

**The Thirst for Catholicity:  
A Key to Understanding Adrienne von Speyr's  
*The Book of All Saints***

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The author of *The Book of All Saints*, Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967), will surely be remembered as one of the great Catholic converts of the twentieth century. Adrienne's reception into the Catholic Church on All Saints' Day, 1940 represented a courageous break with the traditions of the Swiss Reformed Protestantism in which she had been raised. The good burghers of the then staunchly Protestant Basel, Adrienne's adopted hometown on the Rhine, must have looked with dismay on the Romeward journey of this socially prominent medical doctor and professor's wife: What a scandal! Many Swiss Protestants in the early 1940's would still have been as contemptuous of Catholicism as English Protestants had been in the early 1840's, when Cardinal Newman resolved to swim the Tiber.

In reality, Adrienne was anything but an eccentric or a bohemian, and delight in shocking her staid bourgeois neighbors was the furthest thing from her mind. Her unusual conversion sprang from an entirely different source. She was drawn to the Catholic Church because it offered her what the conventional Reformed Christianity of her youth had never been able to provide. For Adrienne (as for Newman), the Catholic Church was simply the undiminished fullness of the Gospel, the authentic Christian life of full surrender to the fullness of Truth revealed in Jesus Christ. It's no wonder that Mary and her unreserved "Yes" to God were so central to Adrienne's understanding of Catholicism, or that her practise of the faith revolved around two interrelated foci: Confession, the sacrament of total openness to God, and the Communion of Saints (with Mary at its center), the total mutual exchange among the members of Christ's mystical body. These two interrelated themes are also the key to understanding *The Book of All Saints*, as we will see below.

Adrienne von Speyr's great passion as a human being and as a believer was what might be called "the thirst for catholicity." By "catholicity" I mean both the unreserved, joyful adherence to all the teachings of the Church and the attitude of total surrender to the Truth which such adherence rests upon. In this sense, Adrienne's first published work, *The Handmaid of the Lord*, which lovingly contemplates Mary as the immaculate exemplar of just such catholic surrender to Truth, gives us a golden key to the rest of her remarkable work. Adrienne received many singular graces (such as the visions that lie behind *The Book of All Saints*), but her mysticism was always an "objective" one aimed at nurturing in others the Marian "Yes" to the Incarnate Word that constitutes the heart of the Catholic Church. It is no surprise, then, that the majority of Adrienne's writings are either scriptural commentaries or theological treatises that seek to illuminate Catholic doctrine independently of appeals to any special experiences. The fact that Adrienne was not a professional theologian, and that she dictated most of her writings to her spiritual father during breaks from her busy schedule as a doctor, lends them a freshness that helps us see the Faith with new eyes.

It would be impossible to sketch here even the barest outline of the content and style of Adrienne's theology, which, uniting prayerful contemplation and sober exposition, aims to let the glorious, demanding absoluteness of Revelation irradiate the reader and so draw him more deeply into the center of the Church. One thing is clear, however: In recognizing the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the post-conciliar Magisterium has also implicitly recognized the theology of Adrienne von Speyr. For, as Balthasar himself always insisted, his work is inseparable, both in substance and in style, from Adrienne's. I'd like to recall here not only the consistent signs of esteem and approval shown to Balthasar (and to Balthasarians) by Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, but also the fact that it was John Paul II himself who, in 1985, convoked a symposium in Rome on the ecclesial mission of Adrienne von Speyr. Reportedly, John Paul was also a reader of *The Book of All Saints*, and he once jokingly wondered aloud what Adrienne would have said about *his* prayer had she been granted a glimpse of it.

In my opinion, these tokens of Magisterial blessing reflect a deeper convergence between the last two pontificates and the "double mission" of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar. This

becomes clear if we consider how both John Paul II and Benedict XVI assess the legacy of Vatican II. For these two popes, the Council was neither the departure from Catholic Tradition hailed by progressives (and deplored by Lefebvrists) nor the harmless “pastoral council” seized upon by some conservatives in an attempt at theological damage control. For John Paul and Benedict, in fact, Vatican II represents a fresh retrieval of *catholicity* as the key to understanding the nature and mission of the Church. According to these pontiffs, Vatican II’s central message is that the uniqueness of the Catholic Church (taught unambiguously by *Lumen Gentium* and reaffirmed recently by *Dominus Jesus*) is not opposed to, but is rather the indispensable sacramental vehicle of, God’s sincere desire to save both all men and all of man. If, with John Paul II, we locate the heart of the Council in *Gaudium et Spes* 22’s affirmation that Christ reveals man to himself, then we can say that the two-in-one work of von Speyr and von Balthasar aims to provide a comprehensive theological foundation Vatican II’s rediscovery of this Christ-centered catholicity lying at the heart of Christ’s Church. I believe that, in honoring Balthasar, the post-conciliar popes have wished to acknowledge the fruitfulness of this theological effort.

