Article

“Nor the Son:” A Christological Inquiry with Hans Urs von Balthasar

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St. Matthew’s Gospel records the following words of Christ as he considers his final hour: “But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone” (Mt. 24:36 NAB, emphasis mine). Of the hour of his own death, it seems that even the Incarnate Word had no knowledge, but only the Father. This simple but powerful statement has caused difficulty, discomfort, and embarrassment for many theologians throughout the history of the Church. How do we deal with the dual affirmation that Christ is God and yet also seems to be nescient?

An attempt to find a way out of this difficulty may be located in the work of Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988). By placing theology in conversation with other disciplines (e.g., literature, philosophy, psychology, etc.), Balthasar aids us in reconciling the scriptural data with classical formulations about Christ’s human nature in a structure that, without diminishing the Son’s deity, affirms his incarnation as one who is “like us in all things but sin.”

For the purposes of this paper, our primary subject of inquiry is the knowledge of Christ, the scientia Christi. However, the author has chosen to limit the scope of the query we set before Balthasar to a single guiding question. We ask, “Must the Christian affirm that the Incarnate Word enjoyed perfect and complete knowledge, both human and divine, from the moment of his birth?” To answer this question, we turn to the third volume of the Theo-Drama (the second installment of Balthasar’s prodigious sixteen volume trilogy on the beautiful, the good, and the true) entitled Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ.

Our methodology for uncovering Balthasar’s answer to this question will proceed in three steps: 1) We will examine Balthasar’s idea of “mission” in the life of Christ; 2) We will examine Balthasar’s concept of “mission-consciousness” and its place in the historical life of Christ; and 3) We will utilize the concept of “mission-consciousness” in answering our guiding question.
Through the course of this brief study, the author believes that it will become apparent that Hans Urs von Balthasar contributes one of the most intellectually and spiritually satisfying accounts of Christ’s human knowledge in the 20th century, paving the road for an authentic Chalcedonian Christology which also permits us to affirm development in the human psychology and knowledge of Jesus. What we will find in him is an incredibly potent theological journey through mystery. As Balthasar unfolds this “mystery” in the context of the Incarnation, we are initiated into a world of dramatic obedience and humbling kenosis. It is hard not to be drawn into Balthasar’s theology on a deeply personal level. It is precisely this dramatic theology that will provide us with Balthasar’s answer to our guiding question.

**Mission as Defining Characteristic**

There is no more fundamental concept in Balthasar’s Christology than the *mission* of Jesus Christ. The concept of mission is central to every Christological question (be it knowledge, being, etc.) in Balthasar’s theology, and it will serve as the hermeneutical key in answering our own guiding question. In order to give an adequate answer in the context of his theology, we must have an adequate understanding of why Balthasar begins with mission.

His reasoning becomes clearer when we look at the way in which the history of Christology has unfolded. What we find there is the constant and, at times, contentious struggle between the competing spheres of exegesis and dogmatics, especially in the modern age—that is to say, between the struggles of interpreting what the text tells us about Jesus’ life and the ecclesiastical formulae which articulate the ontological and theological status of his person.

This ongoing debate led to a situation within the theology of Balthasar’s time that he, though no expert in exegesis, felt compelled to challenge. That situation goes to the historico-critical division between the “Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith” (also termed the “pre-Easter/post-Easter Jesus”). This is not easily overcome, for it illustrates a presumption on the part of many interpreters of the New Testament to say that the image of Jesus we receive is most likely the “mythological overlay” of the emerging Church.

For Balthasar, the Christ presented by the New Testament is the authentic Christ. Thus, a means of reconciling the exegetical conclusions of the historico-critical scholars and the formulations of the dogmatic theologians is not only possible, but necessary. He locates this necessary road in the “mission-consciousness” of Jesus.

