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Article

Behold, the human being: Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of the Paschal Triduum and the self in dementia

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Abstract
This article explores the theological resources within the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar that may be of use to Christians as they consider or face the changing nature of the experience of self following a dementia diagnosis. It takes Balthasar's ideas about the dying and then dead Jesus being the gradual and then total alienation of Father from Son as a model for how dementia can alienate a person from their sense of self. This article does not offer solutions as such but finds hope in the message of Easter that humans are re-membered.

Keywords
dementia, Hans Urs von Balthasar, re-member, self, Triduum

Introduction

Dementia is a reality experienced by many people. It is experienced both by those who have the diagnosis but also by their families and friends. Very often this illness has a radical impact on a person's memory, personality and sense of self. Although dementia is not a new phenomenon as such, its diagnosis is more prevalent now

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than in the past, in large part due to the general population living longer. Thinking about what resources theology may have to help Christians facing this prevalent illness is an important task for the Church to be engaged in. In thinking about biblical imagination, Mary Hinkle Shore suggests that 'our sense of identity, meaning, belonging, and direction are bound up with the ways that identity, meaning, belonging, and direction are constructed within the Bible'.[1] That is certainly the case for those who treat the Bible as Scripture – that place where all things can be chewed over again and again in the search for meaning both in and beyond life. Such searching for meaning also applies to wider tradition. Where the liturgy or theology is engaged with, meaning will be sought and identity discovered. This all becomes part of the sense of self that the Christian develops as they engage with the depths of their faith. These are also things that can be lost, along with much else, in the latter stages of dementia. In this article, we explore how the events of the Paschal Triduum can help interpret dementia for the Christian. We consider the experiences of Jesus and of those with dementia and use the lens of the soteriological thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar. We walk through Good Friday and Holy Saturday before seeing how there is hope of re-membering, even for those who forget themselves and find their own self alienated from itself.

Good Friday

On Good Friday, we enter the Passion of Jesus. In Latin, the words 'passion' and 'passive' have the same root – '*pati*', meaning to endure, undergo, bear or submit. The entwinement of both words can be perceived in the journey of Jesus from active ministry to passively accepting the events of Good Friday. For Balthasar, Jesus is seen as embodying humanity at the moment of crucifixion as he emotively states that 'when the Son accepts dying in the agony of God-forsakenness, it is for him (and the other Divine Persons) not only an "external work" undertaken out of absolute love and joy but also the expression of his very own, his very specific life'.[2] Jesus felt abandoned and forsaken on the cross and in the solitude of that moment embodied the loneliness and despair of humanity when reason and logic are shorn from emotions and darkness appears to be overwhelming. Balthasar refers to Jesus as the 'God-man' who experienced a forsakenness that is worse than any other human experiences, for here, uniquely, is God distanced from God.[3] Reviewing work on self and dementia patients, Lisa Caddell notes that the 'majority of existing studies found evidence for the persistence of self, at least to some degree, but that there may be a deterioration in various components of the self, possibly linked to the stage or severity of the illness'.[4] In a similar manner as Good Friday wears on and as Jesus dies, there is an apparent finality. Gradually, God is distanced from God until the distance between Father and Son is experienced *in toto*, to which we shall return below.

For Balthasar, the cross is not the end of the matter; rather, the descent of Christ is the climax of his saving work, the reality of Christ actually having died on Good Friday, of being dead. Balthasar emphasizes not only that Christ died but

that the dead Christ as well as the dying Christ is soteriologically potent. In Christ, 'man finds his own self and is taken up whole and entire into God', for Christ 'has fulfilled the destiny of all men, even to death and the hopelessness of hell, and transcends this destiny by his resurrection from the dead'.[5] It is not only dying that humanity has to endure, but also really and truly being dead, but Christ has done this too and so it remains true that a human's own self can indeed be found in this man who is also God.

Clearly, someone with dementia is not dead – they are living with a life-altering illness. And yet, both the loss of self and the passivity that Balthasar speaks of in the death of Jesus provide a clear parallel. In becoming passive, Jesus embodies the character of a frailer or older person often enacted in the process of dementia. The dementia sufferer almost becomes an object about whom decisions are made, actions are 'done' to them, and many will fear both the societal stigma around the loss of control and the unknown. In addition, the individual feelings of the dementia sufferer become a maelstrom as they are aware on some level of what is happening to them but are often not able to articulate their needs.[6] Jesus, in a parallel manner, underwent the experience of others stripping away his capacities and decisions being made that had a profound impact on his body and mind and thus placed himself in solidarity with the human experience of ageing and dying. This solidarity is confirmed when Jesus is before Pilate, as Pilate utters the phrase '*Idou ho anthrōpos*'. Traditionally this sentence has been translated as 'Behold the man', although the Greek word *anthrōpos* is better translated as 'human' and so Pilate is actually saying 'Behold, the human being'. For those with eyes to see, Pilate is unknowingly making the point that in this state Jesus is standing in solidarity with suffering humanity, and in his brokenness he bears the scars of our ageing experience.

