

5-20-2017

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Recommended Citation

Nguyen, Chao O.P. (2017) "Mary and the Nuptial Dimension of the Constitution of the Church in the Eucharistic Sacrifice according to Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 68, Article 10, Pages 179-202.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol68/iss1/10

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MARY AND THE NUPTIAL DIMENSION OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH IN THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE ACCORDING TO HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

Sr. Chau Nguyen, OP, PhD

Throughout the centuries, Christianity has reflected deeply on the Paschal dimension of the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Christian life. However, little has been said of its nuptial character. This essay examines Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological insights on the Eucharist in both its sacrificial and nuptial dimensions in relationship to the Blessed Virgin Mary. For Balthasar, these dual aspects converge and are exemplified in Our Lady whose fiat at the Annunciation comes to a climax at the Crucifixion. There, she is mystically and nuptially united to the Son who gives himself away eucharistically, and she thus becomes the exemplary bride of Christ. At every celebration of the Mass, therefore, the Church is invited to take on the bridal dimension of the Paschal Mystery by taking on Mary's own disposition of loving self-sacrifice.

Of the diverse titles attributed to the Blessed Virgin Mary, she is tenderly invoked as the "Woman of the Eucharist" in

the papal encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003). There, Pope St. John Paul II exhorts the faithful to turn to Our Lady in order to “rediscover in all its richness, the profound relationship between the Church and the Eucharist.”¹ The writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar, a prominent ressourcement theologian of the twentieth century, contribute profoundly to this task of reflecting on the relationship of Mary, the Church, and the Eucharist to one another. This essay examines Balthasar’s theological insights particularly on the sacrificial and nuptial dimensions of Mary’s relationship to the Eucharist.

The essay proceeds in two sections. The first surveys the tradition on Mary as *bride of Christ*, or in Balthasar’s words, the “bride of the slain Lamb” and the “womb of the Church” on Calvary.² As intimated by these very words, the Paschal Mystery embodies a nuptial dimension: Our Lady’s *fiat*, initially given at the Annunciation, comes to a climax at the Crucifixion where she is mystically united, that is *nuptially* united, to the Son who gives himself away eucharistically. The second section considers Balthasar’s insights on the Church’s participation in the sacrifice of the Mass, again turning to the Virgin Mother and her role in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

1. Mary as the Bride of Christ

Mulier, ecce filius tuus ... Ecce Mater tua. (John 19: 26, 27)

¹ Pope St. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), no. 53.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV: The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 358.

Turning first to the spousal aspect of Mary's role in the mystery of salvation, the fundamental question to be examined is this: How is Mary to be considered a "bride" of Christ? The title is never explicitly applied to Mary within the texts of Sacred Scripture, but it is used to refer to the nuptial covenant between Yahweh and Israel and between Christ and his Church. The spousal metaphor highlights a covenantal theme that runs throughout the Old Testament and culminates in the New Testament. It is especially prominent in the books of the prophets Hosea (2), Isaiah (5:1–7; 54; 4–8), Jeremiah (2:2; 32), and Ezekiel (16:23), alongside Psalm 44 and the Song of Songs. In the New Testament, it can be found to be undergirding Pauline theology, as in Ephesians 5:25ff, which exhorts husbands to love their wives as Christ loved his Church. In 2 Corinthians 11:2, Paul speaks of his "godly jealousy" for the wayward Christians at Corinth whom he has "betrothed ... to Christ ... as a pure bride to her one husband."

The first allusions to Our Lady as the virgin bride appear in the fourth and fifth centuries. St. Jerome, for example, interpreted Song 4:12, "You are an enclosed garden, my sister, my bride," as alluding to Mary's perpetual virginity.³ St. Ephrem of Syria (†373) in the East and St. Peter Chrysologus (†450) in the West both explicitly refer to Mary

³ Cf. St. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, 1.31; in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, ed. J-P Migne (Paris, 1844ff) [henceforth PL], 23, 265. There, Jerome writes: "What is 'closed' and 'sealed' bears a likeness to the mother of the Lord, who was a mother and a virgin. That is why no one before or after our Savior was laid in his tomb, which was hewn in solid rock. And yet she that was ever a virgin (*virgo perpetua*) is the mother of many virgins."

