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A SANCTO THOMA AQUINATE IN URBE

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# Balthasar and Speyr: First Steps in a Discernment of Spirits

RALPH MARTIN

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## Abstract

Hans Urs von Balthasar repeatedly emphasized the central importance of Adrienne von Speyr's mystical and theological insights for his own theological work. Besides copiously quoting her revelations in some of his most important works he wrote two books that emphasized the importance of the relationship and described its dynamics in remarkable detail. Some of what he described raises serious questions about the source of the spiritual insight on which he based so many of his most important personal decisions and theological approaches. This essay is an attempt to identify some of the dynamics and content of these revelations that require spiritual discernment, distinct from the properly strictly theological analysis of Balthasar's work that continues to be ongoing.

## Introduction

One of the remarkable aspects of Hans Urs von Balthasar's monumental theological work is his repeated affirmations that it is essentially linked to the theological/mystical work of Adrienne von Speyr. There are some who also see in their relationship an inspiring model of spiritual friendship and collaboration, similar to that of some well-known male and female saints, such as Francis and Clare, or Francis de Sales and Jane Chantal. It was while reading a laudatory description of their relationship<sup>1</sup> that I became

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<sup>1</sup> The article by J. ROTEN, "The Two Halves of the Moon," in: *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. D. Schindler. San Francisco, Communio Books, Ignatius Press, 1991, 65-86, is extraordinarily enthusiastic about their relationship and raises

interested in reading Balthasar's own account of their relationship in the two books which he wrote to both explain and defend it.<sup>2</sup> In one of the books, *Our Task*, he states that "this book has one chief aim: to prevent any attempt being made after my death to separate my work from that of Adrienne von Speyr."<sup>3</sup>

He speaks of his efforts to conform to her way of looking at revelation and states that his work in publishing her unpublished writings was more important than his own writing, and that he received from her, more, theologically, than she received from him.

As her confessor and spiritual director, I observed her interior life most closely, yet in twenty-seven years I never had the least doubt about the authentic mission that was hers (...) I not only made some of the most difficult decisions of my life—including my leaving the Jesuit Order—following her advice, but I also strove to bring my way of looking at Christian revelation into conformity with hers (...). Today, after her death, her work appears far more important to me than mine, and the publication of her still unpublished writings takes precedence over all personal work of my own.<sup>4</sup>

Both books testify to Balthasar's complete confidence in the authenticity of Speyr's many mystical experiences and revelations and the significant role they played in the development of Balthasar's own theo-

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no critical questions. He writes the article to tell of their "wonderfully, amazing relationship" (*ibid.*, 80). He speaks of the "symbiosis" of their relationship and points to "ample evidence" that Balthasar's "personality structure, his habits of the heart, and his intellectual framework as well have been influenced and co-shaped by Adrienne von Speyr" producing an admirable "Marian mental structure" (*ibid.*, 66).

<sup>2</sup> The first book, published in 1968 in German provides a lengthy overview of their relationship and collaboration, and an overall introduction to the written works of Adrienne von Speyr. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *First Glimpse at Adrienne von Speyr*, transl. by A. Lawry and S. Englund. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1981. The second book was published in 1984 in German and is a much more intimate portrait and homage to the importance of their relationship for all of their joint theological work and an introduction to their "child," the secular institute of The Community of St. John. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, transl. by J. Saward. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *First Glimpse*, 13.

logical speculations.<sup>5</sup> He strongly repudiates any effort to detach him or his teachings from her after his death. He repeatedly acknowledges that he is deeply indebted to her theological reflections on her mystical revelations, which he quotes extensively at key points throughout his theological works. He insists again and again that her theological reflections based on her mystical experiences not be separated from his theological positions.<sup>6</sup> He even says that the Church will eventually incorporate her insights into the Church's doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

In this short article I would like to simply recount some of the aspects of the relationship with Speyr that Balthasar considers significant and then indicate why the nature of what he shares needs appropriate spiritual discernment. While Balthasar's theories deserve to be taken seriously strictly on a theological level, he himself intends to tie them to Speyr's mystical experiences and interpretations in a way that makes it imprudent to ignore the spiritual component that he so openly attests to in coming to a balanced evaluation of his work.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13: "I never had the least doubt about the authentic mission that was hers." Roten sees their mission as being "essentially theological (...) to receive and to transmit, to ponder, 'interpret,' and so implant the word of God in human reality" (J. ROTEN, "The Two Halves", 71).

<sup>6</sup> E. OAKES, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York, Continuum, 1996, 3-5, 10, 300-305, provides a succinct summary of their relationship and its significance. As Balthasar himself puts it in an article he wrote for the journal he co-founded: "It was Adrienne von Speyr who showed the way in which Ignatius is fulfilled by John, and therewith laid the basis for most of what I have published since 1940. Her work and mine are neither psychologically nor philologically to be separated: two halves of a single whole, which has as its center a unique foundation" (H.U. VON BALTHASAR, "In Retrospect", in: *Communio* 2/3 [1975], 219). J. SERVAIS, "Per una valutazione dell'influsso di Adrienne von Speyr su Hans Urs von Balthasar," in: *Rivista Teologica di Lugano* 6/1 (2001), 67-89, has published a detailed account of the growing scholarship on the relationship between Balthasar and Speyr. He agrees that there is an obvious originality to Balthasar which should not be discounted but also concludes, that Speyr's influence on him was decisive ("un influsso decisivo", 85).

<sup>7</sup> As Balthasar put it in his interview in A. SCOLA, *Test Everything: Hold Fast to What Is Good: An Interview with Hans Urs von Balthasar*, transl. by M. Shrady. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1989, 89: "I believe the Church will gradually have to adopt substantial parts of her doctrine and, perhaps, wonder why these beautiful and enriching things have not been recognized earlier."

So in addition to the ongoing strictly theological evaluation of Balthasar's work to which I have also contributed,<sup>8</sup> I would like to propose that a spiritual discernment also be undertaken. Balthasar himself has argued strongly for the link between theology and spirituality and had a high regard for the witness of the saints as a resource for theology. To the objection that spiritual discernment has no role in scientific theology Balthasar himself would say that the authentic experience of spiritual reality—that of the saints—needs to have the last word in theology. “The last word, here as well, will go to the saints.”<sup>9</sup> Balthasar clearly considered Speyr a very holy person, an authentic mystic, even a saint. Especially when a claim is made that a certain spiritual experience is linked to a novel theological position—the revelations of Speyr that only the “effigies” of people are in hell and the speculations of Balthasar that it is “infinitely improbable” that any are lost—discernment is not only permissible, but necessary.

