FOREWORD

British readers are proverbially nervous about philosophical or religious writers with German names, and a name that appears on the spine of a massive rank of plump volumes, mostly in brown and grey covers, does nothing to take away their apprehensiveness. John Saward’s remarkable little book should persuade even the most wary that Hans Urs von Balthasar, for all that his output is large and often difficult, is not a name to fear. This is a book about theology, Christian reflection, as celebration and thanksgiving, because that is the motive power behind Balthasar’s work. It is, like that work, an invitation into the imaginative and spiritual richness of the Catholic Christian tradition, and a reminder that, as Balthasar so clearly understood, the life of the spirit dries up when the imagination is not allowed to feed on the fullness of doctrine, liturgy and scripture.

Balthasar is, in one way, a resolutely “unmodern” writer, sitting quite light to critical approaches to the Bible, for instance, and seeing with a clinical eye how European rationality from the seventeenth century onwards has more and more tied itself into destruc-tive patterns of self-obsession, alienated from the concrete challenge of the “otherness” of history, art, community and the body itself. Like other contemporary thinkers, he identifies the intellectual “modernity” of Europe as a sickness of the spirit. For all its liberating achievements, it has been drawn inexorably into a realm where human beings are understood as bundles of material requirements, competing with
THE MYSTERIES OF MARCH

each other for feeding space, and so are trapped in the melodramas of their private needs; a realm in which threats and the passion for security dominate; a realm which we can easily recognize as the social and political world of the late twentieth century.

The good news for such a world cannot lie in generalized optimism about the spiritual capacities of human beings. For Balthasar, it lies only in the achieved fact of Jesus Christ. "It depends on him," he has written, "whether we can dare to address being as love, and thus all beings as worthy of love". And the good news is not a theory or a programme, but the possibility of belonging with Jesus in the community of the Church. Jesus in the gospels is in an important sense a solitary and unique figure, but he is not a lonely romantic hero: his mission is realized in and through the varied responses of those around him, the total self-gift of Mary, the turbulent and ambiguous service of Peter's leadership in the community, the contemplative faithfulness of John, the prophetic protest of Paul. Understanding Jesus and the Church of Jesus is understanding how we find our calling in and with these figures. We have a dangerously narrow and distorted view of the Church if we fail to see the essential interlocking of our vocations in the pattern established in these New Testament models and symbols. Balthasar's vision of the Church as bearer of good news involves a vision of the universal, central calling of Christians to the sheer empty availability of Mary (not passive but supremely active, because giving in love is the most demanding of all acts); of the necessary stresses, conflicts and compromises of institutional life, summed up in the Petrine office; of the hidden life of the community as the forming of love and wisdom among human beings; and of the boundary-breaking pressures of mission. Catholic Christianity, for Balthasar, shows the full-
ness of Christ, because in it all these vocations are
given space and woven together.

Is Balthasar a writer who simply presents a superbly
integrated pattern of Christian symbols, rich and
satisfying, but offering no point of entry to the con-
temporary secular mentality? He may sometimes
seem so to the hasty reader. But if Balthasar is
unmodern in many respects, it is equally true that few
theologians can match his knowledge and penetration
of modern European intellectual and cultural life. At
moment after moment in his writing, some point from
the Christian tradition is set alongside some element
in the cultural history of Europe, past or present, to
challenge or illuminate. He does not seek to study the
contemporary world in the hope that, at the end of the
day, some version of residual Christianity can be
produced from it, like a rabbit from a hat; rather he
reads his way deeply into Christian history in its own
right and cultural history in its own right, in the
conviction that the quest and energy animating the
latter must finally be capable of being "brought
home" in terms of the Christian revelation, and its
true direction and desire laid open. So he is never a
conventional apologist; he is more interested in
uncovering the kind of analogy or juxtaposition of
Christian and non-Christian worlds that can fuse both
in a transfiguring perception - a perception of the God
who is able to be present, to be real, in all those places
where he seems most signaly absent. Such is the God
who is with us as Jesus, crucified and descending into
Hell.

John Saward has performed a vastly impressive feat
of synthesis and compression, without ever resorting
to mechanical summary and repetitive cataloguing of
ideas. With a distinctive stylistic richness of his own,
he has thought and imagined his way into the heart of
Balthasar's theological world and given us a medi-
The Mysteries of March

tation on the mysteries of the Word made flesh that is both an introduction to a great mind and something more. He does not gloss over aspects of Balthasar's scheme that may be difficult or uncongenial, or simply (as with Balthasar's use of the visionary insights of Adrienne von Speyr) baffingly unfamiliar to the theological mindset of the English-speaking world. He is not afraid either to challenge Balthasar on some matters, or to speak in his own right as a theologian. This will not be an uncontroversial book to read, even for the most sympathetic; many — like the writer of this Foreword — will have questions and disagreements here and there. But the last thing we should ask of a good book (let alone a good book about God) is that it be bland. Better to ask it to be demanding, enriching and productive of gratitude — to the writer, to his subject, to God. Anyone asking this will not be disappointed in these pages.

Rowan Williams
Oxford, Octave of the Transfiguration 1989