

A Balthasarian 'Ecclesiology': Apprehending the Church with an Ecclesial Aesthetics

Thomas Kristiatmo

Department of Philosophy
Parahyangan Catholic University,
Bandung, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Ecclesiology might have put the center of its gravity on the modern rationality. As a result, this kind of ecclesiology might overlook the mystical yet beautiful side of the church, which seem to have a more unifying character to the already divided church. This article wants to explore with Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of aesthetics the origin and the characteristics of the church from the people around Jesus, the event of the cross, the form of revelation, the Eucharist, the sacrament, and the way of love. This sort of an ecclesial aesthetics is one of the different ways of apprehending the church. This way might contribute to the traditional understanding of the church that has been characterized with modern logical concepts. Balthasar is offering

the way of apprehending the church through the pulchrum toward the more unifying engagement with the mystery of God, the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.

Keywords:

•*Ecclesiology*, •*rationality*, •*beauty*, •*mystical theology*, •*form of revelation*,
•*the way of love*, •*ecclesial aesthetics*, •*bonum et verum*

The Bewilderment

Ecclesiology is often in uneasy circumstances. The church is a divided church. About a thousand years ago, the schism with the Orthodox church took place. About 500 years ago, the church were divided again with the emergence of the Protestant churches. These are undeniably two of the great divisions in the Church. What caused the divisions? It is a tricky yet difficult question. Some might say that suspicions, anathemas, and the de facto or the psychological excommunications were the causes.¹

Within the body of the Roman Catholic church itself we could notice some movements that seem to be trying to destroy its unity. These movements might have been due to the marginalization by those in charge of the church.² The feminists insist on the importance of a non-sexist and inclusive language. The poor and the oppressed have created the liberation theologies. At the same time, conflicts between the universal church and the local churches are inevitable. The old adagium saying *Roma locuta res finita* is almost obsolete. Bishops, as local ordinaries, seem to have created their own contextual theologies, which are not always in line with the doctrines of the universal church. It is not surprising that people of certain continents see the North Atlantic Christians as exercising an unhealthy monopoly on how the church is perceived.³

In this complicated situation, Hans Urs von Balthasar can offer a different way of apprehending the church. He wants to change the center of gravity in doing theology while it goes without saying that theology's interlocutor is philosophy. The *locus theologicus* has been on the modern rationality. The edifice of theology has been built upon rationality. As a result, an ecclesiology that stems from it is also a rational one. On the one hand, it is a good idea that we have a rationally solid ecclesiology. On the

other hand, however, this kind of ecclesiology might overlook the mystical yet beautiful side of ecclesiology. Balthasar has constructed a theological aesthetics of which the *locus theologicus* is the 'beauty', the *summum pulchrum*. An ecclesiology that stems out of this scheme is one that stands upon the beauty. It can enlighten a different perspective in doing theology of the church today.

The Origin

The People around Jesus

'No man is an island'. One of the important vocations of every Christian is to create a *koinonia* with every other human being. Without other people, no one will be able to improve his/her personality. Prosperity may never be achieved without solidarity towards others in striving to create *bonum commune*. The same thing happens in the origin of the Church. It was born from the people around Jesus. At the origin, at the center of the event of the incarnation, stands Mary, the perfect maid who allowed it to happen that she enters a relationship of physical and spiritual motherhood to the person and thus also to the whole work of her son, Jesus.⁴ Next, there stood John the Baptist, the apostles, and also the other disciples. This community was the origin of our church. Jesus did not build his church out of the blue. Being a living human being, Jesus established his Church from the people around him.

The role of Mary is of great importance. The '*ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*' was a beginning of the economy of salvation for humans in *lacrimarum valle*. Balthasar elegantly describes Mary's experience in a specific way. He says, "In Mary, Zion passes over into the Church; in her the Word passes over into flesh; in her the Head passes over into the body. She is the place of superabundant fruitfulness."⁵ Mary is at the core of the *perichoresis* between the human and God, between the natural and the supernatural. Mary is the one and only human that had the fullness of grace: being the *theotokos*.

The Event of the Cross

The church originates in the event of the cross as well. In the cross, Jesus' '*consummatum est*' is a totally beautiful event: the Lord of glory has

absolutely emptying himself for the community he has entrusted to Peter. In the cross, Jesus Christ lays down his life for his friends (John 15:12). The blood and water from his side are the sacraments of the Church. The blood and water nourish the church from the very beginning, that is, they feed it so that it can survive amid the many vicissitudes of human civilization.

The church is--as born of the utmost love of God for the world--itself essentially love.⁶ The ultimate love stands as the most profound foundation of the church. This love is one that simply gives itself as a gift. Christ's love is a love that covers each and every human being with abundant charity. As *Deus est caritas*, we can also say that *ecclesia est caritas*, in so far as it was born out of and within the realm of this love.

