BALTHASAR’S "INFINITE BECOMING"

Vicente Marasigan, S.J.


In this important book, Balthasar's mind moves in the rarefied heights bordering on mysticism with its mystifying language. To reach up to this mind, this reviewer felt the need to use a methodological scaffolding somewhat along the lines of Lonergan's intentionality analysis, a ladder with many rungs.¹ The bottom rung was an inspection of the title, subtitle, and the labels of the 3 parts and 13 chapters that collectively led to an expectation that Balthasar would systematically unfold Gregory's philosophy of becoming, desire, image and love for defining his notions of presence and thought. The expectation was not fulfilled because the unfolding defied system in the usage of terms and relations that might be traced to basic terms and relations of a definite technical language.² Yet something was unfolding, something was evolving, something was becoming "present." The mode of inference was not always philosophical.³ Yes, there were philosophical reflections, but more as fruits of aesthetic perception. Perhaps the process may be described as an undifferentiated merging of analogies,

2. Ibid. 71-73.
metaphors, metonyms, the figures of speech that poets use, the artistry that points to a dramatic movement. With this clue as the second rung of our scaffolding, an ascent into Balthasar's notion of "infinite becoming" began to open up.

The label "infinite becoming" is gently introduced in Part I (on p. 38) as indicative of the meaning Balthasar sees in Gregory's statement in *Contra Eunomium*: "Never will the soul reach its final perfection, for it will never encounter a limit, . . . it will always be transformed into a better thing." This indication is immediately reinforced with Gregory's analogy of a flowing river in *De Hominis Opificio*.

Parts I and II play with this theme in a variety of modes, some poetical, some philosophical. Balthasar, recalling how Gregory could inwardly "transpose" (p. 15) Greek philosophy into a Christian mode, skillfully uses this style of transposition to the very end of Part III where he discusses the transposition of becoming and the transposition of image. The infinite becoming introduced earlier finds expression here as a "well-spring eternally gushing forth in spirit" (p. 156) for which the soul ceaselessly thirsts. The image of Being is transposed to "a revelation of the Trinity by the Trinity" (p. 163).

Balthasar as the theologian is aware of the danger of "foundering in a kind of mystical solipsism" (p. 163) but dismisses it, for his differentiation of aesthetic consciousness is equal to the theological task. This may not be obvious to readers whose aesthetic tastes are formed in a Tagalog or Asian environment different from Balthasar's Germanic environment. To this environment, Lonergan's transcendental method does not assign preferential treatment but includes it alongside the many cases of undifferentiated consciousness.

Balthasar's mysticism cannot be criticized as being solipsistic or exclusively concerned with the knowing subject as subject. It envisions a "divine milieu" that Gregory speaks of in *De Beatitudinibus* (p. 117). Within this divine milieu, even an

---

6. Ibid. 84-85.
“evolution of earth” (p. 55) can coherently be integrated. Is the evolution of the mystical body into infinity included in Balthasar’s — and Gregory’s — notion of “infinite becoming”? What then is “presence”? How does Balthasar link it with “infinite becoming”? The last sentence of the concluding chapter seems to say that Presence is the object of knowledge that is progressively deepening and that this deepening is infinite. At least that is what this reviewer can gather.

From the limited viewpoint taken here by the reviewer, he craves the readers’ pardon for presuming to suggest an alternative title for this book: “Infinite Becoming: Reflections on the Mystical Insights of Gregory of Nyssa.”