

## “He descended into hell”: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Catholic Doctrine

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IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY, few words are as provocative as the word “hell.” There are some who regard the possibility of eternal punishment as being simply incompatible with a merciful and compassionate God. Others view it cynically as a myth or theological construct invented by the Church that historically succeeded in terrifying supposedly naive and superstitious people into obedience to its teachings, but which nowadays has little credibility or relevance. Despite these prevailing attitudes, however, the existence of hell still remains an article of the Christian faith in the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Christ’s descent into it is referred to on several occasions in the New Testament<sup>2</sup> and is mentioned explicitly in the Apostle’s Creed. Although the exact meaning of this admittedly enigmatic event has not been without controversy in the past,<sup>3</sup> the Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> The word “hell” refers both to the abode of *all* the dead before Christ’s resurrection (this abode of the dead is also often called “Hades” or “Sheol”) and to the abode of the damned only after the resurrection—i.e., hell understood as a place of eternal punishment.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Matt 12:29, 39–40; 1 Pet 3:18–20; 4:6, Acts 2:24, 31; and Eph 4:7–10.

<sup>3</sup> During the Protestant Reformation, for example, there was considerable debate between various Protestant denominations on whether the Descent event should be understood metaphorically or literally. See David V. N. Bagchi, “Luther versus Luther? The Problem of Christ’s Descent into Hell in the Long Sixteenth Century,” *Perichoresis: The Theological Journal of Emanuel University of Oradea* 6, no. 2 (2008):175–200.

Church's teaching on the subject has been unambiguous. It understands the event literally and has always taught that, after his death on the Cross, Christ descended triumphantly and in glory to Hades to holy souls who awaited him there in faith.<sup>4</sup>

While this teaching had generally been accepted as normative by Catholics until the middle of the twentieth century, it has since been called into question by certain Catholic theologians, most notably by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who has offered his own interpretation of the event. Although formulated more than forty years ago, Balthasar's unique interpretation has, of late, experienced a resurgence of interest among contemporary theologians because of recent publications that have criticized severely the theological orthodoxy of Balthasar's thesis.<sup>5</sup> The ensuing spirited debate has seen both opponents and advocates of Balthasar offer starkly contrasting views on whether or not Balthasar's interpretation constitutes a legitimate development of the traditional Catholic doctrine.<sup>6</sup>

Conscious of this lack of agreement, the present study shall attempt to contribute to this debate and, if possible, try to bring further clarity to it. This shall be undertaken by an assessment of some of the various arguments for and against the orthodoxy of Balthasar's doctrine in light of Catholic Church teaching on relevant theological issues. These will include the Church's understanding of the possibility of meritorious suffering after death, the condition of hell (also known as Hades or Sheol), man's particular judgment at the moment

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<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1997; hereafter CCC), §§632–35 and 164, and *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (also known as the *Roman Catechism*), trans. John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1923), art. 5; Latin text: *Catechismus Romanus* (Naples, FL: Ex typographia Vincentii Flauto, 1795) pt. 4, ch. 6, art. 6.

<sup>5</sup> The most extensive criticism of Balthasar's Descent theology appears in Alyssa Lyra Pitstick's recent work, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> See the debate between Pitstick and Edward T. Oakes in *First Things*: "Responses to 'Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy,'" *First Things* (March 2007): 12–14; "More on Balthasar Hell, and Heresy," *First Things* (January 2007): 16–18; "Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy: An Exchange," *First Things* (December 2006): 25–29. See also David Lauber, "Review Article: Response to Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of the Descent into Hell*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2009): 195–201, and Edward T. Oakes, S.J., "Descensus and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 1 (2011): 3–24.

of death, and the possibility of solidarity with the damned and its consequences for human freedom, among other topics. We shall first consider arguments against Balthasar's doctrine before turning our attention to those who favor it. While this analysis is unlikely to resolve the current debate, it is envisaged that it will offer a useful theological judgment on whether Balthasar's theology represents a valid reinterpretation of the traditional understanding of the Descent event or a doctrinally unacceptable departure from it.

### **Balthasar's Descent doctrine and the traditional Catholic doctrine**

Although most readers will be aware of the content of Balthasar's Descent doctrine, it is helpful, for clarity's sake, to begin our discussion with a brief outline of its essential elements and to summarize how it differs from the traditional Catholic teaching.

The traditional Catholic doctrine teaches that Christ descended gloriously and in power, not to suffer, but to free the "just" from their captivity and to impart to them the fruit of his Passion, which comprises the beatific vision. By means of his descent, Christ destroys "him who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb 2:14). Hades, or hell, is identified as consisting of the three basic divisions: the abode of the "just" or "righteous" (the "bosom of Abraham"), purgatory, and the hell of the damned.<sup>7</sup> Who exactly constitute the "just" and the extent of those liberated are not specified.