### Their Relationship

Since both the external circumstances of their relationship and Balthasar's report of the interior realities of it are somewhat unusual—and Balthasar acknowledges that there are aspects that are disconcerting at first glance<sup>10</sup>—

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<sup>8</sup> See my chapter on Balthasar's hope that all will be saved. R. MARTIN, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*. Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012, 129-190. See also my response to Fr. Oakes' review of my chapter on Balthasar: R. MARTIN, “Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization: A Response to some Criticism”, in: *The Proceedings of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Convention: Eschatology* (2014) (Another version of this article will appear in the *Josephinum Journal of Theology*, Volume 21, Number 2, in the Fall of 2015, with the title “Balthasar and Salvation: What Does He Really Teach?”).

<sup>9</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Dare We Hope, “That All Men Be Saved”? With a short discourse on Hell*, transl. by D. Kipp and L. Krauth. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1988, 169.

<sup>10</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 15. This is why Balthasar withheld certain of her works and published only what he called her “objective” works first. In this book though he draws upon the “posthumous works.” “The posthumous works are not yet generally available. Their circulation has been restricted up to now so that Adrienne's



such discernment will take some time. He recounts that he had a close collaboration with Speyr for 27 years and lived under the same roof with her for 15 years.<sup>11</sup> At one point, Balthasar acknowledges that there are so many of Speyr's commentaries and revelations—over 60 volumes by 1953 (Speyr died in 1967 at the age of 64)—that he wonders how much people will be able to read of it all, and notes that they could have had two or three times as many volumes if Balthasar had not reached his stenographic limits, and Speyr's health not declined.<sup>12</sup> Besides the immense quantity of her work—mostly given by way of dictation to Balthasar—that has been published and catalogued, either before her death or in the posthumously published works, there is additional archive material that has not been catalogued or completely opened to researchers. In addition, important material that would cast light on their relationship is not presently readily available, such as the perspective of the Jesuit superiors who interacted with Balthasar about his relationship with Speyr and his subsequent leaving of the Jesuits, nor published first hand testimony of those who knew them and could possibly have been witnesses to the extraordinary supernatural acts reported by Balthasar of Speyr. All of these would need to be taken into account in coming to any definitive conclusion. Such work has begun but more is needed. In this article I merely want to open up the conversation and suggest some aspects of the relationship and revelations that require discernment and raise some questions that need to be answered. I hope that this small article will be an incentive for others to pursue additional research.

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objective message, which is so important for the Church, might first be heard and pondered.” Since this was written there have been 12 volumes of the posthumous works published but they are not widely available and English translations of many of them have not yet been made.

<sup>11</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *First Glance*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 44. Balthasar laments the fact that even though she had 37 volumes in print before her death there was scarcely a review of any of them, and even then the reviews were “drab” and at her death only a brief obituary appeared in one newspaper (*ibid.*, 12). A complete bibliography of her writings, compiled by Balthasar, is listed on pp. 102-111 of *First Glance*.

The external circumstances of their relationship are unusual enough. Balthasar left the Jesuits and moved in with Adrienne and her second husband in order to pursue their mystical/theological collaboration and found together “their child,” a new secular institute called the Community of St. John. The first-hand account though of their relationship written by Balthasar is even more unusual. It seems to include what today we would call “recovered memories”<sup>13</sup> and “spiritual channeling”<sup>14</sup> and some somewhat startling defenses of their relationship.

Balthasar reports, based on Speyr’s diaries and recovered memories, that she was rejected by her mother<sup>15</sup> and bullied by her older sister, that she began to encounter St. Ignatius when she was 6 years old, and at the age of 15 was given an interior wound that was given in anticipation of her future meeting with Balthasar whom she had not yet met, but when she

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<sup>13</sup> The term “recovered memories” has been used frequently in relationship to victims of sexual abuse who have blotted out the memory until it was recovered in counseling sessions, whether through hypnosis, establishing a trusted relationship, or through various prayer methods of returning to one’s past. There seem to be some not infrequent abuses of such methodology where therapists have suggested abuse in a too aggressive way. Therefore, its reliability has become controversial.

<sup>14</sup> The term “spiritual channeling” has become used to describe the ability of some spiritually gifted persons to communicate with departed spirits. While commonly used to describe what spiritualist “mediums” do, there are also accounts of holy people receiving visions or messages from departed souls and saints. Usually though these visions or messages are not of the virtually continuous sort, “at will” communicating, that we encounter with Speyr and Balthasar. There is a unique quality to the Speyr communications both in their continuous nature and in their extraordinarily directive content that I am not familiar with occurring in other accounts of saints receiving communications from those already with the Lord. I am not aware of a “channeling” capability being exhibited in recognized saints. Roten, in his admiring essay, speaks of how Speyr “channels” and mediates Mary’s intentions and reactions for von Balthasar, because of Mary’s “helping omnipresence” (J. ROTEN, “The Two Halves”, 81-82).

<sup>15</sup> Balthasar reports that Speyr’s life was full of suffering: psychological, spiritual, and physical. “Yet more than once when she was dreaming, I heard Adrienne call out almost despairingly for her mother” (H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *First Glimpse*, 18). Balthasar reports her experiencing excruciating physical and spiritual pain as he observed her annual Good Friday descents into hell. In her later years she suffered increasing physical ailments—including heart problems, diabetes, obesity, nerve numbness in her feet—and eventually almost completely lost her sight and mobility. Cf. J. ROTEN, “The Two Halves”, 58.

met him she told him: “You do realize, don’t you, that I got your wound, and that the good Lord put you in it.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The Wound**

Roten reports additional insight into the meaning of the wound discovered in his own research into the original German of Speyr’s revelations:

Concerning the wound Adrienne received at the age of fifteen and which she vicariously bears for Hans Urs von Balthasar, Ignatius observed that this was appropriate in a double mission. Since both were virginal, this was the way for the woman to be marked by the sign of the man (...). The spiritual fecundity of the man will be put into the flesh of the woman, in order that it may become fruitful. In this sense, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s fecundity was laid into the wound which Adrienne von Speyr had received for him.<sup>17</sup>

And Roten reports another wound story:

Among the truly touching attentions Mary has towards Hans Urs von Balthasar, there is the story about the roll of bandaging material. Adrienne is bandaging her bleeding hand while Mary holds the bandaging roll. At the completion of her work, Adrienne suddenly knows that she has to give Hans Urs von Balthasar the remaining bandaging material. She does so, telling him that Mary had it in her hand and that he should treat it respectfully and consider this gift as a pledge and obligation. And ever since, von Balthasar carries the bandaging roll in a small holder knit especially for him by Adrienne as a tangible sign of his commitment to the common mission.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Marriages and Recovered Virginit**