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7 *TD* 3. See specifically 149-259.
8 *TD* 3. See the section entitled “Christology between Exegesis and Dogmatics,” 101-122.
9 *TD* 3, 149.
11 Rosenberg, “Theory and Drama,” 63-65. Rosenberg illustrates this point through an exemplification of the relationship between Balthasar’s soteriology and the apocalyptic form of his preaching.
13 *TD* 3, 64-65, 81. This is specifically Balthasar’s critique of David Strauss. He says, “Has this process (that is, the application of ontological categories and titles to Jesus) articulated an original ‘form’, identified its significance and revealed its true outlines—or has it taken what was originally a relatively form-less core and clothed it in successive garments, which ultimately yield a plausible ‘form’?” See also Aidan Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Dramatics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 96.
14 *TD* 3., 81, 123. Balthasar reconciles the different *lagia* and actions of Jesus in the Gospels by theorizing that the Evangelists and their communities merely “transpose[d] the ‘Word in fleshly form’, that is, what Jesus actually did...into the ‘Word in verbal form’.”
15 *TD* 3, 165.
The “mission-consciousness” of Jesus allows us to bring together the apocalyptic orientation of Jesus’ preaching (which cannot be explained away yet appears unfulfilled)\(^\text{16}\) and our assertion of him as the “exhaustive self-communication”\(^\text{17}\) of God. It does this without dividing him into the Jesus of History/Christ of Faith.\(^\text{18}\)

What is this mission-consciousness and how does it guide us? Methodologically, Balthasar exercises a patristic approach to this question.\(^\text{19}\) In order to understand “who” Jesus is, he tells us, we must understand “what” Jesus has done. This approach, in consideration of the very historical factors which surrounded the life of Jesus, implies that we must consider how the concept of mission was perceived in Jesus’ society and how his perception differed from that concept.\(^\text{20}\)

Balthasar here proceeds by considering what the concept of mission means in the prophetic realm of the Old Testament.\(^\text{21}\) For the patriarchs and prophets of old, there is a clear distinction between who they were before being called by God and who they were after this call was received.\(^\text{22}\) Balthasar says, “There are cases where a man’s natural endowment is known and presupposed, but the mission that comes to him from God is not added\(^\text{23}\) per accidens\(^\text{24}\) to this original, but it is given a preeminence over it so that his life and being heretofore seem to be instrumental, leading up to what he is to be.”\(^\text{25}\) Thus, in the case of the call of Elisha we are given a glimpse into the breaking of ties, or rejection of native existence, that is necessary for him to embrace his mission. This break is not always easy; it requires real sacrifice. Elisha implores Elijah, “Please, let me kiss my father and mother good-bye, and I will follow you.” Elijah answers, “Go back! What have I done to you?” (1 Kings 19:20). A consideration of the New Testament reveals the same reality. The calls of the Apostles are not convenient or conducive to their former lifestyles. “Follow Me!” the mission to which Christ summoned them, took precedence over all that had previously been important. Christ revealed and bestowed upon them the mission for which they were made.\(^\text{26}\)

In both the Old and New Testaments, we find that the “in-breaking” of the divine commission on an individual’s life is often accompanied by the changing of a name. We see this exemplified in “Abram-Abraham, Jacob-Israel, Simon-Peter.”\(^\text{25}\) In these cases, a rejection of the former life is then supplemented by an alteration of a fundamental characteristic of the human person, one’s name. We might infer that this external change implies a deeper ontological transformation from what one formerly was to what one has now become.

What we see in the biblical accounts is a clear understanding of the distinction between mission and person. It is in the unity of these concepts that the exegetical-dogmatic question can be answered and an insightful reflection on the knowledge of Christ be made possible.

Jesus represents a unique occurrence in the human race, in that his birth is oriented toward nothing less than the salvation of humankind: “Indeed, the Son of God was revealed to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). Unlike the prophets and disciples, his mission is not an office which has

\(^{16}\) TD 3, 90. Balthasar cedes the reality that there are many apocalyptic phrases in the \textit{logia} of Jesus that cannot be attributed to the post-Easter Church or understood as a permanent expectation of the end.

\(^{17}\) TD 3, 150.

\(^{18}\) Rosenberg, “Theory and Drama,” 63.


\(^{20}\) This is implied precisely because his actions cannot be separated from his culture, even if his ontology can.

\(^{21}\) TD 3, 156.

\(^{22}\) TD 3, 154-155.

\(^{23}\) TD 3, 154.

\(^{24}\) In the case of the great prophets, the destiny of the one who is to be sent forth may be disclosed to him only at the moment of his call (Isaiah 6), though it was intended for him right from his mother’s womb: “I formed you...consecrated you...appointed you” (Jeremiah 1:5).