In contrast, Balthasar sees the Descent as a continuation and intensification of Christ's Passion. In *Sheol* (*Hades* in Greek), Christ suffers passively (as a corpse) the punishment of the "second death" (the punishment of the damned) to expiate the penalty due to all of mankind's sins.<sup>8</sup> Christ thus takes the sinner's place (by substitution) and enters into solidarity with him. For Balthasar, hell/*Sheol* represents an undifferentiated abode of dead who have not, as yet, been judged definitively (Balthasar believes that the hell of the damned and purgatory do not exist before Christ's descent, but are thereby constituted). Consequently, upon Christ's descent, salvation is offered to all in *Sheol* (whether all accept it is not specified) and his liberation of captives includes both righteous and unrighteous alike.

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<sup>7</sup> *Roman Catechism*, pt. 4, ch. 6, art. 5.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of Balthasar's Descent theology, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 148–81.

We shall now examine the coherence of these essential elements of Balthasar's doctrine by comparison with established Catholic theology.

### Arguments against Balthasar's Doctrine

#### *The Possibility of Meritorious Suffering after Death*

A central tenet of Balthasar's Descent doctrine concerns the idea that it is possible for Christ to merit grace for others by his suffering *after* death. This suffering is an absolutely necessary part of Christ's work of redemption that allows him to be in solidarity with *all* of the dead and thus win for them the grace of salvation. The Church, in contrast, teaches that it is not possible to receive grace or to merit it for others after death.<sup>9</sup> Aquinas expresses this teaching in the following terms: "Now the soul united to a mortal body is in the state of meriting, while the soul separated from the body is in the state of receiving good or evil for its merits; so that after death it is either in the state of receiving its final reward, or in the state of being hindered from receiving it."<sup>10</sup> Aquinas's conviction that the opportunity to merit ceases with death leads him to argue that, while it was fitting for Christ to descend into hell to free others from suffering, it is impossible that he should have suffered there:

And regarding the soul, the consequence of sin in human beings after death is that they descend into hell, regarding both the place and the punishment. And as Christ's body was interred in the earth regarding place but not regarding the concomitant defect of dissolution, so also his soul descended

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<sup>9</sup> See CCC, §1021. Concerning merit, *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* states: "The agent who merits must fulfil two conditions: he must be in the state of pilgrimage (*status viae*) and in the state of grace (*status gratiae*). By the state of pilgrimage is to be understood our earthly life; death as a natural (although not an essentially necessary) limit, closes the time of meriting. The time of sowing is confined to this life; the reaping is reserved for the next, when no man will be able to sow either wheat or cockle. Comparing the earthly life with day and the time after death with night, Christ says: 'The night cometh, when no man can work [*operari*]' (John 9:4; cf. Ecclesiastes 11:3; Sirach 14:17)" (available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10202b.htm>).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* (hereafter, *ST*) Supplement, q. 69, a. 7, corp. All citations and quotations from *ST* are taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen: Christian Classics, 1981).

into hell regarding the place, but not to suffer punishment there (*non autem ut ibi penam subiret*). Rather, he descended into hell to free from punishment others who were kept there because of the sin of our first parent for which Christ had already made full satisfaction by suffering death. And so nothing after death remained for him to suffer, and he descended into the place of hell without any suffering of punishment (*absque omni pene passione*) in order to show himself the liberator of the living and the dead (*uiuorum et mortuorum liberator*).<sup>11</sup>

There are several interesting points to note in the foregoing passage. Firstly, unlike Balthasar, who believes that Christ had to suffer everything that sinful man was destined to suffer in the absence of redemption—the punishment of the damned, or the “second death” (Rev 20:14)<sup>12</sup>—Aquinas holds that it was unnecessary for Christ to suffer in hell because he had already made full satisfaction for mankind’s sins by his death on the Cross (elsewhere, in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas excludes the possibility of Christ’s satisfactory punishment after death, claiming that this belongs to those in a state of merit—in *statu merendi*—which is not possible for the dead, but pertains only to the living<sup>13</sup>).

Secondly, Aquinas interprets Acts 2:27 (“For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption”) to mean that, just as Christ’s body did not experience corruption in the grave, neither did his soul experience punishment in Hades. This view contrasts notably with Balthasar’s interpretation, which takes the same verse to mean simply that God the Father did not leave Christ in Hades but raised him up on the third day after he had suffered.<sup>14</sup> Given these two very different interpretations, is it possible to ascertain which one is more credible?

The principles underlying Catholic anthropology appear to suggest the answer. The Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, for example, firmly rejects any moral theory that undermines the importance of bodily actions in the life of human beings or makes them superfluous.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, trans. Richard J. Regan (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), I, chs. 235 and 194; Latin text: *Compendium theologiae*, Leonine edition, vol. 42 (Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, 1979).

<sup>12</sup> *Mysterium Paschale*, 168.

<sup>13</sup> *In III sent.* d. 22, q. 2, a. 1, q1a 1, corp.

<sup>14</sup> *Mysterium Paschale*, 153.