Holy Saturday

For Balthasar, the cross is but the beginning of Christ's saving work, which is completed in his death and in his being dead. The descent of Christ to the abode of the dead is the climax of his saving work. Christ's 'going to the dead is necessarily . . . an event of salvation'.[7] Balthasar uses the Hebrew word Sheol to describe the place to which Christ goes in death. Sheol is simply the 'abode of the dead' or 'a place of darkness'. In the book of Numbers (16.33), there is reference to people descending into Sheol alive, such as Korah and all his men, when it is translated literally as sinking into the earth. However, Psalms 30.3 and 55.15 also point us to the concept of Sheol being a descent into madness, a place of a dispersed and unfocused mind. This points us towards the concept that it is the 'apparent dissolution' of Jesus' identity in the paradox of Holy Saturday that allows God to 'embrace the ultimate threat of the complete negation of identity and being'.[8] This experience allows God to suffer alongside those with dementia as they too experience the 'darkness' of Sheol. Christ is in solidarity with the dead even as he had been as a living human in solidarity with the living. It is only by being dead

and yet overcoming death that Christ is able to plant that 'manifesto of eternal life'.[9] It is only by being dead that Christ's work on the cross can be completed. It is only by being dead that Christ can descend to the dead, to be with the dead in their being dead. It is only in the total unravelling of self that Christ can be with those who experience such unravelling on this side of the grave. The cry of abandonment from the cross is in fact intensified in the descent. In his death, Christ is 'in the supreme solitude . . . sharing in such solitude: being dead with and dead God'.[10] Even in death and abandonment, Christ is sharing experientially with creation and with his creatures.

Holy Saturday could be a time of utter despair, for Christ seems utterly lost and abandoned. And yet, it is also the liminal time between the crucifixion and the resurrection, liminal being derived from the Latin '*limens*', which literally means threshold. It is that in-between time, a time that speaks of the crossing of boundaries. This encapsulates the mystery of Holy Saturday, which has become a place of watching and waiting, a time caught between grief and relief as Jesus appears to be 'forsaken'. Goldsmith states that Holy Saturday is a day that people with dementia and their carers can identify with as 'the horror and immediate pain of death is in the past' but they are in a space where there is 'no sense of meaning or hope for living' apparent.[11] Balthasar speaks of the dead Christ on this day, and says of him:

> the mind of the Logos has been stripped bare, as it were . . . letting himself remain available for the Father in everything, even in ultimate alienation . . . Holy Saturday, one might say, is a kind of 'suspension' of the Incarnation, whose result is given back into the hands of the Father and which the Father will renew and definitively confirm by the Easter Resurrection.[12]

The liminality of Holy Saturday thus illustrates God being 'in the emptiness and God taking the emptiness into himself'.[13] In this incarnational suffering, God comes alongside those who are 'lost' in their remembrance and identity and embraces them in their deep need. Balthasar emphasizes that it is precisely in Christ's passivity in hell that his greatest strength to save is made manifest as he too has experienced a deep abandonment echoed in that cry of Good Friday: '*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*?' – 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27.46). People with dementia might well echo this cry as many find themselves alienated from society without a voice and too often are perceived as 'other'.

For Christian theology, even in the very darkest of nights there is hope. And here, with the separation of God from God's self, of Father from Son, of 'ultimate alienation', Balthasar's theology of the Trinity provides such hope. Whereas sometimes in theology the Holy Spirit seems to be merely an attribute of the relationship between the Father and the Son, for Balthasar, the Spirit has a very particular role to play on Holy Saturday. Graham Ward comments that, for Balthasar, the Spirit 'safeguards the freedom of the Son's givenness to the Father and mediates this obedience to the Father' even in the darkness of Holy Saturday.[14] The Holy Spirit

is the essential guarantor of the oneness of God. It is the Spirit who acts independently of, and yet in concert with, the Father and the Son. It is the Spirit who is able to 'testify' to the continuing unity of Father and Son, even in their deepest separation and in their own (elective) inability to communicate with one another.[15] There is hope here for all who are alienated, even for those alienated from their own sense of self and from their own memories of self.

In a recent paper, Maureen Russell shared a story from her experience caring for her husband's aunt, where they, in solidarity with Aunt Mae's suffering, also 'forgot' the event Mae was upset about forgetting and learned to live in the present moment with the same needs. She argued that, by doing so, the carer and the person suffering with dementia have a 'relationship of mutual-interdependence'.[16] This is the relationship we see proffered in the Trinity and is extrapolated in our relationship with Christ: a transcendent love that is exemplified in the Magnificat and Beatitudes. For Balthasar, this love is pointedly expressed in the willingness of Christ to be utterly lonely in Sheol. For all who feel abandoned and alienated, Balthasar suggests that 'this one besides me who has been forsaken by God (like myself) has been abandoned by God for my sake'.[17] Christ has been on the margins in life and this is even the case in death. He has been in the 'darkness' and as such reaches through the cloud of unknowing, subverting the 'normal' power structures, reaffirming the value of the person who is lost and alone – and, indeed, reaffirming their very personhood. '*Idou ho anthrōpos*' – behold, the human being.