as the “spouse of Christ.”⁴ St. John Damascene (†749), on the other hand, described Mary as “the spouse whom the Father had taken to himself.”⁵ In modern times, St. Maximilian Kolbe (1894–1941) has expounded Mary’s betrothal to the Holy Spirit, through whose power she conceived Jesus,⁶ and Matthias Scheeben (1835–1888), the renowned Scholastic theologian of the nineteenth century, revived attention to the notion of Mary as the *Mater-Sponsa Verbi*, the bridal mother of the Word.⁷ Amongst these different applications of the bridal motif to Mary, in what particular sense is Mary properly speaking the “bride of Christ”?

St. Irenaeus of Lyons provides an essential key to this question in his understanding of redemption as a “recapitulation in Christ.”⁸ Just as Jesus Christ is the anti-

⁴ Cf. St. Ephrem in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, ed. J-P Migne (Paris, 1844ff) [henceforth PG], 10.1177; 77.1427–1428; 93.1464; Peter Chrysologus, *Sermon*, in PL 52.576; as referenced in Donal Flanagan, “The Image of the Bride in the Earlier Marian Tradition,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 27 (1960): 111–124; here at 117–120.

⁵ St. John Damascene, *Encomium in Dormitionem Dei Genetricis Semperque Virginis Mariae, Hom. II*, n. 14. Also quoted in Pius XII’s *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), no. 21.

⁶ Cf. a three-volume Italian translation of the original Polish writings: St. Massimiliano Kolbe, *Gli scritti di Massimiliano Kolbe, eroe di Oswiecim e beato della Chiesa* (Firenze, Italy: Citta di Vita, 1976–78). See also H.M. Manteau-Bonamy, *Immaculate Conception and the Holy Spirit: The Marian Teachings of Father Kolbe*, trans. Richard Arnandez, F.S.C. (Kenosha, WI: Franciscan Marytown Press, 1977).

⁷ Cf. Matthias Scheeben, *Handbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik V* (Freiburg im Br.: Herder, 1873–1882). According to Flanagan, 113, Scheeben’s fundamental idea of *Mater-Sponsa Verbi* is not to be interpreted with Mary as Mother and Spouse, but rather, as a “divinely-bridal maternity.”

⁸ Cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.22 and 5.19. See also St. John Chrysostom, *Catecheses* 3, 13–19 (*Sources Chrétiennes* [Paris, 1941ff], 50:174–177), which is also in the Office of Readings for Good Friday. John Chrysostom interpreted the water and blood that flowed from Christ’s side as symbols of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. From these two

type of Adam, Mary is the anti-type of Eve—Mary’s perfect obedience standing in contrast to Eve’s original disobedience. Although Irenaeus never refers to Mary as bride *per se*, his conception of the New Eve attributes a fundamental bridal identity to Mary in relationship to Christ, the New Adam. In this typological sense, Mary is indeed the bride of Christ.

Hans Urs von Balthasar drew inspiration from the theology of Irenaeus.⁹ Balthasar’s writings on the Church especially help to illumine this topic of the nuptial dimension of Mary and the Eucharist. In *Theo-drama IV*, he distinguishes between two conceptions or aspects of the Marian mystery by which Our Lady *becomes* the bride of the Son of God:

In her first conception [at the Annunciation], she was the ‘vessel (not the bride) of the Spirit’ for the sake of her virginal motherhood vis-à-vis the Son; in her second conception [at the Cross], she becomes

sacraments, the Church is born. Hence, the New Eve from the wounded side of Christ, the New Adam, is the Church: “There flowed from his side water and blood. Beloved do not pass over this mystery without thought; it has yet another hidden meaning, which I will explain to you. I said that water and blood symbolized baptism and the holy Eucharist. From these two sacraments the Church is born: from baptism, the cleansing water that gives rebirth and renewal through the Holy Spirit, and from the holy Eucharist. Since the symbols of baptism and Eucharist flowed from his side, it was from his side that Christ fashioned the Church, as he had fashioned Eve from the side of Adam.... As God then took a rib from Adam’s side to fashion a woman, so Christ has given us blood and water from his side to fashion the Church. God took the rib when Adam was in a deep sleep, and in the same way Christ gave us the blood and water after his own death.”