Balthasar tells us that Speyr married her first husband, out of compassion, to take care of his two children, and had three miscarriages herself in the marriage. After her first husband’s death she married again, again Balthasar tells us, out of compassion. Balthasar reports that this mar-

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<sup>16</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> J. ROTEN, “The Two Halves”, 73, 74.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

riage was never consummated and Speyr's second husband accepted that Balthasar move in with them so they could collaborate on their spiritual work more effectively.<sup>19</sup> Balthasar goes to some surprising lengths to tell us that Speyr "was given back her virginity" and despite her familiarity with the male sexual organ, both through her first marriage and her work in a hospital inserting catheters into male patients, these experiences "made not the slightest impression on her."<sup>20</sup>

When Speyr tells Balthasar that she was "given back her virginity," she is not talking about a spiritual virginity but actual physical virginity. Balthasar accepts her claim and reports as fact: "Although she had the experience of marriage, physical virginity was later restored to her by the Lord."<sup>21</sup>

### Confession and Taking Dictation

After their meeting in 1940 Balthasar became her confessor and in 1944 began to take "dictation"—his term—from Speyr when she was in what sounds like trance-like states. "First, she had complete freedom of initiative in receiving what was given her and in translating it into a human language that I, who had to take down the shorthand, could understand. Secondly, I did to some degree help her to prepare for giving the dictations."<sup>22</sup>

It seems that Balthasar did not just passively write down what came to Speyr's mind but helped "prepare" her for what she was to say, although he never describes what this preparation consisted in.

To begin with, she does not understand what is shown her (...). This is where the mission of H.U. comes in. For A. it is somehow a guiding principle when she speaks in the Spirit. She has to go into this "speaking in the Spirit" until H.U. understands (...). When A. sees yellow and H.U. sees blue, she may occasionally have to put herself into the position where he sees blue, so that she can lead him from there to where she sees yellow.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 26-30.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-32.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18. Assuming the translation is accurate, such difficult-to-understand sentences are not uncommon.

Balthasar points out that Speyr united him to her previous life before she met him in what sounds like what would be called today “recovered memories,” in the context of the confessional.

As her confessor Balthasar was given the ability to

transfer Adrienne (back) to each of the various stages of her life, in order to run through her biography. This made it possible for her to recall much of what she had forgotten (...). At each stage, she used the language she had spoken at the time—whether as a small child, as a high-school student, or as a medical student. This transferring of Adrienne back into her past (always in conversation with me) had a further effect, which for her was quite crucial: it gave me a presence in her earlier life.<sup>24</sup>

### Extraordinary Spiritual Experiences

Speyr also described to Balthasar a vast number of truly unusual and remarkable spiritual experiences. Balthasar admiringly reports:

On her countless “journeys” she was transported to places in the world where trouble of some kind was taking place. She would then be transported into the soul of, say, someone who was finding it hard to make his confession, so that she could give him inner help. In this way she was able to support the dying, people being tortured and burned alive in concentration camps, men on battlefields and in prison, in fact suffering of every kind (...). There were many mystical phenomena in Adrienne’s life—stigmata, transferences, the radiating of light, levitation, speaking with tongues, and other things of that kind but they all occurred in a totally unemphatic way. They were mere accompaniments to show forth the heart of the matter: what was to be passed on to the Church invisibly through prayer and strenuous penance, visibly through the dictated works (...). Adrienne once told me that my mother, whom she had met in heaven (...). had entrusted me to her.<sup>25</sup>

Speyr’s reports of what her heavenly revelations wanted Balthasar to do often involved exhortations for him to trust her more:

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 70, 72-73.

Ignatius, who insisted that he (Balthasar) should be more communicative and give Adrienne more responsibility, didn't always appreciate von Balthasar's prudence and restraint: "Adrienne von Speyr needs trust and love, she hasn't received much during her life."<sup>26</sup>

### St. Ignatius and Speyr

Speyr stated that she was in constant communication with St. Ignatius, a claim that Balthasar completely accepted. Speyr offered to ask Ignatius questions that Balthasar wished to submit to him. Speyr reported to Balthasar that St. Ignatius after meeting St. John the evangelist in heaven had become much more Johannine in his thinking and so their community that they were to found together ("our child") should be Johannine.<sup>27</sup> It was St. Ignatius's guidance, given through Speyr that confirmed Balthasar in leaving the Jesuits and moving in with Speyr and her husband to carry out their common mission: "Quite early on very quiet and gentle suggestions began to be made that the mission of St. Ignatius would perhaps be more important than remaining in the Society."<sup>28</sup>

Speyr knew what a huge decision this was and suggests that maybe if she died Balthasar would not have to leave the Jesuits. Balthasar forbade her to die, left the Jesuits, and the two become more deeply entwined than ever.<sup>29</sup>

Balthasar clearly acknowledges that he left the Jesuits, persuaded to do so by Speyr, who invoked the supernatural guidance of St. Ignatius: "But truly superhuman strength was demanded of her by the part she assumed in the responsibility for persuading me to leave the Jesuit Order when it became evident that it would be impossible to carry out within the framework of the Society of Jesus the mission with which we had been charged in founding the new community."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> J. ROTEN, "The Two Halves", 73.

<sup>27</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *First Glance*, 43.

Once during a retreat that Balthasar was giving Speyr spoke about what her role would be in it, indicating that this was revealed to her by St. Ignatius:

He [St. Ignatius] would like Adrienne to be sent to heaven for the next few days. H.U. must do this and let Adrienne share the Exercises with him from heaven. After each conference, she must give a short commentary on how things look from there, in the light of the Trinity. With this in mind, on each occasion, H.U. should take her out of heaven for, say, a quarter of an hour and ask her questions. He can think up all kinds of questions (...). If he wants to, H.U. can call upon SP [*Sanctus Pater* = St. Ignatius] if there is something he does not understand or wants to know (...). She will also share in a large part of the confessions of other people. From where she is, she can go almost anywhere she thinks necessary, or where H.U. thinks she should go. H.U. has therefore a certain power over heaven, which later, when A. no longer returns, will be important for him (...). Anything negative, anything that does not come off, must always be seen as a learning experience, never as an estrangement from Father (St. Ignatius). Father is glad to be allowed to help his children.<sup>31</sup>

Apparently things that do not seem to work out as expected are not to put in question the authenticity of the link with St. Ignatius, but are to be viewed as learning experiences.

