

Dissertation Title: "Living in the Condition of Love's Gift": Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Anthropology of Childhood and its Significance for the Form of Human Freedom

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to show that the form of the human spirit as it emerges in the child's "awakening" to consciousness through an interpersonal encounter with love tells us something about the inherently social and gift character of the form of human freedom. Addressing the dominant understanding of freedom as self-originating choice within American liberalism, this work seeks to offer an enriched reading of freedom by looking at the concrete locus of its emergence in the child's primal relationships within the family. We argue that it is in the privileged figure of the child that we see that freedom and belonging are intrinsically related because, paradoxically, freedom is always socially mediated. Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that the anthropological and theological significance of childhood and its implications for the form of human freedom can be appreciated only in light of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, who not only became a little child but also is the eternal Child of the Father. This dissertation seeks to elucidate Balthasar's analogy of human and divine childhood and its significance for the form of the human spirit as it emerges in childhood an *imago Dei*. **Chapter I** begins with a reflection on childhood and freedom as John Locke and John Dewey, representatives of the American liberal tradition, have understood them. We will explore the prevailing ideology of "self-creation" and its implications. In **Chapter II** we present the foundational principles of Balthasar's theological anthropology that enable him to articulate childhood as the form of the human spirit and of freedom. We see how childhood emerges at the intersection of philosophy and theology. **Chapter III** focuses on Balthasar's account of the birth of the spirit, its philosophical foundations and its significance for human freedom. This chapter claims that the family shelters the mystery of being as love. It is here that the paradox of freedom and belonging is understood and safeguarded. **Chapter IV** addresses Balthasar's reading of Jesus Christ as the eternal Child of the Father and its christological and trinitarian implication. We end this chapter looking at how human freedom is called to fulfill itself in the form of freedom embodied by Jesus Christ, the eternal Child.