⁹ Cf. Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002). See especially page 9ff, on which Mongrain sets forth his central thesis that “Balthasar granted Irenaeus of Lyons privileged status as the quintessential patristic figure whose theology is the standard by which all other patristic theologies should be judged.”

the equally virginal Bride of the Son of God himself, who gives himself away eucharistically.¹⁰

In the first conception, the Annunciation is the event in which Mary gave a bridal response on behalf of all humanity and consequently became the *bridal chamber* for the nuptials of the Divine Word and human nature. Here, she is not the “bride of Christ” *per se*, but she intimately takes part in the mystery of the Incarnation, which is described as the divine nuptials of the Word and human nature.

This idea that God unites humanity to himself in a *sacrum connubium* is consistent with the message of the prophets of old. The Church Fathers and medieval theologians, likewise, spoke of the emergence of the spouse from his bridal chamber as a metaphor for the virgin birth of Christ from Mary’s womb. For instance, the Angelic Doctor writes of the Incarnation: “[T]here is a certain spiritual marriage between the Son of God and human nature. And therefore through the Annunciation there was awaited the consent of the Virgin acting in the place of all of human nature.”¹¹ In other words, at the Annunciation, a mystical marriage is effected between God and humanity, and it takes place in Mary who provides the essential human consent to God’s initiative.

In the second conception, the link between Mary and Christ as bride to bridegroom is explicit: “she becomes the equally virginal Bride of the Son of God himself.” Moreover, it is specifically at the cross and in the Eucharist that Mary’s

¹⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama IV: The Action* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 358–359.

¹¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 30, a. 1.

espousal to the New Adam is sealed. This is the crux of Balthasar's insight, the point in which the nuptial and sacrificial dimensions of the Eucharist coalesce in Mary. Our Lady is the spouse of Christ in her perfect sharing in his sacrificial love.

Love is personal. On the cross, Christ offers himself for "someone."¹² The bride who emerges, standing vis-à-vis Christ, is a real subject who gives a reciprocal response of love to her bridegroom. Mary first spoke that perfect *fiat* at the Annunciation on behalf of the entire human race, and she speaks it climactically at the cross, where she becomes for Christ what Eve was to Adam; she is his true "helpmate" (i.e., his spouse). In a mystical sense, the cross consummates the union of the Bridegroom and the bride; it is a fruitful, mystical union in which the New Adam and the New Eve bring forth the children of God.

Expropriation is a key term in Balthasar's dramatic soteriology. It refers to the "*Entselbstung*" or "unselfing" action of the Holy Spirit divesting human persons of all self-centeredness in order to draw them into the self-giving life of the Trinity. This dynamic is rooted in the complete self-donation of the Trinitarian Persons to one another, such that, in the eternal processions, the Father holds nothing back from the Son in generating the Son except what is proper to being "Father," and likewise of the Son in relationship to the Father, and of the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father and the Son. This divine "expropriation" extends into the economy of salvation in the kenotic mission of Jesus Christ,

¹² Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Who is the Church?" in *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 143–191; here at 147.

who “though he was in the form of God did not deem equality with God ... [but] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2:6–8). In the realm of finite existence, human persons are drawn into this divine dynamic by way of a similar kenotic movement, an “excentration” and gifting of oneself to others in conformity to the will of God.

According to Balthasar, Mary’s expropriation was made explicit in her *fiat* to the message of the Angel Gabriel. Her consent to become the vessel of the Incarnation inaugurated an era of salvation, fulfilling the Old Covenant and ushering in the New. Mary’s faith is the culmination and climax of Abrahamic faith. The Virgin Mary’s “yes” moved salvation history forward because it was given with unconditional love and was absolutely free of any restriction. Balthasar writes: “If Mary’s yes had contained even the shadow of a demurral, of a ‘so far and no farther,’ a stain would have clung to her faith and the child could not have taken possession of the whole of human nature.”¹³ Quite the contrary, Mary completely offered her entire being—and hence the entirety of human nature, pure and untainted—as the locus of the Incarnation. Mary’s assent of faith is a bridal assent in which she receives “the Son as seed of the Father through the realizing act of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ The Annunciation is thus the threshold of eternal nuptials.