Jesus' life is directed toward the cross. The dramatic moment in the Gethsemane is the witness of Jesus' obedience to the Father's will. Balthasar puts it this way,

”By letting go of 'the form of God' that was his (and so his divine power of self disposal) he willed to become the One who, in a remarkable and unique manner, is obedient to the Father- in a manner, namely, where his obedience presents the kenotic translation of the eternal love of the son for the 'ever-greater' Father.”⁷

The 'kenotic' action is the key to understand how Jesus' life is directed toward the cross. The incarnation has marked and characterized his being-toward-the-cross and the kenosis on the cross is the culmination of his humility. The whole of Jesus' existence is an anticipation of the consummation in the cross. The event of the cross as the origination of the Church is a part of God's economy of salvation. Thus, it is God's will that humans are saved in a communion. Here we have the sense of the communion ecclesiology of Balthasar.

The Characteristics

Form

Balthasar's theological aesthetics has a lot to do with form. This form is not merely an object but represents something within and behind itself. To experience the true sublime, we need a certain form. The same thing applies to revelation. Revelation always takes certain forms. The formless revelation

is always mediated by something historical.

Concerning the form, Balthasar states that

“If God has first of all revealed himself as Creator, and if this creation is necessarily (and therefore, in an objective sense, permanently and inalienably) a manifestation of God, it follows that this manifestation takes its form from the form of the world itself.”⁸

Revelation is too abstract a concept that human can never comprehend without a mediation of a certain worldly thing. Jesus Christ is the form of God's revelation.

Balthasar's considers the church “only in so far as she can be and intends to be a medium of God's form of revelation in Christ”.⁹ For Balthasar, Christ renders the form of the manifestation of God's revelation. The church mediates this very form. The church contains the revelation of God. In aesthetics, the work of art has a message that flies far away from the creator. Barthes strikingly calls this the “death of the author”. An opus will penetrate into the imagination of people enjoying it and in this way, the opus has become totally autonomous from its creator. We know Beethoven's Symphony Number 5. But we never know exactly whether he intended this to be a fate knocking at the door or not. There must have been a consensus. When Herbert von Karajan interpreted this work, he might have found the leitmotif as that fate knocking at the door. But who can guarantee whether this is what every audience has in mind when they listen attentively to the three short G's and the one long Eb? The interpretation of Beethoven's symphony shows that the work itself is autonomous and valuable in itself.

Such is the case of a work of art and not of the church. In Balthasar's word,

“Such a thing is plainly impossible where the relationship between Christ and the Church is concerned. For the Church is not created from the union of subjective genius with objective world-spirit, but as the Church of Christ, she is created purely from the being of Christ himself”.¹⁰

Here lies the difference. The case is not merely 'mutatis mutandis'. Beethoven was a subjective genius that united with the objective world-spirit and then he created the famous fifth symphony. While the Church is *sui generis*: it is from the very being of Christ. The symphony is not Beethoven's

being, of course. In other words, the church proceeds from Christ's innermost personal reality, at once 'Body' and 'Bride' so it is nothing other than Christ's own fullness.¹¹

Eucharistic

The eucharist is the *fons* and *culmen* of the church's life. In the last supper, Jesus Christ has to die in order to rise again. This is the mystery of our faith: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. The eucharist nurtures the Church. Every exercise of the ecclesial reality is a realization of the moment of Jesus' eucharistic surrender.¹² Indeed, the eucharist we celebrate is a *memoria passionis Domini* and the memory of the event of Jesus's self surrender is an 'anamnesis' that recalls the birth of the church.¹³

The church means nothing without Jesus Christ. That is why the 'anamnesis' is of great significance. The Eucharist is not simply a nostalgic remembrance of Christ death and resurrection. It does represent it. The priest celebrating the mass *in persona Christi et ecclesiae* is representing the mystery of faith. The eucharistic character of the Church shows how constitutive the Eucharist is for the church. The eucharist holds up the whole parts of its structure. As for the importance of memory, we can turn to Walter Benjamin. For him, the *memoria passionis* of a nation can be a dangerous memory which may explode once. Thus, we have a performative and encouraging dimension of a memory. Applied to the church and the Eucharist, I would like to say that it is in the 'anamnesis' within the Eucharist the church gains its most powerful liveliness to go on age by age. Its *memoria passionis* is certainly not directed toward *thanatos*. Instead, it is directed toward the radical love that embraces even the 'enemies'.

Sacramental

As *signum efficax gratiae*, a sacrament signifies the grace of God. All sacraments are a saving act that God performs in Christ Jesus for the ecclesial believer.¹⁴ The sacraments, which flow from the water and blood of Jesus' side, are perfect means to experience the grace of God. Balthasar maintains,

“Not only does God invisible grace become visible and graspable in the Christ-form as such, but here, in the sacraments, the Christ-form itself in turn appears before us and impresses its shape upon us in a valid form which is free of all subjectivity”.¹⁵

This statement, I think, is a rephrase of the primordial conviction of *ex opere operato*. The church has the sacramental characteristic not only because it has the seven sacraments but because it is itself a sacrament.

