

Distributed Like Bread – Jonathan M. Ciraulo

Ciraulo, Jonathan M. *Distributed Like Bread: Hans Urs von Balthasar Speaks to Seminarians*. Omaha, NE: Institute for Priestly Formation, 2023, 92 pp.

Reviewed by Dr. Steven Umbrello

In *Distributed Like Bread: Hans Urs von Balthasar Speaks to Seminarians*, Jonathan Ciraulo engages with the theological insights of Hans Urs von Balthasar, especially as they pertain to the priesthood and seminary formation. This work not only introduces readers to Balthasar's complex and nuanced understanding of the priestly vocation but also serves as a guide for those discerning or living out this calling. Through a detailed examination of Balthasar's life and writings, Ciraulo uncovers the profound notion that the priesthood is a mission, one in which God elects individuals to become instruments of divine grace despite and within their human limitations.

Ciraulo's volume is grounded in the belief that to be a priest is to be "distributed like bread"—to become as accessible and necessary as the Eucharist itself. This metaphor captures the essence of Balthasar's vision: the priest is called to embody Christ's self-giving love, to be broken and given for the life of the world. The author systematically explores Balthasar's theological framework, focusing on key themes such as discernment, the tension between objective and subjective holiness, and the integration of the priestly identity with the broader Christian call to holiness. By doing so, Ciraulo provides a comprehensive overview of the demands, challenges, and profound beauty of the priestly vocation as articulated by one of the twentieth century's most influential theologians.

This work emerges not only as an academic exploration of Balthasar's thoughts on priesthood but as a spiritual manual for seminarians and priests. It offers insights into the nature of discernment, the importance of theological formation, and the intrinsic connection between the priestly mission and personal sanctification. This short volume stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of Balthasar's theology for those seeking to understand or live out the call to the priesthood today, offering a rich theological reflection that invites engagement with the mysteries of faith, service, and sacrifice.

Distributed Like Bread is structured into three main chapters and a conclusion in which Ciraulo examines Balthasar's theological insights on priesthood. Each segment builds upon the last, forming a cohesive exploration of priestly identity and mission.

Chapter 1, *Balthasar as Seminarian, Priest, and Theologian*, is both a biographical sketch of Hans Urs von Balthasar and an introduction to the central themes of his life that resonate throughout his work on priesthood. Ciraulo delves into Balthasar's early life, academic pursuits, and his entrance into the Jesuits, highlighting Balthasar's profound encounter with God that directed him towards the priesthood. The narrative tracks Balthasar's theological evolution, emphasizing his unorthodox path and the development of his theological vision, which contrasts sharply with his contemporaries. This chapter sets the stage by illustrating how Balthasar's life and theology are inseparable, providing a living context for his insights into the priesthood.

In the following chapter, *Discerning the Objective and Subjective Holiness of the Priesthood*, Ciraulo tackles the nuanced distinction Balthasar makes between the objective holiness conferred by the priestly office and the subjective holiness to which every priest must aspire. This chapter discusses the tension between these concepts and the necessity of both for a fruitful priestly vocation. By examining Balthasar's understanding of discernment and mission, Ciraulo articulates how priests are called to embody Christ's sacrificial love, navigating the complexities of living out this calling in a world marred by sin.

Focusing on the themes of self-emptying (kenosis) and celibacy, Ciraulo explores in Chapter 3, *The Kenosis of the Pastor and the Value of Celibacy*, how these aspects are central to the priestly vocation in Balthasar's thought. The chapter examines the theological underpinnings of priestly celibacy, not merely as a disciplinary requirement but as an eschatological sign that points to the complete self-giving required of priests. Through Balthasar's lens, Ciraulo elucidates how the kenotic path of the priest mirrors Christ's own self-emptying on the Cross, challenging priests to live out their celibacy as a radical form of love and service.

Ciraulo concludes by reflecting on the apparent paradox of the priestly vocation: a life spent in service to God's people can often seem thankless or ineffective. Drawing from Balthasar, he reassures readers that the value of priesthood is not measured in worldly success but in fidelity to Christ's call to be "distributed like bread." This concluding chapter encourages seminarians and priests to persevere in their vocation, trusting in the inherent worth of their sacrificial love and service.

Beyond this, Ciraulo, in his epilogue, *Orthodoxy without Mimesis*, addresses the risk of reducing the priesthood to mere role-playing or adherence to orthodox practices without a genuine interior transformation. Ciraulo stresses the importance of authentic witness, urging priests to live

out the truths they preach in a manner that is both faithful to tradition and responsive to the Spirit's movements in their lives.

More broadly, *Distributed Like Bread* presents a rigorous and enriching exploration of the priesthood through the theological lens of Hans Urs von Balthasar. This work is a significant contribution to contemporary Catholic theology, not only for its depth in explicating the nuances of Balthasar's thought on priesthood but also for its broader implications within the field of ecclesiology and the theology of vocation. Ciraulo's book meticulously outlines the intricate relationship between the objective and subjective dimensions of the priesthood, a theme central to understanding the comprehensive demands of the priestly vocation in the modern world. By drawing from Balthasar's rich theological repertoire, Ciraulo elevates the discourse on priesthood beyond canonical and disciplinary frameworks, positioning it within the existential and soteriological mission of the Church. This perspective is crucial for a holistic understanding of the priesthood that transcends legalistic interpretations, offering a vision deeply rooted in the mystery of Christ's kenotic love.