\(^{25}\) TD 3, 155.
taken preeminence over a life once led; Jesus comes for nothing else than to reconcile the world. 26
Balthasar reminds us, “no one can give himself a mission;” 27 even the Son of God is sent. He does not come at his own bidding, but by the will of the Father: “I came from God and am here; I did not come on my own, but he sent me” (John 8:42). 28
Although we may say that the Son was sent by the Father, 29 this does not lead us to the affirmation that mission and person are one in the Son. 30 What we must look at, then, is the generation of the Son, that is, whether the person of the Son precedes the mission of the Son.

The Father’s sending is not contained in simply dispatching the Son to Earth, but the entire existence of the Son is in being sent forth from the Father. This sending forth is not limited to a singular temporal event, but, as the Church professes, is an eternal begetting by the Father. The Psalmist says, “in holy splendor before the daystar, like dew I begot you” (Psalm 110:3). What we may conclude then, is that in both the Economic Trinity (the Trinity in relation to Salvation History) and Immanent Trinity (the Inner Life of the Trinity), the Son is sent forth from the Father.

Balthasar reminds us of the intimate connection between “the One sent and the One sending,” 31 highlighting the fact that, according to scripture, the One sending is “to be ‘known,’ ‘believed,’ and ‘honored’ in the One who is sent.” 32 Because the Son is ever generated from the Father as the “One Sent,” he is in an ever-dependent relationship with the Father. Thus, “His whole being is in motion toward [the Father].” 33 Our conclusion then must be that the person of Jesus is inseparably bound to his mission (being sent) from the Father.

Understanding mission as the essence of the person of Jesus allows us to escape the dilemma between exegesis and dogmatics (the Jesus of History vs. the Christ of Faith). The mission of Jesus and its completion must look towards both eternity and temporality. We, for our part, must view his teaching through that lens. The essential dogmatic overlay, by which dogmatic theologians interpret the actions of Jesus, in Balthasar’s view, is the “pro nobis” (the fundamental, expiatory, “for us,” nature of Christ’s activity, especially on the Cross). 34 This, rather than being a later mythological gloss, can be united to that essential exegetical overlay, which is the apocalyptic style of Jesus’ logia, his preaching concerning the imminent and final judgment of the world. 35 It is not that Jesus was wrong about the coming end, which would require theologians to overlook the biblical text; rather, Balthasar tells us that at the moment of the “pro nobis,” the Cross (the purpose for which he was sent), God executes the supreme judgment on the world. Thus, in a way, it contains the totality of all time (for it reconciles the totality of all sin), and has, therefore, accomplished the eschatological goal, even if it has not yet been realized in chronological time. Balthasar says that, “[Jesus] has to deal with the world and its time on the basis of his unique, temporally circumscribed, human existence: his final ‘hour’ contains the entirety of world-time, whether or not the latter continues to run, chronologically, ‘after’ his death.” 36

Considering the words of Jesus in this way allows us to escape the necessity of dividing the dogmatic “Christ of Faith” from some supposed “Jesus of History” lying beneath the text of the New Testament. The eternal and

26 TD 3, 153.
27 TD 3, 154.
28 TD 3, 153.
30 TD 3, 157. Which would constitute a question concerning the Immanent Trinity as well.
31 TD 3, 153. Paraphrased.
33 TD 3, 153.
34 TD 3, 110.
35 TD 3, 110-117.
36 TD 3, 111.
temporal nature of his mission cuts a legitimate path through the exegetical material while allowing us to read the dogmatic formulations of the New Testament and the Early Church as authentic representations of the same Jesus.

More importantly, however, the idea of mission-consciousness affects how we think about the knowledge and consciousness of Jesus. If mission is part and parcel of the person of Jesus, then Balthasar is right to assert “Jesus’ knowledge of himself coincides with his knowledge of being sent.” This is an incredibly important point for our guiding question and has major implications for our more classical ideas about what Jesus knows and when he knows it.

If Balthasar’s theory concerning mission and person holds, can we still affirm what Gerald O’Collins calls the classical approach Christ’s knowledge: that, “from the very first moment of his conception, Jesus enjoyed in his human mind the vision of God enjoyed by the saints in heaven?” Is the Incarnate Son simply a “static essence” who came down to execute a mission and then returned to the heavenly kingdom? Some wish to say “yes,” but this does not take heed of the dramatic way in which Jesus entered our humanity and does not properly account for his nature as being sent from before all eternity.

