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Book Review

Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Spendor

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Book Reviews

Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: *Perceiving Splendor* By Mark McInroy

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In his book *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses*, Mark McInroy discusses Hans Urs von Balthasar's doctrine of spiritual senses. He suggests that—in spite of its crucial role in Balthasar's theological aesthetics—the spiritual sensorium that perceives God remains unexplored due to the overarching views of religious scholarship stemming from Karl Rahner's transcendental structure of the human subject. McInroy further argues that Balthasar's theology emphasizes the resuscitation of objective revelation for modern theology by adopting Karl Barth's revelation-centered theological method. However, McInroy repositions the doctrine of spiritual senses at the heart of Balthasar's theological aesthetics by critically examining the broader tradition of spiritual senses, which Balthasar himself constructively appropriated in order to rehabilitate the doctrine of spiritual senses, especially as a source of objective revelation.

McInroy states that spiritual senses receive some attention in modern scholarship, but was even more prevalent in patristic and medieval contexts. The notion of spiritual senses is variously described in the texts of the early fathers and medieval theologians: "inner senses," "interior eyes," "eyes of the soul," "eyes of faith," "eyes of the mind," "eyes of the heart," "eyes of the spirit," "ears of the heart," "touch of the spirit," "divine sense," and many others (7). Because of this variety, it is difficult to identify

with precision when an author is speaking of spiritual perception, and to navigate variant perspectives on fundamental questions, for example how spiritual perception functions: what does the spiritual sense perceive? How does this particular sensorium operate? Who is given it: only “mystics”, or all Christians?

McInroy suggests that one needs to explore spiritual senses through Balthasar’s idea of the spiritual senses, which provides a comprehensive response to the numerous hermeneutical difficulties that the doctrine of the spiritual senses represent. According to McInroy’s reading of his first part of the trilogy (*Glory of the Lord*), Balthasar does not relegate spiritual senses into an uninteresting epistemological formula that “dissolve[s] all phenomena horizontally-quantitatively, in order to make them approximately intelligible and reconstructable” (146). Instead, resisting a mechanistic approach, Balthasar sees the spiritual sensation as the intersection of God’s grace and humanity’s spontaneous response. Far from a pre-existing, transcendental structure of consciousness through which one beholds God, this *eventful* act comes ‘from above’ and ‘from outside’ into oneself and plays a crucial role in perceiving the total form (*Gestalt*) of revelation by being integrated into one’s natural, corporeal senses, thereby making his or her sensorium as a whole “one single, corporeal-spiritual sense apparatus” (184). This apparatus performs, in an extrinsic manner that is nevertheless non-extrinsic, the epistemologically central task of seeing the absolute beauty, or ‘glory’ (*kabod*, δόξα), according to Balthasar’s usage.

McInroy points out that Balthasar’s doctrine of spiritual senses, which is at the heart of his theological aesthetics, heavily relied on patristic and medieval texts. But this is not to say that Balthasar is content simply to re-pristiniate the doctrine out of its patristic and medieval versions. Avoiding simple repetition or uncritical mimesis of such texts, Balthasar is more concerned with constructively, critically integrating spiritual sense traditions into a modern context, where often theological anthropocentrism attempts to mediate divine revelation to humanity through the use of natural (or philosophical) aesthetic categories. To be more specific, Balthasar treats the spiritual senses as a distinct kind of aesthetic dimension, a place of theological aesthetic which must be

distinguished from the category of natural aesthetic. For Balthasar, natural aesthetics are insufficient to perceiving the full splendor of the form, whereas theological aesthetics are able to encounter the fullness of God's revelation. McInroy explains the necessary connection between the spiritual senses and theological aesthetics in Balthasar's grand project, an essential aspect of *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses*: "Balthasar's theological aesthetics calls for perception of the 'form' (*Gestalt*), and that form consists of both sensory and 'supersensory' aspects... it is precisely because the form itself has both sensory and supersensory aspects that the *perception* of that form must be both sensory and supersensory. Balthasar's theological aesthetics thus clamors for a doctrine of the spiritual senses" (12-13).

Balthasar's distinctive rearticulation (or rehabilitation) of the doctrine of the spiritual senses in the modern context is well-described in McInroy's reading of Balthasar's extensive hermeneutical engagement of patristic authors, including Origen and Pseudo-Macarius; medieval authors, including Bonaventure and Ignatius of Loyola; and early modern authors like Karl Barth, Romano Guardini, Gustav Siewerth, and Paul Claudel. *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses* reflects a growing interest of recent theological studies on the doctrine of spiritual senses, and provides a well-balanced hermeneutical framework for a theological field lacking a systematic study of the doctrine. Some areas of Balthasar's work, however, seem neglected. McInroy limits his discussion of Balthasar's burgeoning interest in the various practices one may undertake in order to cultivate spiritual perception to only four pages of a short chapter called "Spiritual Senses without Ascent: Ignatius and Practice." It is also disappointing to see that McInroy notes but does not develop the ethical implications of Balthasar's notion—largely influenced by the personalism of Barth and Siewerth—that the definitive arena where one receives or develops the spiritual senses is the place of encounter, encounter with the neighbor (which encompasses the whole of creation), the sacrament, the Church. Nonetheless, McInroy's accomplishments are significant in three critical dimensions.

First, he is in keeping with the contemporary studies on spiritual senses in theological disciplines, including systematic, philosophical, and

spiritual theologies, as well as ecclesiological and liturgical scholarships. One representative example is *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, a collection of essays edited by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley and published by Cambridge University Press in 2012. A total of fourteen theologians, including Gavrilyuk and Coakley, contributed to *The Spiritual Senses* by tracing an ideological genealogy of spiritual senses from Origen of Alexandria to contemporary analytic philosophers of religion and constructively describing it from their various theological perspectives. This exceptional collection draws the most recent attention of churches and seminaries and strongly appeals to the need for a recovery of the spiritual sense tradition in Christian theology. *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses* is a direct yet very carefully crafted response to this appeal, which significantly helps Christian theology understand and engage the idea of the immediate, sensible (or aesthetic) knowledge of God. Secondly, he demonstrates the epistemological task of Christian theology beyond the establishment of abstract intellectual mechanisms in serving persistently the knowing subject in making him or her open to God's grace, to the extent that he or she finally enters into the prayerful and doxological realm, where "one becomes both enraptured and overwhelmed by God's glorious splendour, awakening the desire to follow where God will lead" (190-1). Thirdly, he makes clear that Christian theology can address problems of the modern context by constructively reviewing not only the contemporary sources but also the traditional sources. Indeed, this extensive reviewing is at the heart of the *resourcement* that Balthasar has always thought of and engaged in for the renewal of Catholic theology. The reader of *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses* will find it expressed in concrete terms and realize that the vision of this *resourcement* is still in the making through the works of theologians who perform Christian theology in light of that vision.

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