Our Lady’s *fiat* is renewed in every event of Jesus’ lifetime, until its consummation on Calvary. In preparation

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary, The Church at the Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 105; this statement also underscores the theological *raison d’être* of the Immaculate Conception.

¹⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama III: The Dramatis Personae* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1978), 162.

for this final act, it is Jesus who “educates the Mother for the great task.” According to Balthasar, Jesus cultivates in Mary “the maturity she needs to stand under the Cross and, finally, to receive, at prayer within the Church, the universal gift of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ Simeon had prophesied that a sword would pierce Mary’s heart, but this would not consist of a single episode of suffering. Rather, Mary’s entire life was comprised of a succession of *fiats* in faith—consenting and actively willing that God’s will be done. Each moment of her existence unfolded with an intensified renewal of the *fiat* that she first spoke at the Annunciation. From the disappearance of her teenaged Son to Jesus’ response to Mary years later at the wedding feast in Cana, “Woman, what have you to do with me?” and then throughout his public ministry, Mary surrendered herself to the mystery unfolding before her, never ceasing to contemplate it in her heart.

Balthasar highlights the expropriatory dimension of Jesus’ statement that whoever does the will of the Father is brother, sister, and mother to him. In contrast to the traditional interpretation that Jesus’ words actually hold Mary in proper esteem—for no one has done the will of the Father as perfectly as she—Balthasar posits that Jesus’ words imposed a painful distance between him and his mother. Would not those words have gnawed at her soul and plunged her into a darkness that demanded her continued excentration from her Son? Every detail of Mary’s interaction with Christ hones her faith and prepares her for the darkness of incomprehension that is to come.

¹⁵ Ratzinger and Balthasar, *Church at the Source*, 107.

Throughout his life and ministry, she is increasingly cast away from her Son until this expropriation is complete.

The final stage, which fills Mary's bitter chalice to the brim, comes at the cross where she surrenders to the full mystery of salvation hidden behind the violent powers of sin and evil.

At the Cross, Mary's *Yes* consents to her being totally stripped of power (Mary can do nothing to help her Son); and what is more, she is sent away into utter uselessness: Mary cannot even remind her Son of the mystery of his coming forth from her, for she is handed over to another son. This is the graveyard of all those theories that try to establish a direct connection between the suffering of the Mother and that of the Son.¹⁶

Balthasar posits that Jesus' words, "Woman, behold your son" (Jn 19:26), are essentially words of abandonment, and it is precisely in this abandonment that Mary is perfectly united to her Son in a new way: "[J]ust as the Son is abandoned by the Father, so too, he abandons his Mother, so that the two of them may be united in a common abandonment. Only thus does she become inwardly ready to take on ecclesial motherhood toward all of Jesus' new brothers and sisters."¹⁷ The paradox of the drama of salvation is located in the darkness of mutual abandonment wherein Mother and Son are mystically united and their mutual forsakenness is overcome.

In this crucible of redemption, the nuptial mystery is consummated. Mary becomes the "virginal Bride of the Son

¹⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* IV, 361.

¹⁷ Ratzinger and Balthasar, *Church at the Source*, 109–110.

of God himself, who gives himself away eucharistically.”¹⁸ She takes on a new identity and mission with the birthing of the Church: “*Ecce Mater tua*” (Jn 19:27). Balthasar writes:

Finally falling silent, the Word is empowered to make his whole body into God’s seed; thus the Word finally and definitively becomes flesh in the Virgin Mother, Mary-Ecclesia.¹⁹

The sacrifice that constitutes our salvation and stands at the core of ecclesial existence is indeed a nuptial mystery in which the bride and bridegroom are mystically united, and this union renders the bride utterly fecund:

In the “poverty of her dispossessed womb ... [Mary] embraces and envelops the ‘closed’ and negative poverty of all sinners ... [She thus becomes] the ‘bride of the (slain) Lamb’ and the ‘womb of the Church’—a nuptial relationship that begins in the utter forsakenness and darkness they both experience.”²⁰

Mary’s sinless “yes” becomes the universal womb bearing forth the life of Christ for others. In Balthasar’s account, she welcomes “[t]he seed of God eucharistically multiplied.”²¹ The Eucharistic sacrifice is a nuptial gift; Mary is the first bride.