Describing such a theory as contradicting “the *Church’s teachings on the unity of the human person*, whose rational soul is *per se et essentialiter* the form of his body,”<sup>15</sup> it goes on to state:

The spiritual and immortal soul is the principle of unity of the human being, whereby it exists as a whole—*corpore et anima unus* . . .—as a person. These definitions not only point out that the body, which has been promised the resurrection, will also share in glory. They also remind us that reason and free will are linked with all the bodily and sense faculties. *The person, including the body, is completely entrusted to himself, and it is in the unity of body and soul that the person is the subject of his own moral acts. . . . A doctrine which dissociates the moral act from the bodily dimensions of its exercise is contrary to the teaching of Scripture and Tradition. . . . Body and soul are inseparable: in the person, in the willing agent and in the deliberate act, they stand or fall together.*<sup>16</sup>

In agreement with the principles set forth in the above text, Aquinas’s Descent theology understands the human person as a unity of body and soul. Consequently, Aquinas believes that Christ, like all men, is judged by God at the moment of death because moral acts (e.g., meritorious suffering) are no longer possible without a body. According to Aquinas, this judgment vindicates Christ’s holiness, which is demonstrated by his incorrupt body in the grave.<sup>17</sup> However, since God’s judgment involves a verdict on the *whole* person in the full integrity of their human nature (as a unity of body and soul),<sup>18</sup> Aquinas reasons that the fate of Christ’s body must reflect the fate of his soul. He naturally concludes that, if Christ’s body did not experience the effects of sin but remained incorrupt in the grave, then his soul also did not suffer the effects of sin in the form of punishment after death.

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<sup>15</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), §48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, §§48–49.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in imitation of Christ, the bodies of many well-known saints have been miraculously preserved by God in an incorrupt state as a testimony to their holiness, e.g. St. Bernadette of Lourdes and St. John Vianney.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the Blessed Virgin is assumed soul *and* body into heaven at the end of her earthly sojourn because her body shares in the “fullness of grace” that characterises her soul, and it is hence preserved from the effects of sin, from corruption or dissolution.

In contrast, Balthasar teaches that Christ's *greatest* act of redemption is performed in Sheol in the *absence* of his body, which means that Christ merits the salvation of all of mankind as a disembodied soul.<sup>19</sup> The obvious problem with this claim is that the above text of *Veritatis Splendor* insists that any doctrine that "dissociates the moral act from the bodily dimensions of its exercise is contrary to the teaching of Scripture and Tradition." But the act of meriting constitutes a moral act. Therefore, Church teaching clearly excludes the possibility that Christ merited grace without his body after death.

Furthermore, even if we assume that Balthasar's Descent doctrine is correct and that Christ had to suffer all that sinful man was destined to suffer in his stead, then Christ's body should have experienced physical dissolution in the grave (just like sinful man's) while his soul underwent the punishment of the damned in Hades. We know from Scripture, however, that Christ's flesh did not see corruption while in the grave (Acts 2:31). This means that Balthasar's theology necessitates that Christ's soul and his body must have suffered *different* fates from each other after death, meaning that his soul suffered the effects of sin (in the form of the second death) while his body did not (it remained incorrupt). This possibility again clearly contradicts the foregoing text of *Veritatis Splendor* that states that "body and soul are inseparable . . . in the person . . . they stand or fall together."

On account of these inconsistencies in Balthasar's thesis, we must conclude that Balthasar is most likely mistaken about Christ's experience in Sheol and that he did not, in fact, suffer any punishment upon his descent there. Interestingly, this is precisely what the *Roman Catechism* teaches:

All others descended, either to endure the most acute torments, or, if exempt from other pain, to be deprived of the vision of God, and to be tortured by the delay of the glory and happiness for which they yearned; Christ the Lord descended, on

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<sup>19</sup> There seems to be a theological contradiction inherent in the notion that Christ suffered the "second death" in Sheol that has not, to the best of my knowledge, been hitherto noted—namely, that the "second death" spoken of in Rev 20:14 is the punishment reserved for the wicked after the final judgment and involves torment of *both* body and soul in the lake of fire. Now, Christ does not have a body when he descends to Sheol. How can he be then said to suffer the same punishment as those who experience the "second death," as Balthasar claims?

the contrary, not to suffer, but to liberate the holy and the just from their painful captivity, and to impart to them the fruit of his Passion. His supreme dignity and power, therefore, suffered no diminution by his descent into hell.<sup>20</sup>

The *Roman Catechism*, which represents the Church's traditional and most comprehensive teaching on Christ's descent, in contrast to Balthasar's claims, clearly rules out the possibility that Christ suffered in Hades.

### *Balthasar's understanding of Sheol*

A second fundamental aspect of Balthasar's *descensus* theology is the notion that Christ experienced solidarity with the dead. This conviction is intrinsically linked to Balthasar's concept of Sheol and the condition of being dead. His view of the nature of Sheol is nuanced and seems to offer two distinct possibilities. On the one hand, Balthasar claims that Sheol represents an undifferentiated state for all the dead. Yet, on the other, he speculates that it may be divided into an upper and lower *infernium* that are separated by a *chaos magnum* (great chasm).

Citing various passages of Scripture, Balthasar initially makes the case for an undifferentiated Sheol. He argues that the Old Testament depicts Sheol simply as the abode of the unredeemed who are deprived of the vision of God (*poena damni*) and where there is "no more praise of God (Ps 6:6; 30:10; 115:17; