogal, covenantal, God-human relationship, because it quintessentially demonstrates all the elements of the dialogic principle, their operation and results. The exegetical articles demonstrate how the entire Annunciation dialogue serves as a model for the I-Thou relationship with God. Chapter Four ("Re-Reading of the Annunciation in the Light of the Dialogic Principle") relates the ideas of Buber and von Balthasar to the Annunciation scene. This chapter comments on both men's contribution in forwarding the dialogic concept as a worthy instrument in theological anthropology's study of the person. The first four points are taken from Buber's work and applied to Mary, while the remaining statements reflect von Balthasar's work.⁵

³Ignace de la Potterie, S. J., *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant* (New York: Alba House, 1992), 40.

⁴Aristide Serra, *E c'era la Madre di Gesù* (Milano: Cens-Marianum, 1989), chap. 3.

⁵As a Jew, a man of the Old Testament, Martin Buber did not address the Annunciation scene. However, his dialogic principle has been applied to various fields and does serve as a vehicle for understanding the dialogal elements of the Annunciation and Mary achieving personhood through dialogue.

1. Mary is only a person in her relationship to God through Gabriel. She becomes a unique person through a relation with another.
2. All that Mary was possible of becoming was the result of the I-Thou relation with her Creator.
3. All that lies as "dormant potentiality" became realized actuality.
4. Uniqueness is found only in relationship.
5. Mary is the prototype of the I-Thou relation, because she initiates the creativity of the Holy Spirit as he listened-received from the Father and the Son. She does likewise.
6. Mary is the image, the figure, the total people of God in its relation with God.
7. Mary is portrayed as a model of personhood through her acceptance of God's covenant resulting from the God-human relationship. Since covenant is the primordial example of dialogic encounter by which an individual becomes a theological person, it follows that Mary, if she is a prototype, would have such a covenantal relation with God. Her covenantal relation then serves as a model for all the following covenantal and dialogic God-human relations.
8. Mary's *fiat* expresses the spousal attitude of the "new covenant" and serves as a model for every believer who welcomes the Spirit. Receiving the Spirit gives substance to the Word within the person.
9. Mary is in closest approximation in her embodiment of personhood through vocation to Jesus who realized perfect identity of person and mission. Mary reaches the highest degree of personhood because she defines herself in accord with God's will. She defines herself by reformulating God's wishes. "I am the handmaid of the Lord" beautifully reflects Mary's reformulation. By her assent she is constituted a theological person. The Annunciation itself might be considered a Scriptural summarization containing the often-mentioned elements of von Balthasar's theology, i.e., God's descending movement which invites the adequate response from the creature, a response of adoration and obedience, all of which seems within the context of covenant or dialogue. The Annunciation reveals an anthropology based on the creature's exercise of free will in the reception of grace, situated in an I-Thou relationship, in which God and Mary (representing all creatures) are free partners.

Mary reveals to humanity the constitutive elements of personhood and its attainment, while at the same time revealing the depths of the mysteries of God.

When Mary received the angel's announcement that the Spirit will overshadow her and she will bear a child, "her experience inundates her knowledge, with the result that she receives more insight, and at the same time everything becomes more mysterious than she thought. The mystery grows in her: it becomes brighter and yet accumulates into a store of knowledge that is undisclosed, a treasure from which all generations of the Church will draw sustenance in order to penetrate into her mystery. They will never come to an end. Every believer who senses that he has a mission to illuminate aspects of divine revelation needs to possess both a deeper knowledge and a deeper awareness of the mystery."⁶

⁶From Adrienne von Speyr's *Objektive Mystik*, as quoted by Hans Urs von Balthasar in his *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-), 5 (1992):496.