¹⁸ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* IV, 358–359; as previously quoted.

¹⁹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* IV, 361.

²⁰ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* IV, 358.

²¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* IV, 358.

2. Mary and the Sacrifice of the Mass

The bride is sacrificed together with the Bridegroom; she is placed together with him under the one knife of the Father on Moriah.²²

In an essay, “The Mass, a Sacrifice of the Church?” Balthasar considers the significance of “*offerimus*” in the Eucharistic prayers of the Roman Canon.²³ If Christ has offered the one, definitive propitiatory sacrifice, in what sense does the Church “offer [to the] Father this life-giving bread [and] saving cup”? How can the Christian experience of “dying with Christ” begin to approximate the forsakenness of Jesus on the cross? In what sense does the Church offer sacrifice?

In view of these questions, Balthasar begins his essay acknowledging that the Eucharist is always, first and foremost, the action of Christ. Redemption is the work of God and never a human initiative. In the objective sense, then, God has accomplished man’s salvation independently of man, through Christ’s blood shed for our sins. In the subjective sense, however, the drama of salvation requires real participants who, by receiving the gift of God’s mercy and forgiveness, are empowered by the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ dwelling within the Church to partake truly in Jesus’ salvific sacrifice. Yet what does this participation entail? As explored above, Balthasar posits that the Blessed Mother exemplified perfect receptivity to the

²² Balthasar, “Who is the Church?” 369.

²³ “We offer to you, God of glory and majesty, this holy and perfect sacrifice” (Eucharistic prayer I); “We offer you, Father, this life-giving bread, this saving cup ...” (Eucharistic prayer II); et al. Cf. *The Sacramentary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1985).

sacrifice of Christ specifically *as his helpmate*. Having undergone complete expropriation, she became the first recipient of the mercies of God in the Son's work of Redemption. Consequently, a new relationship between the Mother and the Redeemer has come into being. To speak of Mary as mystically "the bride of Christ" means that, by way of her expropriation, Mary is the New Eve who has entered into a fructified, spousal relationship with the New Adam, and her *fiat* is universalized so that the Church may be born from his side.

Building up to this thesis, Balthasar examines three preliminary considerations, which he ultimately deems insufficient, before proposing a nuptial and Marian understanding of the Eucharistic sacrifice. Balthasar first examines Odo Casel's fundamental idea that "the divine mystery of salvation exists ... as cult mystery."²⁴ Cult mystery, he says, refers to "the ritual presentation and renewed positing of the mystery of Christ, whereby it is made possible for us to enter the mystery of Christ itself."²⁵ In the Mass, the resurrected Christ extends the gifts of his Spirit to the Church so that, as "the historical Christ alone offered sacrifice on the Cross, the pneumatically exalted Christ offers sacrifice together with the Church that he has purified with the blood flowing from his side."²⁶

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Mass, a Sacrifice of the Church?" in *Explorations in Theology III: Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 185–245; here at 194: "[T]he divine mystery of salvation exists in a form that is both double and single: as the mystery of Christ in the historical incarnation, in the life, Passion, and Resurrection of the Lord, and as cult mystery."

²⁵ Balthasar, "The Mass," 194.

²⁶ Odo Casel, *Das christliche Kultmysterium* (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1948), 30; quoted by Balthasar, "The Mass," 197, see footnote 23.

Balthasar's second consideration is of St. Augustine's notion of the *totus Christus*: it is Christ the Head along with all his members who make up one Mystical Body and together offer sacrifice.²⁷ However, even within this mystical union, the Church's participation in the sacrifice is never equivalent to the unique and unrepeatable offering of Christ on the cross. Balthasar reminds his reader of the fact that "Christ's gift of self was consciously his offering of himself to bear the entire guilt of the world"²⁸ and that "no one who enters the sphere of the cult mystery will ever receive the faintest notion of the night Christ went through, even if he were to receive the highest mystical graces."²⁹

This leads Balthasar to reframe his question: "Where do we find the realization of the *identity* of the sacrifice between the Head and Body, between Bridegroom and bride, which was indeed envisaged in this theory?"³⁰ His response turns to a third consideration, namely a consideration of the ministerial priesthood as the *causa instrumentalis*. In this light, it is in the priest as *alter Christus* that the Church is enabled to make her offering to God.³¹

In each of these considerations (i.e., Casel's idea of the "cult mystery," Augustine's notion of "*Totus Christus*," and the Church's understanding of the ministerial priesthood), the emphasis is on the Church's action as members of the Body of Christ. However, Balthasar presses the question further in order to put forth a compelling thesis on the

²⁷ Cf. Balthasar, "The Mass," 200–202.