In order to engage these types of questions adequately, we must take a closer look at the idea of mission-consciousness in Balthasar. To do this, we must examine (in an abbreviated way) the very inquiries Balthasar makes into this problem: a) How to get nearer to a concept of mission-consciousness that is absolute, that is coinciding with the person; b) how it is possible to reconcile the historical shape of this consciousness with the fact that it existed from before all time; c) its presuppositions in the “economic” Trinity; and d) mission as the measure of Jesus’ knowledge.

**Mission-Consciousness**

The mission-consciousness of Jesus does not merely represent an “absolute” in the divine reality, but constitutes the “entirety of the content of Jesus’ human consciousness.” We must begin by engaging the question of why we affirm that this mission-consciousness constitutes the whole of Jesus’ human consciousness and what implications flow from that affirmation.

For Balthasar, this is explained by reiterating that Jesus’ “I” is equivalent to his mission. His “I” necessarily implies that “I am the one who must accomplish this task. I am the one through whom the kingdom of God must and will come.” Although this was laid out in the previous section, it can be deepened by looking to scripture.

The Gospel of John (which deeply influences Balthasar’s concept of mission) and the letters of Paul provide a rich ground of material from which to consider this idea. “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him” (John 1:18). “The Father and I are one” (10:30). “Whoever believes in me believes not only in me but also in the one who sent me, and whoever sees me sees the one who sent me” (12:44-45). “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). “I am in the Father and the Father is in me[,] The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works” (14:10). “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (14:11). “For in him all the fullness was pleased to

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37 *TD* 3, 153.
39 *TD* 3, 149.
40 Rosenberg, “Theory and Drama,” 78. Rosenberg provides a helpful clarification of what Balthasar actually means by “absolute.”
41 *TD* 3, 166.
42 Rosenberg, “Theory and Drama,” 66. “...Balthasar is clearly most influenced by the Johannine missio Christology,”
"dwell" (Colossians 1:19). “He set forth in [Christ] as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ” (Ephesians 1:9-10).

What is presented in these passages is not an image of the Son who brings the *message* of the Father, but of the Son who brings the Father. The work of the Son is not *his* work, but the work of the Father in him. “The Father and I are one[!]” The Father and the Son are so intimately bound up, that to see the “One Sent” is to see the “One Who Sent Him.”

Christ’s mission-consciousness provides a way of understanding this. We recall that Jesus’ mission is not the subject of divine fiat, but the very substance of his existence. Jesus’ being is in his *processio* from the Father. He did not sit upon a divine throne until a point at which the Father decided to send him to redeem us; he was sent “from before all time.” His mission is universal, the execution of the Father’s will. Thus, when he entered time, the eternal mission did not fade into the background; it is precisely this mission which ordered the human consciousness of Jesus.

The static “essence” Christology, which Balthasar laments, is thus overcome. By organizing our Christological inquiry around Jesus’ mission-consciousness, the relationship of the Father to the Son is revealed as a continuing drama of “the One Sending and the One Sent.” As a result, we see the Son who is eternally dependent on and obedient to the Father (cf. Philippians 2:7-8). His obedience is a perfect obedience, holding nothing back. An infinite receptivity is opened towards the Father, and all that Jesus is he receives from the Father. In light of this, we cannot but conclude that Jesus’ “I” (what Balthasar refers to as the “I-consciousness”) necessarily implies and is equivalent to his mission-consciousness. When we then perceive his “I” anywhere in the sacred text, we must assume that it is fundamentally related to his mission. The conclusion that follows shows us that everything the person of Jesus knows and does, even from his birth, is oriented out of his consciousness of mission.

**Mission-Consciousness in the Historical Life of Jesus**

The orientation of life that we derive for Jesus out of his mission-consciousness has real consequences for Christology. If the mission-consciousness is constitutive of his human-consciousness, must we then conclude that he is aware of the totality of his mission, even from the moment of his birth? Balthasar phrases the problem this way: “If Jesus’ consciousness of an absolute (divine) mission is to coincide with his I-consciousness, how can the child Jesus ever have awakened to self-consciousness without simultaneously knowing of His mission—at least implicitly?”

