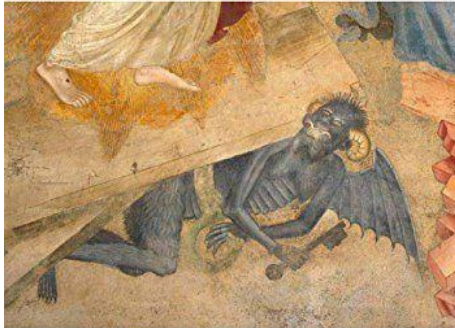


Hans Urs von Balthasar

'Dare we hope that all men might be saved?'

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR



DARE WE HOPE

"That All Men Be Saved"?

WITH
"A SHORT DISCOURSE ON HELL"

FOREWORD BY
FATHER ROBERT BARRON

IGNATIUS

I have a member of the congregation to thank for this next book. It's many years since I've read any systematic theology. This and the fact that it was a translation – and the mother-tongue was German – meant that this was not an easy read. Sentences and words seemed cumbersome long and I had to re-read many sentences – or paragraphs, as we call them in English – to understand what was being said. (I was not sure if the sexism of the title was a factor of age or translation, but it further set the book at something of a distance.)

However, I was glad of the opportunity to engage with Balthasar's ideas, many of which are now – possibly thanks to him – common currency in many parts of the church.

Balthasar (1905-1988), a Swiss theologian and Roman Catholic priest, was appointed to be cardinal by Pope John Paul II but died before this could happen. He was admired by the future Pope Benedict XVI and shared similar theological sensibilities with Karl Rahner.

Balthasar's critics accuse him of believing in a bland and easy 'universalism' – that all are saved. He, however, insists on the reality of Judgement and the real possibility of Hell – he just isn't sure that anyone is in it.

He is more in tune with the very earliest Christian thinkers like Origen (d 254 CE), and finds Augustine's (354-430 CE) ideas on mass damnation to be untrustworthy – especially when allied to the perverse sense that observing the torments of the condemned in some way enhances the joyful experience of being in Heaven. For Balthasar, hope is found in the eternal love of God that never loses patience: that even those who fiercely resist the love of God come under God's grace. He acknowledges that there are excluding passages in the Bible but quotes parts of the Gospels and Letters which support his sense that Christ draws 'all people' to himself (John 12:32) and that 'nothing can separate us from the love of God' (Romans 8:39). Balthasar insists, however, that there be no room for any complacency: all stand under Judgement and none deserve eternal bliss on merit.

The volume I read included A short discourse on Hell, a rather snappy title and stylistically more accessible which set the tone perfectly as we approach the holy season of Advent with its four great cheerful themes of death, judgement, heaven and hell.

Overall, the message is one of profound hope and Balthasar wonders at the enthusiastic folly of those who imagine a Hell over-populated with those who sin differently from themselves.