²⁸ "Balthasar, "The Mass," 202.

²⁹ Balthasar, "The Mass," 202.

³⁰ Balthasar, "The Mass," 202.

³¹ Cf. Balthasar, "The Mass," 202.

Church as bride. He argues that the sacrifice of Christ must become the sacrifice of the Church precisely by the latter's own "personal participation ... thanks to her mystical incorporation in Christ as [both] his Body and *his Bride*."³² This is the nuptial dimension of the Eucharist, which, in ecclesiological terms, underscores a union-in-distinction between Christ and the Church and accordingly posits the Church's bridal participation in Christ's sacrifice as her own.

As previously discussed, expropriation is a dynamic of loving sacrifice, and it takes on a bridal quality in Mary, seminally in her *fiat* at the Annunciation and climactically at the Crucifixion. The bridal and sacrificial dimensions of the Eucharist are immanent in Jesus' display of fellowship in washing the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper. For the disciples, this event becomes the threshold to communion in Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice.

Because the Paschal Mystery brings Jesus' *kenosis* to a climax, fellowship in Christ's sacrifice thenceforth demands the disciple's complete expropriation in the likeness of his Master. When Peter responds with profound shock and incredulity to the Lord's self-abasing request to wash his feet, exclaiming, "Lord, you shall never wash my feet!" (Jn 13:6), Jesus replies, "What I am doing, you do not yet understand.... If I do not wash you, you will have no *fellowship* with me" (Jn 13:7, 8b; emphasis added). This "fellowship" refers to communion with Christ in the ultimate act of love, in laying down one's life for one's friend. In stooping to wash the disciples' feet, Jesus stooped to the level of a slave. He would act as a slave in this deed and die

³² Balthasar, "The Mass," 203; emphasis added.

a slave's death on the cross.³³ The former is the prelude to the love manifested in the latter, and it is significant that the symbolic act of feet-washing takes place in a Eucharistic context, the *koinonia* of the Last Supper. Fundamentally, Peter must forgo his initial resistance and consent to laying down his life by resigning his own will and yielding to the Lord's request unconditionally.

Balthasar describes Peter's expropriation thusly:

Peter must utter his *Yes in persona Ecclesiae* in a state of non-understanding, in pure obedience, indeed, more than this, in the confusion of an elemental shrinking back in terror, a terror that is expressed in Peter's second statement: "You will never wash my feet."³⁴

Moreover, Balthasar describes Peter's "yes" as something "pressed out of [him]" and something utterly "appalling for him."³⁵ Nonetheless, Peter's expropriation becomes the very factor that incorporates him into Christ's sacrifice. In other words, Peter must choose to allow the Master to wash his feet; he must choose for Jesus to die. In his love for the Lord, such a choice seems contrary to his own will, and this compounds the paradox of the cross: it is in forsaking his own will to love Jesus *in his own way* that Peter manifests genuine love and true fellowship with his Teacher and Savior.

³³ Balthasar, "The Mass," 219.

³⁴ Balthasar, "The Mass," 220.

³⁵ Balthasar, "The Mass," 221.

The total collapse of the “religious order of values of the natural man”³⁶ is a necessary condition for the supernatural man to emerge. Balthasar writes:

The creature, and *a fortiori* the sinner, can raise itself up to this absolute love only in an act of perfect “blind” obedience, to which the divine love compels it inexorably and with apparent cruelty. This same coercion lay already in the discourse that promises the Eucharist, where it is said that whoever does not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and does not drink his blood does not have life in himself (John 6:53).³⁷

In the Eucharist, the sacrament of the Paschal Mystery, the Church is configured to Christ in this expropriatory demand. She becomes the Mystical Body of Christ in the Eucharist by first being the bride who surrenders herself to embrace her Crucified Beloved.