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43 TD 3, 166.
44 TD 3, 153-154, 183. See on 183 Balthasar’s discussion of the obedience of the Son.
45 TD 3, 153-154, 201. On 201, Balthasar points us to St. Thomas who also concludes that the “Son’s missio is the economic form of His eternal processio from the Father.” Thomas says, “Thus the Son is said to be sent by the Father into the world, inasmuch as He began to exist visibly in the world by taking our nature; whereas He was previously in the world.” See St. Thomas Aquinas, “Summa Theologica, Part I,” in God and the Order of Creation, ed. Anton Pegis, vol. 1 of The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), hereafter ST I, q. 43, a. 1, respondeo.
46 TD 3, 167.
47 Cf. TD 3, 138, 164-166.
48 TD 3, 149.
49 TD 3, 117-122. See specifically 119.
50 TD 3, 180-181. So then Paul may acclaim that he is the “fullness” in Colossians 1:19.
51 See TD 3, 173-183.
53 TD 3, 173.
54 TD 3, 173.
Further, are we forced into the patristic teaching that Jesus must have possessed, from the moment of his birth, “a knowledge of everything knowable to a man”? To answer this problem (which is carried from the Fathers over into the Scholastics), Balthasar looks to human nature itself. Calling upon the Buberian theme of the “I-Thou” as articulated by Maurice Nedoncelle, Balthasar insists, “unless a child is awakened to I-consciousness through the instrumentality of a Thou, it cannot become a child at all.” In our own lives, we can say that it is most often our mother and father who awaken this “Thou,” this self-recognition, in us. What is interesting about Balthasar’s approach here is that he is keeping Christology as it relates to the humanity of Jesus within the categories of real human experience. There is no need to formulate some “purely theoretical content, over and above [Jesus’] mission.” He can be appropriated on this level by our own human understanding. This approach rings with an authenticity that is often lost in the endless hurdles of the Scholastics.

Who then awakens this Thou in Jesus, and what implications does it have for us? The source of this awakening can be none other than Mary, who is the source of his humanness. Through the transmission of the “religion of the Fathers,” she awakens his “I” to its reality as a “Thou.” This is to say that she provides the means by which the child knows itself not merely as an individual, but as a person.

Having already established that the “I-consciousness” and “mission-consciousness” are the same, we can conclude that the awakening of this “I” is the awakening of the mission in the Child. We need not assume that the mission is poured into the child “from the outside,” only that exposure to salvation history is sufficient to awaken the “mission latent in the Child’s person.” The result of this is a child who grows externally, through historical tradition, in harmony with his own internal growth “under the guidance of His eternal Father.” This is yet another layer of Balthasar’s Christology, honoring the dual natures by placing Jesus in the most authentic human light, a light which only shines because of the divine radiance that created it.

So articulated, we can affirm that the mission, in its totality, is present within the Child, but his consciousness of it grows in a human fashion. Thus, Balthasar can say, with Karl Rahner, that, although Jesus has knowledge of his mission, there is room for clarification and increased awareness of that mission. For Balthasar, the theologies that recoil from this proposition fail to distinguish properly between the two different states of Christ, the status exaltationis (Christ in exaltation) and the status exinanitionis (the emptied state of Christ on earth). While in the status exaltationis, we attribute to Jesus both the full measure of the Godhead and the perfect attributes which accrue thereunto. In the status exinanitionis, while attributing the full measure of the Godhead to Jesus, we are not obliged to affirm that Jesus either possessed or exercised omniscience in his human nature. Rather, the kenotic action of the Son Incarnate impels us towards a separate conclusion. Balthasar sides with

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55 TD 3, 173-174.
56 TD 3, 174-175.
57 TD 3, 175. See also Rosenberg, “Theory and drama,” 82. Rosenberg tells us that this theme is an essential part of many of Balthasar’s works. The question that is not revealed in the English text and that Rosenberg does not answer is whether by “child,” in the second use, Balthasar is indicating personhood (which is only constituted by consciousness) as distinct from individuality? Does this claim have moral ramifications or does Balthasar simply mean to convey that a child that lacks a sense of self can never realize its own personhood? This might, perhaps, be cleared up with a closer reading of Nedoncelle, who is Balthasar’s primary source here.
58 TD 3, 166.
59 TD 3, 175-176.
60 TD 3, 175-178. As a person, Jesus is not merely one among billions, but lives in relationship to a specific time, place, and tradition which constitutes him. Thus we might conclude that to be a person implies being a person-in-relation.
61 TD 3, 176, 181.
62 TD 3, 176, 181.
63 TD 3, 176, 181.
64 TD 3. More will be said on this in the next section.
65 TD 3, 161, 176.
66 TD 3, 161, 178.
Rahner in making this conclusion, saying, “in certain circumstances, a certain kind of not knowing may...be the more perfect attribute [of Jesus].”67 In this relationship of knowing and not knowing,