## Two Main Emphases

There were two main emphases in their common work. The first was finding a way to introduce into Catholic theology an interpretation of scripture and doctrine, based on Speyr's descent into hell experiences, revelations and theology, that would allow Balthasar to propose that it is "infinitely improbable" that any human being will ultimately be able to resist God's salvific grace.<sup>32</sup> The other main emphasis though was, and in some ways they considered this the most important fruit of their common effort, the birthing of a new secular institute to be called the Community of St. John.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 185-186.

<sup>32</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Dare We Hope*, 219-221.

Speyr reports to Balthasar her numerous communications from Mary and the saints and the Lord himself<sup>33</sup> about the importance of founding the community. At one point, when she is troubled because a Jesuit has told her that founders need to be saints, Balthasar consoles her by saying they will not be founding a “grand order” like the Jesuits or Franciscans and that their community will be “more modest.” To which Speyr replies, based on her revelations:

It will become something great. It will spread out (...). She prayed constantly for the “Child” and learned a great deal about it. She also prayed for my “inadequacy,” so that I would be able to cooperate properly (...). As for her spiritual life, she said that “the Child” and the general task always stood at the center of the visions (...) and “the *new parents*” really ought to bear responsibility for the birth.<sup>34</sup>

### **Speyr’s Rebukes of Balthasar and a Strange Voice**

Speyr’s prayer for Balthasar’s “inadequacy” is tame compared to what Balthasar recounts of her lengthy and severe rebukes of him—for the most part for not providing enough emotional support or defending her enough from her critics. He describes this as her “relentless rebuking and training of her confessor” and recounts some truly harrowing scenes that he nevertheless seems to be abjectly grateful for.

During her first Holy Week as a Catholic, she reported that she experienced the Passion and complained that Balthasar was not “there” for her. This feeling that Balthasar was not supporting her enough intensified and on July 11, 1941 Speyr summoned Balthasar to her office, as he later put it, so that she could “show her contempt for me face to face.” At first

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<sup>33</sup> Not only are there the straightforward prophesies and accounts of a huge number of mystical experiences there is also what Balthasar describes as “a rather strange work,” which he describes as “number mysticism.” The work in question is *Das Fischernetz* (The Fisherman’s Net) and it is described in *Our Task*, including a lengthy footnote on pp. 68-70. It is also described, in hard-to-follow detail, in H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *First Glance*, 82-85.

<sup>34</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 50-51, 54.



Speyr will not say anything, knowing that it could cost their friendship, but Balthasar urges her to speak and she did,

quietly, with a kind of ice-cold severity. It is not her voice. Someone else is speaking out of her (...). A terrifying indictment continues for almost an hour (...). She says she is like a young mother in a labor ward. The medical students look at her and make cynical, indecent remarks. Her husband hasn't the time. He's busy somewhere else, perhaps with another woman (...). Finally the child arrives. He is inspected from every angle, weighed, registered. The mother nearly dies of shame. She feels violated (...). Later she spoke about the woman's sexual role: "Carrying the child is naturally the woman's role, but the husband ought to support her and take care of her. After all, the child is his as well as hers."<sup>35</sup>

At other times Speyr expresses concern about Balthasar's spiritual life and says she sees darkness settling into his soul, a lack of "total love" of God, and his "lack of prayer."<sup>36</sup>

Yet despite her misgivings and regular rebukes she affirms:

If the Lord and his Mother didn't hold your hand forcefully—she says—it would be very dangerous for me, because in this moment I view God entirely through you. But it would be absurd to think that you could show me another but the true God.<sup>37</sup>

The mutuality of the total trust in one another's revelations/theology/guidance is clear. Both have surrendered a critical ability and have embarked on a path of mutual trust in the revelations and theological interpretations of each other. The fear that Speyr expresses—that Balthasar's vision of God could be false—which she quickly rejects, is worth noting. It is possible that Balthasar had to overcome similar fears in what he was receiving from Speyr although what is expressed is only complete trust.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-79. There is a great deal of sexual imagery which we cannot go into in the space of this article. Speyr continually compares herself and Balthasar, in an analogous husband/wife role, in bringing forth the child. There is talk of "conception," "pregnancy," etc. throughout the works. Speyr is Mary to Balthasar's John; all guided by what Speyr relates that St. Ignatius is telling them. See J. ROTEN, "The Two Halves", 74-75.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in J. ROTEN, "The Two Halves", 70.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

Balthasar reports that her rebuke of his lack of support led to a conflict with his Jesuit superiors over her “which began the long and painful story of my departure from the Jesuits.” Forbidden to any longer go to her house, they continued meeting in his office.<sup>38</sup>

It seems, as Speyr reports, that St. Ignatius relates to Balthasar in a similarly demeaning manner. In a puzzling account of the “obedience” dynamics of their relationship, Balthasar reports that Speyr would receive a “detailed and complicated penitential program,” from “heaven” and would promptly forget it, “under obedience.” Balthasar was then expected to impose it on Speyr “under obedience,” but if he did not do it exactly right, he was reprimanded.

This again was done in such exacting obedience that at times I had to start all over again when through inattention or negligence, I had made a mistake. I was treated like a schoolboy by SPN [St. Ignatius]: I had to learn that one can only command if one is under strict obedience oneself. As part of the “program,” moreover, it was often necessary for me to turn myself into “sheer authority” in my behavior towards Adrienne.<sup>39</sup>

### More Strange Voices

Another very puzzling account of a strange voice is reported by Balthasar on the occasion of Speyr’s reception into the Catholic Church.

As she recited the Tridentine profession of faith, she stumbled as she came to the words about the Catholic Church “*extra quam est nulla salus* [outside of which there is no salvation]” and left them out. Her husband, who was there, said he heard the words quite distinctly but as if spoken by a strange voice. As soon as A’s extraordinary experiences began, my work consisted chiefly in fitting them into the tradition of the Church (...). She would say that what was happening to her was not real mysticism (...). These things had nothing to do with her, with poor old, bad old Adrienne.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 79.

<sup>39</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *First Glance*, 69-70.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

If her experiences were not true mysticism and at the same time “had nothing to do with her,” what indeed were they?

Balthasar also reports the regular “missions of hell” that involved a change of personality in Speyr and a change of voice.