The church is a sacrament of the world. It is its task to show the grace of God before the world. This task is challenging. The world today is a loveless world. So many sufferings have led to hopelessness. As a sacrament, the church has to manifest the love of God to humankind. As a sacrament, the church is also challenged to prove that God's salvation is there for human beings. It should always be transparent: pointing directly to the incomprehensible yet real mystery of God. The seven sacraments and the church's presence are the signs of God's presence in the world. The sacraments are an essential part of an ecclesial aesthetics.¹⁶

The Way of Love

As a medium of God's revelation, the church always contains a certain mystery. A medium does not represent what it mediates absolutely. This mystery is best apprehended through a meditative, typological analysis of persons encountered in the scriptures who represent symbolically the various dimensions of the reality of the church.¹⁷ The mystery is love itself. Christian love is God's final word about Godself and therefore also about the world.¹⁸ Balthasar maintains that God's love is so universal that it will seek everyone even in the darkest corner of the hell.¹⁹ Love permeates every single piece of reality. Love penetrates even the hardest diamond on earth. The church offers the way of love, that is, that it is a medium of God's true love.

The way of love should be understood in comparison to its other side, that is, the 'official' church. In Balthasarian thought, the archetype of Peter epitomizes the official church. On the other side, the archetype of John--the disciple whom Jesus loved--typifies the church of love. Both are important. The hierarchical structure of the church renders itself solid, surviving at least two thousand years of history. Nonetheless, love remains its solid basis. The official task of Peter is founded upon this love. The depiction goes like this: the Lord with Peter on the shore (symbol of eternity,

of the infallible solid ground), the others bringing the catch to both of them; Peter boards the boat and brings in the whole overflowing net to the Lord the meal together; finally, the conferral of office: starting by 'Do you love me more than these?'²⁰ The conferral of office begins with a question of love.

This way of love is best described in the last part of his *Love Alone is Credible*:

love does not come to man "from outside"
because the human spirit is tied to the senses
but because love exists only between persons
a fact that philosophy tends to forget

God who is for us the Wholly-Other
appears only in the place of the other
in the "sacrament of our brother"

and it is only because he is the Wholly-Other
that he is at the same time the non-other
the one who
in his otherness transcends
even the inner-worldly opposition
between this and that being

only because he is over the world
is he in it
but being over it does not deprive him
of the right
the power,
and the Word,
to reveal himself to us as eternal love
to give himself to us

and to make himself comprehensible
even in his incomprehensibility
consideratio rationabiliter
comprehendit incomprehensibile esse

The emphasis on love is at the same time a highlight on the mystical side of the church: where many paradoxes meet, where what seem to be in opposition embrace each other. Love as the way to apprehend the church and the hub of the church will deliver us to the Promised Land, in which we can taste the true beauty for ever and ever. Via *caritas* we may have a community of and communion with saints. Love also proves the universality of the church.

Concluding Remarks

The tone of a Balthasarian ecclesiology, or in a way of an ecclesial aesthetics, is mystical. This aesthetics invites us to delve into the experience of mystical union with God through the theological aesthetics insofar as it is mediated by the church. The characteristics of the church are determined by its engagement with the mystery of God, the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.

The problems faced by the church in this divided age might be overcome by journeying a different way of viewing the church. This sort of an ecclesial aesthetics is one of the different ways of apprehending the church. This way might contribute to the traditional understanding of the church which tends to explain the church using the modern logical concepts. Instead of using merely these concepts, Balthasar is bidding us to go all the way through the *pulchrum*, which, in turn, will drag us to the *bonum et verum*.

End Notes:

¹ See Michael A Fahrey, "Church", in Francis Schussler Fiorenza & John P. Galvin (eds.), *Systematic Theology vol. II* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ Medard Kehl & Werner Loser (eds.), *The von Balthasar Reader* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1982), 208

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics vol. I: Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 338

⁶ Medard Kehl & Werner Loser (eds.), *op.cit.*, 218

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* (Edinburgh:T&T Clark Ltd., 1990), 90-91

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics vol. I: Seeing the Form*, 430

⁹ *Ibid.*, 556-557

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 557

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 558.

¹² *Ibid.*, 572.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 576.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 582.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 582.

- ¹⁷ Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 98.
- ¹⁸ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 139.
- ¹⁹ Dennis M. Doyle, *op. cit.*, 98.
- ²⁰ Cf. Medard Kehl and Werner Loser, *op. cit.*, 276.
- ²¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 139; here I arrange the phrases in a certain layout to explore the strength of the words.

Bibliography:

- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Mysterium Paschale*. Edinburgh:T&T Clark Ltd.. 1990.
- _____, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics vol. I: Seeing the Form*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998.
- _____, *Love Alone is Credible*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004.
- Doyle, Dennis M. *Communion Ecclesiology*. New York: Maryknoll, 2000.
- Fiorenza, Schüssler & Galvin, John P. (eds.), *Systematic Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.
- Kehl, Medard & Löser Werner. *The von Balthasar Reader*. New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1982.