Re-membering on the way to Easter

Easter Sunday brings us to the conclusion of the Triduum when Christians joyfully proclaim the six-word story: 'Christ is risen from the dead.' This proclamation reminds us that it is not the end but a new beginning. This has resonances with dementia (and, indeed, with other illnesses) where the disease has a beginning, a middle and an ending. The diagnosis is not an ending but the start of a different journey. Those at the beginning of the journey realize that they are different but also the same, for their personhood, their God-given humanity, has not changed. And yet their experience of the world and even of their own humanity may be radically altered.

On Good Friday, Jesus was beaten, lacerated, taunted and eventually pierced on the cross. He was despised and rejected, acquainted with grief, and human dignity was stripped away from him. He entered humanity and suffered alongside a suffering world. He died, and by the end of Good Friday and on Holy Saturday he was truly, actually dead – as dead as any dead human being. However, while he was then 'forgotten' by human institutions and authorities, and even while Son and Father experienced alienation, his body was taken down from the cross, cared for and laid to rest in the tomb. Normal practice was for such a body to remain on the cross to be food for scavenging animals or to be dismembered, but there was someone to prevent this, someone to remember and re-member, even in the

utter desolation that was Golgotha. Joseph and Nicodemus were re-membering Jesus, giving care and embracing his identity as an embodied human being in the same way that carers re-member the identities of those they love who have dementia. Even as, in Balthasar's thought, the Holy Spirit retains the possibility of ending the dismemberment of the Trinity, so in their own human way, Joseph and Nicodemus were holding out this same hope and this same ministry. In thinking about dementia, Goldsmith reiterates that this re-membering is at the heart of the Christian faith as 'we discern the presence and activity of God in brokenness and weakness'.[18] This re-membering was also demonstrated by Jesus when he was on the cross in his interaction with the thief, who asks Jesus to remember him. Jesus takes the broken pieces of the thief and, in re-membering him, inviting him into his kingdom, recognizes and embraces the other's humanity. Balthasar suggests that in this moment Christ shows his presence to lonely souls and emphasizes being in solidarity with them.[19] So, too, can it be for any human being; we are continually fractured and when we turn to Christ in our weakness and embrace his strength, made available to us in his coming alongside us in weakness, we are re-membered.

We are aware of how the story of the cross ends – if anything ever truly ends – in the resurrection. We often think of this as simply being about Jesus being given new life. But given all that has been said already, it is also about the re-membering of God in Trinity. And even as this re-membering takes place, so too Jesus then assists others in their own re-membering, even in their inability to see what is before their eyes. In John 20.13–16, Mary at first did not recognize Jesus as she was consumed by grief and so he helped her by calling her name. She recognized his voice and tone and saw him with new eyes: he was different but the same. So, too, in various other accounts of meeting the resurrected Christ. In this moment we are shown that we are all remembered by God and that he knows us by name as 'his love is there freely and unreservedly', even if we can't recognize him, as Goldsmith reminds us.[20] This is echoed by Balthasar in *Theo-Drama V*, where in essence he states that the identification of Christ with a person such as this is already guaranteed because Christ has been in their position, only even more definitively.[21]

Christine Bryden powerfully states in her book *Dancing with Dementia* that, as she journeyed into dementia, she became a new person and that she was 'becoming who I really am'.[22] Here, we may remember Paul Tillich's assertion that 'nothing truly real is absolutely lost or forgotten'.[23] Indeed, Bryden embarked on a new relationship and university degree mid-diagnosis, helped by those around her, as part of her new journey. It is possible to discover a new sense of self even while living with dementia. Jesus, as he journeyed through the Triduum, became who he really was yet remained connected to the constant thread of his humanity. Many of those who have dementia are vulnerable as they become truly themselves with no masks, and this re-membering and realization brings with it a responsibility to enable those who are maskless to live well in a society that expects masks to be worn. In essence, they 'cannot demand acceptance and respect, or even acknowledgment of their being . . . and yet they offer us a new way of looking at

the world . . . that can enrich us as we enable them to live fully'.[24] Thus, Jesus, in his Incarnation, suffering, death, being dead and resurrection, affirms that even in our imperfect state, the state of all humanity, we are named, known and loved.

Conclusion

Balthasar is not alone in proclaiming the involvement of God in the very depths of human experience. Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells us: 'God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and the broken.'[25] In denying others their humanity, through inaction, inadequacy, embarrassment or simply not seeing, we are trampling over our own compassion and ignoring the suffering of God. There is a call to action in the soteriological thought of Balthasar, which relies on God being actively involved in the world by suffering alongside it. Pilate unwittingly spoke the truth of what Jesus was all about when he said '*Idou ho anthrōpos*', 'behold, the human being'. In Christ, we are all beheld and re-membered as we most truly are. The ultimately lonely and abandoned one saves us from such a fate as he beholds us. There is a duty imputed in this to also say of others '*Idou ho anthrōpos*', 'behold, the human being'.

Notes

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24. Reader, *Entering the New Theological Space*, p. 97.
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