Mary holds an essential place in this Eucharistic and nuptial configuration, as she did on Calvary, because her surrender constitutes the complete bridal response, a response that enables the Church to give that same selfless reply, and thus become, like Mary, a true bride of Christ. In fact, Balthasar’s discussion of the Church’s participation in the sacrifice of the Mass reaches a climax in Mary; he revisits the topic of her total expropriation at the cross in “The Mass, a Sacrifice of the Church?” and describes the scene of Calvary as follows:

She [Mary] does nothing and says nothing, she is only there. And the dying Son disposes over her so thoroughly that he foists another

³⁶ Balthasar, “The Mass,” 220.

³⁷ Balthasar, “The Mass,” 222.

son on her and gives her to this son as mother. She is not asked; her agreement is taken for granted. This has always been the case, since the scene of the conception.³⁸

Mary is the epitome of faith and the paradigm of a perfectly dispossessed love—a love that is always willing to accept God’s plan without reservation, even to the point of accepting the death of her Son:

At the Cross, she is officially and definitively set aside. Here is achieved the ultimate form of the relationship between this Mother and this Son, this Bride and this Bridegroom, this Lord and this Handmaid: she must allow him to go away, not only into physical death, but into the state of abandonment by God.... She can neither see nor understand that it is herein that she becomes most perfectly configured to him, because he, too, is the one sent away and abandoned by the Father.³⁹

Our Lady’s *fiat* to sacrificial love constitutes the perfect bridal response that should be on the lips of the Church gathered in worship. Only in Mary does the Church truly enter into the sacrifice of Christ, not only by way of cultic mystery, but truly and mysteriously, as a bride united to her bridegroom. In this way, the Church does not offer up any sacrifice of its own, but rather, she is taken up in the sacrifice of Christ by a union of willful consent to becoming an oblation of love. In other words, the Church offers sacrifice with and in Christ when she suffers the death of her Bridegroom with and in the spirit of Mary.

³⁸ Balthasar, “The Mass,” 226.

³⁹ Balthasar, “The Mass,” 227.

3. Concluding Remarks

The assent of the *Ekklesia* to the sacrifice of the Son must press on until it reaches Mary's perfect selflessness.⁴⁰

This essay has examined Balthasar's synthesis of the Marian and nuptial dimensions of the Church's Eucharistic sacrifice. The first section considered the bridal aspect of Mary's role in salvation history. Through a lifetime of *fiats*, she became the "bride [who] is sacrificed together with the bridegroom ... the Mother who, with the Son, is abandoned by God on the Cross."⁴¹ Balthasar's perspective illumines how the notion of the "bride of Christ" is best understood with reference to the cross, wherein the bride is cleansed with the blood of the Lamb. There, the Blessed Virgin stands as the first and truest helpmate of the New Adam. Her expropriation culminates in these divine nuptials at the Crucifixion, and she thus becomes mother to the Church born from his side. "*Ecce homo*" (Jn 19:5) is followed and completed with "*Ecce mater tua*" (Jn 19: 27).

The second section considered the sacrificial aspect of Mary's *fiat* in relation to the Eucharist. The driving question of that exposition was: In what sense does the Church participate in offering the sacrifice of the Mass? The final answer came as a paradox. Through a nuptial receptivity of faith and love, the Church offers the supreme sacrifice precisely *in receiving it*. In the Eucharist, the best the Church can do is to bring to the altar her own poverty in an openness that is willing to receive anything and everything the Father

⁴⁰ Balthasar, "The Mass," 240.

⁴¹ Balthasar, "Who is the Church," 369.

gives. In turn, the Father gives the complete sacrifice of Christ, his Son. In receiving this sacrifice with a disposition of Marian receptivity, the Church acts as Christ's true bride. The Paschal Mystery commemorates the nuptial sacrifice of the Bridegroom for his bride. The birth of the Church from the pierced side of Christ attests to Mary's bridal motherhood; she is the first bride, fructified by grace, and she enables her children to be likewise. The Church's participation in the Mass, therefore, must also exhibit this Marian core.

