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THE TABLET

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DECADE OF TWO POPES

WRESTLING WITH ANGELS

The contrast between the papacies of Pope Francis and Pope Benedict has echoes of one of the great theological debates of the past century, between the German Jesuit Karl Rahner and the Swiss Jesuit – until he left the Society of Jesus in 1950 – Hans Urs von Balthasar. The issues are still at the heart of modern Catholicism, as it strives to read the signs of the times.

In one of the defining scenes of the Oscar-nominated film *The Two Popes*, Ratzinger and Bergoglio (to give them their original surnames) discuss how humanity encounters the divine. In an exchange that theologians who know them both have described as realistic, the actor playing Ratzinger (Anthony Hopkins) declares: “God does not change.” Bergoglio (Jonathan Pryce) counters: “Yes he does, he moves towards us.” Ratzinger quotes John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” and asks, “Where should we find him if he is always moving?” Bergoglio: “On the journey?” Ratzinger: “Oh ... This is your ego talking. You think you know better.” That last line does not do justice to the real Ratzinger’s gentleness and courtesy, but probably captures what he is thinking.

Ratzinger, whom some regard as formidable a theologian as Rahner and Balthasar, held fast to the position that the Church stood outside history, judging the world by the Gospel and by its inheritance of doctrinal truth. Balthasar would have agreed. Rahner saw the grace of God already at work in the world, and the Holy Spirit flowing freely among every generation of humankind – “God moving towards us”. It is on that basis that he invented the concept – which he is later said

to have somewhat regretted – of the “anonymous Christian”. This is the unbaptised person of goodwill who is open to the transcendent, and whose good deeds flow from the grace of God though he or she does not (yet) know it.

Balthasar was scathing about the anonymous Christian idea, because it painted fallen humanity in too rosy a colour. Rowan Williams discusses the Rahner-Balthasar dispute in an essay originally published in 1982 and reproduced in *Wrestling with Angels*; he shares Balthasar’s misgivings. “For Balthasar,” Williams writes, “dialogue with the world is so much more complex a matter than it sometimes seems to be for Rahner; because the world is not a world of well-meaning agnostics but of totalitarian nightmares, of nuclear arsenals, labour camps and torture chambers ... Balthasar’s harsh clear-sightedness is an important disturbance of any assumptions about easy humanist convergences in our world.”

These nightmares and torture chambers stand as a corrective nuance to the optimism of the opening words of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes*: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” Up to a point, Lord Copper. Some of the “men of this age” are instruments of evil, and their anxieties diabolical. And that is why the Rahner/Balthasar debate, the dialogue between Benedict and Francis, is something the Church needs constantly to ponder – without one side demonising the other. For they were both right. Humankind is simultaneously both redeemed and fallen.