These states were transports (ecstasies) into a hell-like condition of absolute objectivity of obedience to the mission and to what was to be transmitted. Afterwards she usually recalled nothing of what had transpired. I was able to restore these memories to her under obedience, however, so that she might explain them to me more fully. In these states she was no longer the loving woman, but the mere vehicle of a truth which had to be communicated or explained; she no longer recognized me. I was merely someone who was present to learn something and who understood nothing to begin with, which often caused her to make sarcastic remarks (for so much stupidity in divine matters). Finally she would give some sort of signal that the lesson was over, then she was to return to her “normal” state of consciousness by means of a simple prayer together. These “missions of hell” were, as it were, extensions of Holy Saturday’s central mystery of obedience and are therefore mentioned here.<sup>41</sup>

Balthasar notes that the “darkness” that Speyr took on as reparation for sin and as participation in Christ’s passion and descent into hell, brought her to “the very edge of insanity.”<sup>42</sup>

Her death also was dark and hard. “And during her illness in Ley-sin: ‘Is it not so that a person can have a totally darkened spirit before

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68. Besides the more frequent “missions of hell”, Speyer’s descents into hell happened only on Good Friday, beginning in 1941, the year after she was received into the Church by Balthasar. He considered what she saw and experienced in these descents to hell as her most important contribution to Balthasar’s theology and her greatest gift to the Church (*ibid.*, 64). Alyssa Pitstick’s monumental study of the Catholic theology and tradition of Holy Saturday and her critique of the Balthasar/Speyr revelations, is an important resource here: A. PITSTICK, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell*. Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007. Pitstick ably defends her views in her “Response to Webster and Lauber,” in: *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62/2 (2009), 211-216.

<sup>42</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 102.

death?’ In fact, that is how it was when she herself died. As she had asked it should be, her death was a hard one.”<sup>43</sup>

### Why Was Balthasar Attracted to Speyr?

Long attracted to the speculative theories of some of the early fathers who either explicitly taught *apocatastasis* or who he thought did,<sup>44</sup> Balthasar explicitly acknowledges that Speyr’s revelations provided him with the alternative he was looking for in order to break from the way in which the mainstream theological and magisterial tradition harmonized what Balthasar considers contradictory sets of scriptures. On the one hand are those scriptures that indicate God’s will to save all mankind and Christ’s sacrifice offered for the salvation of all, and on the other hand those scriptures that indicate that some will accept this offer and some will reject, some will be saved and some will be condemned, in numbers known only to God. He wanted to find a way of implying that all would be saved while avoiding a formal teaching of *apocatastasis* which he knew was heretical. “Throughout my patristic studies, what I longed and looked for (...) was a catholicity that excluded nothing (...) only in Adrienne’s theology, I found it.”<sup>45</sup>

He is not, in fact, despite his frequent statements to the contrary, just establishing universal salvation as a possibility, or something to hope for, as we hope for someone to recover from an illness, but he is quite clearly teaching—not directly as that would be formal heresy—that it is “infinitely improbable” that human freedom will be able to ultimately resist God’s grace. How does the ordinary person—or for that matter the theologian or Church leader in awe at Balthasar’s learning, and appreciative of his loyalty to Rome, emphasis on spirituality, on beauty, on the

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> A number of scholars, including Brian Daley, Thomas Joseph White, James O’Connor, Roch Kereszty, and Manfred Hauke, have raised serious challenges to some of Balthasar’s suggestions that certain Fathers taught *apocatastasis*. See R. MARTIN, “Will Many Be Saved?”, 165-169, and the accompanying footnotes.

<sup>45</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 44.

Christian states of life, etc.—understand if there is a distinction between “infinite improbability” and certainty? Not very easily I would submit.

Balthasar summarizes his conclusion by citing a text of Edith Stein which she never published herself, but which, he affirms, “expresses most exactly the position that I have tried to develop.”<sup>46</sup>

Balthasar recounts how she speculates on how grace can secretly work in the souls of apparent unbelievers as “all-merciful love” descends to everyone. He quotes her words:

And now, can we assume that there are souls that remain perpetually closed to such love? As a possibility in principle, this cannot be rejected. *In reality*, it can become infinitely improbable—precisely through what preparatory grace is capable of effecting in the soul (...). Human freedom can be neither broken nor neutralized by divine freedom, but it may well be, so to speak, outwitted.<sup>47</sup>

Balthasar often “stands behind” theologians that he favorably quotes, but seldom is he as direct in his endorsement of their views as he is here in his claim that Stein’s views most exactly represent his position. In the end, then, Balthasar is teaching that even though it is theoretically possible for someone to be damned, it can be “infinitely improbable.” How thin is the line between “certain” and “infinitely improbable”? Or is there a line at all? But what about human freedom? It is “outwitted.”

Balthasar talks about his theological encounter with “the mighty Origen” and that what particularly attracted him was Origen’s eschatology

with its tendency to universal redemption. It was clear to me that an unqualified doctrine of *apokatastasis* was irreconcilable with the Church’s theology (...). It was Adrienne’s Holy Saturday experiences which were to open up a quite startling way of rethinking the whole question. Later I looked for approaches in the history of theology into which I could incorporate her teaching (...). It cannot be by chance that, in her encoun-

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<sup>46</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Dare We Hope*, 218.

<sup>47</sup> E. STEIN, *Welt und Person. Beitrag zum christlichen Wahrheitsstreben* (World and person. A contribution to Christian truth seeking), eds. L. Gelber and R. Leuven. Freiburg, 1962, 158 ff. Cited by H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Dare We Hope*, 219-221.

ters with the saints, Adrienne will feel “most at home with the Church Fathers” and “especially close” to Origen.<sup>48</sup>

He is one of the people she meets in her apparitions or visions.

In his attempt to give an alternative interpretation of certain texts that seem to clearly indicate that those who die unrepentant in serious sin will be definitely excluded from the kingdom of God (e.g. Rv 21:5-8; 1 Cor 6:9-11), he appeals to Speyr’s mystical insights. As Speyr puts it:

It seems now as if there are also blank pages in the book of life. And it is not known now whether that which seems blank to man is also blank for God (...) John sees the condemned in the position of being cast down, because he must bear witness to this *possibility*; this witness is part of his mission; he must be able to report that he has seen it, since it belongs, as a possibility, to the essence of judgment, and in order to be able to report it, he must have seen it.<sup>49</sup>

Fr. Oakes, one of Balthasar’s leading interpreters, regards the final three volumes of the *Theodramatics* as

the culmination and capstone of his work, where all the themes of his theology converge and are fused into a synthesis of remarkable creativity and originality, an achievement that makes him one of the great theological minds of the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup>

Oakes continues:

Here, more than anywhere is where his work should be judged. (...) Describing so densely packed a drama—and one that moreover is shrouded over in darkness by revelation and whose presentation is thus necessarily based on extrapolation and mystical insights—is, it goes without saying, extremely difficult.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Dare We Hope*, 40-41. In conversations with Speyr that make their way into print he acknowledges that what he is trying to do will not readily be accepted by the Church and that it will have to be done very carefully, and be well prepared. See R. MARTIN, “Will Many Be Saved?”, 269, footnote 77.

<sup>49</sup> The words of Speyr quoted by H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Dare We Hope*, 141.