Balthasar's creative synthesis on Mary, the Church, and the Eucharist is built on the treasures of tradition, and it expounds the inexhaustible richness of the mysteries of the Christian faith. At once traditional and innovative, he deepens our understanding of the bridal and sacrificial character of the Christian life and draws us into the mystical core of Christianity where the greatest love is manifested in the greatest sacrifice. The irresistible power of divine love is revealed as a *crucified* love, sealed in a *marital* covenant. Salvation is about God wooing the soul to Himself, and the Eucharist is the place wherein the Church, as bride, is brought into union with the Bridegroom.

Balthasar's writings illumine the content of that "profound analogy" between "the *Fiat* which Mary said in reply to the angel, and the *Amen* which every believer says when receiving the body of the Lord," as described in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*.⁴² Mary's complete self-gift at the Annunciation and Crucifixion embodies the convergence of the bridal and sacrificial dimensions of the Eucharist. When

⁴² John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 55.

the Church likewise takes on Mary's disposition of loving receptivity and self-renunciation at every celebration of the Mass, she makes her own the sacrifice of Christ and rejoicingly enters the Paschal banquet of the Lamb.

Mary's role in the Mass is unique and irreplaceable. In her, the Church finds herself as a bride, prototypically present in the flesh of the Bridegroom. Her sacrifice, a receptive complement to Christ's own, allows the efficacy of the sacrament to take hold of human existence. The anamnesis of the Eucharistic celebration is not some abstract remembrance. Rather, it is a remembering that resides in the living memory of a real person—in Mary, and through Mary, in the Church. When the Church prays to the Father in the Eucharist, "Look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church,"⁴³ she turns to the faith of all those who have persevered in holiness, and at the center of these saints stands the Mother and Bride who made the perfect faith-filled offering of her Son, the world's Redeemer, to the Father. Only in turning to Our Lady does the Church begin to "grasp what *eucharistia* means: it is thanksgiving to the Father for the departure of the Son and thanksgiving that we are permitted to let him depart."⁴⁴ Mary is the living and loving "memory of Christ's Passion." With her, in the

⁴³ *The Sacramentary*, celebrant's words preceding the sign of peace.

⁴⁴ Balthasar, "The Mass," 236. See also Balthasar, *A Short Primer for Unsettled Laymen* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1980), 94: "...being set aside and given away to another son, ... [Mary] was a silent, invisible part of this sacrifice. For she, the woman, *is* the Church that gives her assent, and everyone in the Church as a part in this assent. Even the man, even the priest, is in this respect feminine, Marian." See also Col 1:12: "...giving thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light."

Eucharist, “our souls are filled with grace and the pledge of future glory is given us.”⁴⁵

One might consider how the very words of consecration, “This is my body, given up for you,” belong most fundamentally to Mary. It was from her flesh that the Word was made flesh; it was from her humanity that he took his humanity. Each time a priest, acting *in persona Christi*, speaks the words of consecration, he speaks them efficaciously in the sacramental order. Mary, on the other hand, operates on the level of the *realities* that are made sacramentally present.⁴⁶ It is this *res et sacramentum* of the Eucharist that makes the Eucharist the pulse of ecclesial existence. Every time the Church celebrates the Paschal Mystery, then, she must look to Our Lady to learn how to live as a truly priestly and Eucharistic people.

The Church has expounded the Paschal dimension of the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Christian life, but little has been said of its nuptial character. Balthasar fills this lacuna with a rich Marian perspective, showing how Mary uniquely illumines the nuptial mystery. Moreover, in an era of turmoil and confusion with regard to gender and sexuality, Balthasar’s theology brings us back to the core of salvation history wherein “love alone is credible”⁴⁷ and all creatures stand as feminine—namely, as bridal—in relationship to God. Our salvation culminates in the banquet of the slain Lamb, with Mary as the first bride; she unites in her own

⁴⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas’ *O Sacrum Convivium*.

⁴⁶ Cf. James O’Connor, “Mary and the Eucharist,” *Marian Studies* 34 (1983): 48–65; here at 59.

⁴⁷ Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D.C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

being the dual dimensions of sacrifice and spousal love. Having stood as the “veiled virgin” in the pivotal moment of human history, she continues to stand with us and for us at every Eucharistic sacrifice. At present, the mystery is still hidden behind a sacramental veil—a veil that is simultaneously a mourning veil and a bridal veil. Until it is lifted and the ultimate nuptials consummated, may we share and grow in her bridal love.

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