Admittedly, Adrienne and Balthasar not only build on previous theologians (above all the Church Fathers and the great Scholastics), but also propose new ideas of their own. Then again, so do all great theologians. This is not to say, of course, that every new theological idea is a good one; some are heretical (there are a lot of contemporary examples, as we all know), and are deservedly rejected by the Church. Nevertheless, some new theological ideas represent a valid development of doctrine (a theme dear to Newman), in that they legitimately unfold implications lying hitherto unnoticed in the Deposit of Faith. Now, it was precisely because he was confident that Adrienne’s charism was a gift to help the Church towards a deeper understanding of the perennial *depositum fidei* that Balthasar submitted everything she wrote to the judgment of the Magisterium. Not only does the original German-language edition of every one of Adrienne’s published books (most of which appeared before Vatican II) bear the *imprimatur* of the local bishop, but, as already noted, her work as a whole (insofar as it is one with Balthasar’s) also enjoys the at least indirect *imprimatur* of the pontifical Magisterium as well. Naturally, it will take time for the Church fully to receive and sift Adrienne’s immensely rich theological work. Nevertheless, Adrienne’s writings have already generated a renewal of faith and practise in many Catholics from all walks of life (from cardinals to housewives)---a witness to the authenticity and fruitfulness of her charism. If “by their fruits ye shall know them,” then Adrienne’s work surely has some powerful evidence in its favor.

Something of the newness of Adrienne’s theology infuses *The Book of All Saints*, inasmuch as it purports to be a visionary’s inspired glimpse into the prayer-lives of numerous saints, both canonized and uncanonized (as well of a few notorious sinners). Critics will no doubt accuse Adrienne of curiously prying into other men’s souls or of arrogating to herself a supposedly God’s-eye view of their hearts. Unprejudiced readers, by contrast, will be willing to look at things the other way around and to test the hypothesis that *The Book of All Saints* originates in a divine invitation to enter more deeply into the mystery of the Communion of Saints. After all, if the blessed in heaven are wholly transparent to God and to one another, why shouldn’t they happily volunteer to teach us the same transparency by giving us a glimpse into their earthly prayer? Adrienne’s saints, like the bright spirits in C.S. Lewis’ *The Great Divorce*, have no hang-ups about showing us even their mistakes and temptations. One can almost hear their heavenly laughter, which is equally free of both shame and indiscretion; with nothing either to hide or to flaunt, *they*, at least, do not confuse themselves with their plaster statues. Nor should the reader be troubled by the inclusion of people such as Luther (when he was still a Catholic monk) in a book bearing the title “All Saints.” Their ultimate fate is in Christ’s hands, and perhaps he wished to show them to Adrienne to illustrate the truth that the deeper you go into the Communion of Saints, the readier you are to offer yourself even for the seemingly most hopeless sinner (think of Therese’s fervent intercession on behalf of Pranzini).

The unprejudiced reader, I have said, will want to test for himself the hypothesis that *The Book of All Saints* is a God-given opportunity to enter more deeply into the mystery of catholicity (as Adrienne understands it). The best method for conducting such a test is prayer. After all, if the saints are good enough to let you see how they prayed on earth---warts and all---then the best way you can thank them is to let them teach you (through that very disclosure) how to pray better. Adrienne never understood

*The Book of All Saints* as a definitive and total portrait of the saints (or of the sinners) whose prayer she describes; she knew perfectly well that the human soul is an inexhaustible mystery, especially when it passes into a heavenly mode of existence that we cannot fully comprehend. In her humility, Adrienne received the visions recorded here as nothing more and nothing less than a help to pray better in the spirit of the Communion of Saints. Once again, there is ultimately just one test that really counts for judging this book: “By their fruits ye shall know them.” So if *The Book of All Saints* fosters in the reader something of the saints’ characteristic thirst for catholicity, something of their yearning to surrender ever more completely to the fullness of Truth carried in the Tradition of the Catholic Church, that will be a good sign that the book transmits to us an authentic gift of God for today’s Church.

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