<sup>50</sup> E. OAKES, *Pattern of Redemption*, 230-231.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Oakes notes that “as the volumes of the *Theodramatics* progress, the citations from the writings of Adrienne von Speyr grow more frequent (in the last volume she is cited, it seems, on almost every page).”<sup>52</sup>

The same is true of Balthasar’s treatment of hell and the Trinity in volume II of *Theo-Logic*. Here Balthasar states that his earlier work, *Mysterium Paschale*, “is an attempt to pave the way for Adrienne von Speyr’s bold teaching.”<sup>53</sup> His teaching in this section heavily quotes Speyr and puts forth her unusual theories based on her visions that perhaps condemned persons are not in hell but rather only their “effigies,” that the Lord “depersonalizes” some in hell, that he “lies upon them, like the man upon the woman,” and a multiplication of other metaphors that make it difficult to know what is really being taught.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time statements like the following seem to indicate that hell is ultimately empty: “Hell then is transformed by the Cross: grace penetrates to the point where damnation was. Redemption penetrates to the point where there was definitive judgment.”<sup>55</sup>

Balthasar even suggests that Christ may meet the condemned sinner in hell itself and give him or her a last chance to repent, rather than lose the “gamble” in giving the creature freedom. By losing the “gamble” Balthasar is referring to the gift of human freedom that God gave to the human race with the accompanying risk that his creative and redemptive love would be rejected by some. This is a particularly difficult argument as even Oakes acknowledges in the second edition of his book, as God clearly lost the “gamble” with the multitude of fallen angels and there is no clear reason that the loss of humans would be somehow exempted from the risk of freedom. In the mystery of God’s Providence the risk of freedom is worth the risk of loss for the sake of the redemption of all those who are willing to accept his mercy.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Logic, vol. II, Truth of God*, transl. by A. Walker. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2004, 345, note 75.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 345-361.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>56</sup> E. OAKES, *Pattern of Redemption*, 324 (“Afterword to the Second Edition”).

Oakes acknowledges that Balthasar is taking “astonishing leaps” where it may not be easy to follow or accept.

We have now come to the point where Balthasar’s thought is at its most daring and speculative, where perhaps indeed many will feel left behind, where they feel his thought borders on the very speculative reverie he accuses the nominalists of indulging. How true these reservations are can perhaps emerge only from one’s own encounter with his thought...<sup>57</sup>

Oakes thinks Balthasar’s effort is fundamentally sound, although he readily admits that these speculations are just that, speculations.

But he has dared to leap into previously uncharted territory, and we wish both to grant him this speculative freedom and also the right of the Church to assimilate these speculations in her own good time. Private reflections and personal opinions of a theologian, especially one who bases his works so heavily on the graces of a mystic, take time.<sup>58</sup>

### Preliminary Conclusions

From my own study of the mystics and pseudo-mysticism,<sup>59</sup> and from my experience with a wide range of spiritual phenomena, true and false, in various contemporary spiritual renewal movements, in various positions of leadership that required the cultivation of discernment of spirits, I have found it to be very important to be attentive to what may be “red flags” that indicate that something may be amiss in what appear to be mystical revelations.

John of the Cross is sometimes so severe in his judgment of mystical phenomena because of the plethora of spiritual persons in his and Teresa of Avila’s time who claimed mystical revelations, only some of

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 241-242.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 241-242. J. SACHS, “Review of ‘Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar’”, in: *Theological Studies* 56/4 (1995), 788, who is in other respects a strong defender of Balthasar, in a review of Oakes’ book, thinks that Oakes is too sympathetic to Balthasar’s “rather strong tritheism” and believes that “Balthasar succumbs here to the very sort of vain speculation in theology that he condemns.”

<sup>59</sup> R. MARTIN, *The Fulfillment of All Desire: A Guidebook for the Journey to God Based on the Wisdom of the Saints*. Steubenville, Ohio, Emmaus Road Publications, 2006.



which turned out to be authentic. Sometimes these persons had a great appearance of holiness and a widespread following, which only after the passage of much time was shown to be not primarily from the Holy Spirit but at least a mixture including large components of revelations that came from the human spirit or even demonic spirits.

At other times, even among those now recognized as saints or truly holy persons, it became apparent that a mixture sometimes was present in what was claimed as revelation and sometimes a mixture in those who authoritatively interpreted their revelations. What is very striking in Balthasar's accounts of their relationship is how deeply this was a common project and how little suited Balthasar really was to be an objective evaluator of what was going on in their mutual, symbiotic, deeply entwined, mystical/theological enterprise. They both needed someone outside of them to whom they could submit what they were engaged in, someone with a solid knowledge of ascetical/mystical theology whose principles if even rudimentarily applied would have raised grave questions of the soundness of what was going on between them.<sup>60</sup> After he left

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<sup>60</sup> Virtually any traditional manual of ascetical/mystical theology provides an immensely relevant body of wisdom which is essential for judging spiritual phenomena. For example: "A revelation may be unwittingly *altered* by the seer himself when he attempts to explain, or, still oftener, by those to whom he dictates his revelations (...). For all these reasons we cannot be too prudent when examining private revelations." See A. TANQUEREY, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, transl. by H. Branderis. Tournai, Desclee/Society of St. John the Evangelist, 1930, 1508. See all of Book III, chapter III, and 700-718 for an examination of the need for discernment as regards mystical phenomena. "The great mystics are unanimous in teaching that one must neither desire nor ask for these *extraordinary* favors (...). The saint [John of the Cross] forcefully denounces imprudent directors who encourage the desire of visions (...). Some directors, when they see that their penitents have visions from God, bid them pray to Him to reveal to them such and such things concerning themselves or others and the simple souls obey them (...) when in truth it is not pleasing to Him, and contrary to His will (...) in this matter there is great danger of illusion..." (*ibid.*, 703). "A revelation may be true in the main and yet contain some incidental errors. God does not right the prejudices or errors that they may lodge in the minds of the seers; He has in view their *spiritual* welfare, not their intellectual formation" (*ibid.*, 707). "At times we also meet with the prejudices and the systems of the spiritual directors of the seers" (*ibid.*). See also: A. POULAIN, *The Graces of Interior Prayer: A Treatise on Mystical Theology*, transl. by L. Smith (from the

the Jesuits, it is not clear if there was anyone who was really “over them” and in a position to discern and judge what was happening between them. Did they really carry out such an unusual, intense spiritual enterprise with no real oversight?