The discussion on celibacy, situated within the broader theological narrative of kenosis, is particularly noteworthy. Ciraulo advances the conversation by presenting celibacy not as an ancillary aspect of priestly life but as a profound participation in the self-emptying love of Christ. This aligns with the broader theological currents that seek to understand celibacy in light of Christological and eschatological realities, moving the discourse beyond the often polarized debates surrounding this discipline.

Here, scholars may find it fruitful to place Ciraulo's work in conversation with Bernard Lonergan's contributions to theology, given that it provides a fertile ground for understanding Balthasar's position among his contemporaries. Lonergan, known for his emphasis on method in theology and the role of consciousness and conversion, offers a complementary perspective to Balthasar's thematic focus on beauty, truth, and goodness.ⁱ While Lonergan's methodological approach to understanding faith and revelation underscores the intellectual dimensions of theological inquiry, Balthasar's emphasis on the aesthetic and dramatic aspects of divine revelation highlights the experiential and transformative power of encountering God.ⁱⁱ

Ciraulo's engagement with Balthasar's theological vision, when juxtaposed with Lonergan's methodological rigor, offers a fruitful intersection between the existential and the epistemological dimensions of faith. Lonergan's framework, grounded in the dynamics of

questioning, understanding, judging, and deciding, underscores the cognitive process involved in the appropriation of faith and theological reflection. His focus on the operations of consciousness, particularly in the movement from understanding to judgment, emphasizes the role of intellectual conversion as foundational for theological discourse. This methodological approach, while deeply analytical, aims at facilitating a more authentic grasp of religious truth and a more committed engagement with the divine mystery.

In contrast, Balthasar's theological aesthetics, as explored by Ciraulo, invites a more immediate, though no less profound, encounter with the divine through the beauty of revelation. Balthasar posits that the encounter with God's beauty, manifest in the world and supremely in the Person of Christ, precedes and grounds the intellectual assent to theological truths. This encounter is transformative, drawing the believer into a participatory relationship with the divine that transcends mere cognitive assent. For Balthasar, and subsequently, for Ciraulo's analysis, the aesthetic dimension of faith is not peripheral but central to the process of conversion, fostering a holistic integration of truth, beauty, and goodness in the life of the believer and, by extension, in the priestly vocation.

Ciraulo's work is important because a further synthesis of these perspectives contributes significantly to a more rigorous and expansive understanding of Catholic theology and priestly formation. Ciraulo provides an easily digestible text that permits us to situate Balthasar among contemporaries like Lonergan. This does not merely highlight divergences but rather elucidates a complementary relationship between the intellectual and experiential facets of faith. This dialogical engagement enriches the Catholic theological tradition by advocating for a model of priesthood that is intellectually engaged, aesthetically attuned, and existentially committed.

Furthermore, this approach underscores the indispensability of ongoing formation for priests, who are called to navigate the complexities of contemporary culture while remaining anchored in the timeless truths of the Gospel. Ciraulo's work, informed by Balthasar's theological aesthetics, presents a compelling vision of the priesthood as a life of deep intellectual inquiry, aesthetic sensitivity, and existential openness to the divine mystery.

In the broader discourse of Catholic theology and doctrine, Ciraulo's contribution through his exploration of Balthasar's insights reaffirms the Church's commitment to a faith that is both thoughtfully reasoned and deeply lived. The pastoral argument presented in *Distributed Like Bread* not only advances academic scholarship but also offers practical pathways for the renewal of priestly ministry in the Church, advocating for a priesthood that embodies the fullness of Christ's truth, beauty, and goodness.

Distributed Like Bread makes a significant contribution to broader Catholic theology and doctrine by articulating a vision of the priesthood that is deeply Christocentric, ecclesial, and sacramental. Ciraulo's work reaffirms the Second Vatican Council's teachings on the nature of the Church as both hierarchical and charismatic, emphasizing the indispensable role of the priest within the community of believers.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, by engaging with Balthasar's thought, Ciraulo enriches the ongoing dialogue on the renewal of priestly ministry in the post-conciliar Church, advocating for a priesthood that is both deeply rooted in tradition and dynamically open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in addressing the challenges of the contemporary world.

Jonathan Ciraulo's exploration of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of the priesthood in *Distributed Like Bread* is a valuable addition to the corpus of Catholic theological literature. By drawing meaningful connections between Balthasar and his contemporaries, including Bernard Lonergan, Ciraulo not only situates Balthasar within the broader theological discourse but also highlights the enduring relevance of his insights for understanding the complexities of priestly identity and mission today.

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ⁱ Lonergan, Bernard J. F. *Method in Theology*. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, (CWL 14), edited by Robert M. Doran and John D. Didosky, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics (Volume 1)*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Lumen Gentium* 4, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection*, ed. Matthew Levering, Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021.