> Jesus does not step forth as one apocalyptic figure among others to testify primarily to secret things and events; rather, he—and he alone—testifies to himself (Jn 5:31; 8:13, 14, 18). It is really the case, therefore, that he understands the Word he hears from God to be identical with himself. He receives himself from the Father—both once for all and in an eternal and temporally ever-new “now.” [I]n his temporal consciousness, he experiences this gift of himself (from the Father’s hand).68

Thus, even though he is the Word which comes down from Heaven, he chooses to share in our humanity to its fullest extent. He receives this Word, this slow and steady revelation of himself in time, as a full exemplification of his complete kenotic obedience to the will of the Father and his solidarity with the human race.

Balthasar’s understanding of mission-consciousness, seen in the light of the status exinanitionis, permits us to see Jesus as both intuitively knowing that he is the Son, yet continuing to grow in his understanding of that knowledge. It allows us not only to resolve the “[Church] Fathers’ profound embarrassment occasioned by the passage that says that not even the Son knows when the Day of Judgment will be,” 69 but also brings clarity to the scene of the Child Jesus in the Temple—the Child who “[sat] in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and [they hearing] him were astounded at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:46-47), but who also, “advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor” (Luke 2:52).70

Mission-Consciousness and the Knowledge of Jesus

In the wake of what has been said concerning the “mission-consciousness” of Jesus, we can now look to the conclusions Balthasar draws about the human knowledge of the Incarnate Word. His theory concerning the effect of mission-consciousness on the self-consciousness of Jesus puts Balthasar in direct opposition to an assortment of Church Fathers and Popes who advocated for Jesus’ possession of omniscience 71 and an uninterrupted visio beatifica72 at the moment of his birth.

Seeking even greater support for his theory of the temporal unfolding of knowledge in Jesus’ consciousness, Balthasar looks to the writings of German philosopher and theologian Hermann Schell.73 Randall Rosenberg articulates Balthasar’s assessment of Schell nicely: “Schell recognizes that human perfection requires that one is not given all the advantages from the beginning, but rather proceeds in freedom from capacities to the realization of these capacities.”74 Here, Balthasar has yet again called upon the lens of Jesus’ solidarity with humanity as a key hermeneutic of his self-knowledge. Unlike the Church Fathers, we do not have to posit Jesus’ complete

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68 TD 3, 180. Emphasis and scripture references are Balthasar’s.

69 TD 3, 174.

70 TD 3, 181. Balthasar says, “Nothing prevents us from going on to understand this process (the revelation of the Son-Incarnate mission) as taking place through time, according to human maturation (cf. Lk 2:40, 52).” Scriptural reference is Balthasar’s.

71 TD 3, 191-192. Balthasar here lists the numerous Fathers who attribute omniscience to Jesus from the moment of his conception.

72 TD 3, 178. Balthasar here addresses the theology espoused in *Mystici Corporis Christi* of Pope Pius XII.

73 TD 3, 193-195.

74 Rosenberg, “Theory and drama,” 97. See also Gerard Reedy, “The Christology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Thought* 45 (1970): 413. In a discussion of the theology of history, Reedy makes a similar point about Balthasar’s theology. He says, “God gave Christ his existence to be lived through temporally, that is, human stage after human stage.”
possession of all human perfections in order to safeguard his dignity. His dignity is established and maintained by his perfect obedience to the Father (Philippians 2:8-9).  

This obedience, which Jesus renders to the Father, may require that some of his “intrinsically ‘fitting’ and ‘direct’ knowledge should be ‘laid up’ with the Father for reasons of economy.” Here, Balthasar advises us to “take seriously Schell’s concept of mission as the measure and to place the Triune God’s free decision and purpose prior to the Incarnation, in such a way that the extension of Jesus’ mission and self-consciousness (that is, knowledge) coincide in it.” Thus we might say that Jesus’ mission and self-consciousness are extensions of the universal will of the economic Trinity from all eternity and, therefore, are ordered by that will.