In my own experience with various renewal movements in the Church, and particularly with the charismatic renewal movements, both Catholic and Protestant, I have regularly encountered people claiming prophetic or mystical insight who turned out to be sadly deluded. Sometimes I have even encountered what appeared to be close spiritual relationships between priests and women, involving mystical phenomena, that turned out to be a mixture of mutually enforced grandiose thinking and outright deception. Sometimes two genuinely holy people can drift into a situation which is open to deception. When, say, a priest, reaches a point of “total trust” in a woman mystic—or vice versa—while the relationship may be chaste and the two parties genuinely holy and well intentioned, the almost inevitable “mixture” will assert itself and insinuate certain “ideas” that are not from the Holy Spirit. Emotional and spiritual dependency can easily drift into emotional and spiritual manipulation as deep desires infiltrate their way into the reception and interpretation of spiritual experience.

### **Red Flags**

Let me attempt a preliminary list of what appear to me to be some of the “red flags” that need to be taken into account in any judgment about the authenticity of the mystical/theological revelations and insights that flow from the spiritual and personal union of Speyr and Balthasar.

1. *The phenomena of “strange voices”*. In this short study we have noted four instances where strange voices occurred in conjunction with

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6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Arcadia, Cal., Catholic Spiritual Direction, 1978; especially chapters XX-XXII, which deal with revelations, deception, and rules for spiritual directors and those who think they are receiving revelations. His treatment of the relationship between Madame Guyon and Archbishop Fénelon is particularly illuminating (pp. 384-387).

Speyr's spiritual experiences. The first time is during the "recovered memories" sessions with Balthasar, in which she spoke in various voices consonant with the age level she was recovering. The second time is in the "ice cold voice" which mercilessly rebukes him. "It is not her voice. Someone else is speaking out of her (...). A terrifying indictment continues for almost an hour."<sup>61</sup> Who is this speaking out of her? It certainly does not seem like the Spirit of the Lord. Could it be the "accuser of the brethren"? If so, this is a very grave matter. The third instance is Speyr's inability to recite a line from the Tridentine creed affirming the unique salvific role of the Church, which is accompanied by a strange voice which recites it. A fourth instance is in her reporting of her "missions of hell," where she was no longer the "loving Adrienne," but spoke sarcastically of his stupidity. Sometimes it also seems to be the case that Balthasar experiences her speaking in "tongues," a gift that can be an authentic charism but can also be a sign of another spiritual influence.<sup>62</sup>

2. *The lack of verification of extraordinary claims.* Perhaps there are other witnesses to the extraordinary reports that Balthasar makes as to what happens to and through Speyr, but none are cited. Certain claims, such as her claim to have her physical virginity restored, would seem not susceptible to appropriate verification. But other claims—such as the claims of the many people she is said to have helped, her "countless journeys," her entering into the "souls" of people at great distances, the miracles of healing she is said to have worked—should be subject to some appropriate verification. Also, the visible mystical phenomena that Balthasar cites would seem subject to verification—did others ever see them?—although distinguishing false mystical phenomena from true can sometimes only be done in relationship to their effects and fruits.

Some of Speyr's visions are beginning to get the kind of theological evaluation and spiritual discernment that is needed. In one of her books

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<sup>61</sup> See above, 285.

<sup>62</sup> A. TANQUERAY, *The Spiritual Life*, 721-722.

recounting her visions of the saints<sup>63</sup> she “graded” the saints on the quality of their prayer. She gave a bad grade to St. Thomas Aquinas. Fr. Paul Murray, OP who teaches on the spirituality of St. Thomas Aquinas at the Angelicum has written a critique of Speyr’s visions of St. Thomas at prayer and her evaluation of his “deficient” prayer life. He finds her “vision” of Thomas’ prayer “truly bizarre.”<sup>64</sup>

3. *Confessor and confession.* There are some very strange things said in relationship to the role of Balthasar as Speyr’s confessor and the sacrament itself. It would seem, first of all, in agreeing to become her confessor and his very active participation in her mystical revelations, preparing her for them, and then fitting them into a theological framework, there was at the very least a “conflict of interest” and a lack of objectivity built into the heart of the relationship. They were clearly working as a team and the ability to “test the spirits” was not something that they were any longer in a

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<sup>63</sup> She dictated a good number of these visions (approximately 250), which Balthasar helped her to understand, perhaps even “coached her,” and transcribed for her, published as *Book of All Saints*, the first volume of the posthumous works. Even though she was in “ecstasy” Balthasar could ask questions of the saints and received answers through Speyr. The visions are notable as they take a “God’s eye” point of view and are remarkably critical of many of the saints. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *First Glance*, 73-74. He gives “samples” of her visions on pp. 75-81. An English translation exists: A. SPEYR, *Book of All Saints*. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2008. Recently K. KILBY published *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*. Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012, which addressed what she considers the very problematic “God’s eye” point of view that Balthasar/Speyr take in their work. Her considered judgment: “Attention to Balthasar needs to continue. But, if I am right, it should be combined with a certain wariness, a readiness to question him, to wonder how he knows what he seems to know, to ask where he stands so that he can tell us what he wants to tell us. A recurring theme in Balthasar’s work, as we have seen, is the relation of the whole to the part, the whole to the fragment. In essence what I am proposing in this book is that Balthasar in fragments is important and worth pursuing, for there is much to learn from, to borrow, to think about, to develop. But when one tries to follow Balthasar as a whole, to treat him as one’s theological guide, as a contemporary Church Father, then he in fact becomes dangerous. If there is much to learn from Balthasar, the one thing in my view one ought *not* to learn from him is how to be a theologian” (*ibid.*, 167).

<sup>64</sup> P. MURRAY, “Aquinas at Prayer: The Interior Life of a ‘Mystic on Campus’”, in: *Logos* 14/1 (2011), 39.

good position to do on their own, particularly in a relationship that became virtually exclusive. For that, some outside spiritual oversight was needed, and that no longer existed after Balthasar left the Jesuits, it appears.

Secondly, did Speyr actually mystically participate in the confessions of people on Balthasar's retreats and give him advice about them? Did he accept this as legitimate? What about the violation of the seal?

4. *Emotional and spiritual manipulation.* Based on my own knowledge of human relationships, it appears that the relationship of Balthasar and Speyr was ripe for various kinds of manipulations. Balthasar's deep emotional and spiritual bond to Speyr makes him uniquely unqualified to be her confessor and spiritual director and yet he persisted in taking this role. Many of Speyr's "revelations" and "criticisms" of Balthasar appear to me to be spiritual and emotional manipulation of a very high order. The exclusivity of their relationship and the abundance of sexual imagery that is used to describe their relationship and its fruit is also troubling; when Balthasar invited another Jesuit to be present for her dictations, she could not go on and after that it was always just the two of them. Her appeals to him that he protect her better from criticism perhaps accounts for some of the polemical and emotional tone of parts of *Dare We Hope*, where he sometimes becomes quite defensive when questions are raised about the authenticity of her revelations.<sup>65</sup>

Were the "seeds" that led to Balthasar leaving the Jesuits, supposedly from revelations Speyr received from St. Ignatius himself, free of her own desires for him and plans for him? Was her "relentless rebuking and training" of Balthasar free from emotional manipulation? Was her suggestion that if she died he then would not have to go through the trauma of leaving the Jesuits manipulative? Was Balthasar's "preparation" of her for her revelations and dictations, and his interpretation of what she "saw" but

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<sup>65</sup> Those who question the wisdom of Speyr's private mystical revelations being used as a basis for theology are accused of desiring to "burn the witch": "Thus it would seem to be high time to burn the witch before she is beatified" (H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Dare We Hope*, 168).

did not understand free from his desire to find a way of advancing his theological speculations on the “infinitely improbable” possibility of anyone going to hell, and giving them a mystical backing that would strengthen their reception?

Roten acknowledges:

The relationship between Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar stands and falls with their common directedness towards the source of their common vocation, God, as he expresses himself through Ignatius and Mary, and towards the hopeful result of their double mission, the “child.”<sup>66</sup>

I must say that Balthasar’s unquestioned belief that God was speaking through Mary and Ignatius as “channeled and mediated” by Speyr ignores not only abundant evidence to the contrary, but basic rules of spiritual discernment.

5. *Verification of specific prophecies.* Speyr prophesied a great expansion of the Community of St. John. What has happened in that regard? In coming to a judgment about the authenticity of Speyr’s revelations which Balthasar wholeheartedly endorses we must see if the remarkable spiritual promises<sup>67</sup> about the significance of the community they were founding have come to pass. It is difficult to obtain factual information about the current state of the community.<sup>68</sup> Its main apostolate seems to be publishing the works of Balthasar and Speyr and overseeing the archives of their published and unpublished writings. It comprises about 60 members worldwide according to an interview John Allen conducted

<sup>66</sup> J. ROTEN, “The Two Halves”, 86.

<sup>67</sup> Among many others, see the prophecy about the community sharing in Speyr’s charism of healing. See H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 126. Or Speyr’s reported experience of Mary placing “the child” in her arms, *ibid.*, 92.

<sup>68</sup> There was a short chapter which interviewed a few of its members that didn’t give any numerical information about the community’s size or growth. See M. GREINER, “The Community of St. John: A Conversation with Cornelia Capol and Martha Gisi,” in: D. SCHINDLER, ed., *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 87-102.

with a member of the community some years ago.<sup>69</sup> Any evaluation of the grandiose prophesies about the significance of the community and its spread would have to be evaluated in light of its actual state, information for which I could not readily find.

### **By Their Fruits**

Balthasar himself invokes the principle “By their fruits you shall know them”<sup>70</sup> as a criterion for assessing the authenticity of Speyr’s work, both in itself and as mediated through him:

I have often emphasized, whatever Adrienne experienced subjectively was meant to bear objective, theological, and spiritual fruit for the Church as a whole. This fruit is the criterion for judging the significance and genuineness of experience and becomes obvious to anyone who reads the writings already published. All the various aspects of her charism are directed concentrically at a deeper interpretation of revelation. That includes the developing community outlined here.<sup>71</sup>

One of the main reasons I am proposing that a spiritual discernment be done of the mystical influence of Speyr on Balthasar’s theories is that one of his main theories seems to me to have significantly contributed to the undermining of evangelization in the Church and the subsequent spread of a presumption of virtual universal salvation. I would submit that most ordinary Catholics today and many Catholic theologians and even Church leaders consciously or unconsciously subscribe to the presumption that only a very small minority of truly evil people will possibly be lost and virtually everyone else saved. Some admiringly cite Balthasar specifically as a major source of the belief that human freedom will ultimately be unable to resist the grace of God.

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<sup>69</sup> This information was conveyed to me in an email from John Allen in response to my query to him. Since then I have had the opportunity to talk with someone who has been in more recent contact with the community which confirms its very small size.

<sup>70</sup> Mt 7:16.

<sup>71</sup> H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Our Task*, 9-10.

John Sachs, in a lengthy article on universal salvation that appeared in *Theological Studies*, expresses what he says is the current Catholic theological consensus.

We have seen that there is a clear consensus among Catholic theologians today in their treatment of the notion of *apocatastasis* and the problem of hell (...). It may not be said that even one person is already or will in fact be damned. All that may and must be believed is that the salvation of the world is a reality already begun and established in Christ. Such a faith expresses itself most consistently in the hope that because of the gracious love of God whose power far surpasses human sin, all men and women will in fact freely and finally surrender to God in love and be saved.

When Balthasar speaks of the duty to hope for the salvation of all, he is articulating the broad consensus of current theologians and the best of the Catholic tradition. Like other theologians, notably Rahner, he intentionally pushes his position to the limit, insisting that such a hope is not merely possible but well-founded (...). I have tried to show that the presumption that human freedom entails a capacity to reject God definitively and eternally seems questionable. And, although this presumption enjoys the weight of the authority of Scripture and tradition, it would seem incorrect to consider this possibility as an object of faith in the same sense that the ability of human freedom in grace to choose God is an object of faith.<sup>72</sup>

As previously noted, I have argued elsewhere that while Balthasar's hope for universal salvation is possible, as human hope, as a logical possibility, not as a theological/supernatural hope, it is not well-founded and it is extremely unwise, and damaging to the salvation of souls to adopt the presumption of virtually universal salvation which flies in the face of how the Church has always understood the solemn words of Jesus. While it may be logically possible that the Detroit Tigers win every single one of their games for the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, nevertheless, it is extremely unlikely, to say the least.

To those who persist in saying that he is only presenting a "hope," I would like to say directly again, as I did above, that this is simply not

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<sup>72</sup> J. SACHS, "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell", in: *Theological Studies* 52 (1991), 252-253.



true. When he summarizes what he says most perfectly expresses what he is saying he suggests that it can be “infinitely improbable” that any are ultimately lost, as human freedom that appears to finally reject faith may be “outwitted” by God. Combined with his sarcastic dismissals of those who hold the traditional view, accusing them of lack of compassion, it is clear where his sympathies and own beliefs lie.

If Speyr’s revelations were the encouragement and indeed, key, to Balthasar’s “bold” theory of “infinitely improbable” damnation, a discernment of spirits is indeed relevant, in addition to the proper theological and scriptural evaluations that are being done.

This article is a preliminary step in this necessary discernment.

“*Beloved*, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn 4:1).