The “sometimes” ignorance of Jesus excludes, from Balthasar’s perspective, the enduring visio beatifica which is often attributed to him. The knowledge of Jesus is not predicated in any “beatific vision, which he began to enjoy when he had hardly been conceived in the womb of the Mother of God,” but in his mission-consciousness; and in this mission-consciousness he derives his “vision” of God. Thus, we can satisfactorily say that what Jesus knows is a function of his mission (a point we have been working towards since the beginning of our inquiry). In this way, he is able to engage our humanness in its totality while simultaneously reserving those divine characteristics which are necessary to execute his mission.

If we reject the claim that Jesus possesses the visio beatifica and its coincident scientia visionis (omniscience), what does that mean for our understanding of his knowledge? Balthasar provides us with the answer:

> With respect to the extent or limits of Jesus’ knowledge concerning God’s salvific work in the world, if we take mission as the point of reference, it will allow every possible variation, as the particular situation demands. Thus he may have the prophet’s detailed prospect of the world’s entire situation and its relation to God, or of individual events of the present, the past, or the future; or he may have an intuition of these things. So too his field of attention may be restricted, for obedience’s sake, to a particular horizon, as in a narrow ravine: the flow of his mission is contracted as it pushes its way through.

We must conclude from this that, to Balthasar’s thinking, the knowledge of Jesus is entirely dependent. It is regulated, guided, and oriented by the manifestation and execution of his mission. If it is necessary to his mission, we can assume that he possesses it. However, this does not require us to assume that he continues to possess any special knowledge if it no longer suits the purpose of his mission. Balthasar likens this to the undulating reality of the mystics, who experience “moments of illumination [that are followed by] constrictions of dryness and forsakenness.”

75 See Reedy, “The Christology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” 412. “It is the Father’s will that Jesus spend his time sequentially, as man does.”
76 TD 3, 192. See also Alyssa Pitstick and Edward Oakes, S.J., “Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy: An Exchange.” First Things 168 (2006): 27. In the article this initial “laying up” of the divinity is related to the eventual “laying up” or “stripping away” of the humanity in Christ’s descent. This is but another example of the theme of obedience as it runs through Balthasar. It should be noted that in this section Pitstick is laying out Balthasar’s theology with the intent of demolishing it.
77 TD 3, 195.
78 TD 3, 178, 195.
81 TD 3, 196-197.
82 Cf. Rosenberg, “Theory and drama,” 99-111. Rosenberg treats this question in the context of Balthasar’s understanding of the Beatific Vision in a far more extensive and exhaustive manner.
83 TD 3, 196-197.
84 See TD 3, 178-179. Balthasar himself reserves to Jesus’ knowledge a general knowledge of persons which is conducive to the mission he is about.
85 TD 3, 197.
E.L. Mascall tells us, “It is both ridiculous and irreverent to ask what it must have been like to be God incarnate.”\(^{86}\)

While it would, no doubt, be important to keep this wise dictum before our eyes (as did Balthasar), the following observation seems appropriate: The first and determinant principle of Jesus’ human knowledge is not his pre-existent status as the Eternal Word or his final exaltation in glory. The first principle and ultimate mediator of his human knowledge, developed in solidarity with the very humanity he entered, is his absolute obedience to the Father’s will. This obedience emerges from his very essence, an essence which is nothing else but to be “the One Sent.”

Conclusion

Must the Christian affirm that the Incarnate Word enjoyed perfect and complete knowledge, both human and divine, from the moment of his birth? Balthasar’s answer to our guiding question should now be clear: it is a resounding “No.” As the Word of the Father, who and what Christ is is rooted in the mission he receives from the Father. This same mission directs his human life and consciousness. However, as a human, he is born with his mission in latency, waiting to be awakened by the “Thou” of the Virgin Mary. This awakening occurs through the normal process of human development. Thus, we do not need to attribute perfect and complete knowledge to the Incarnate Word from the moment of his birth. In this way, through deeply relational terms, Balthasar remains faithful to the authentic Christology of Chalcedon, while integrating into it modern advancements in our understanding of what it means to be truly human.

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\(^{86}\) TD 3, 165.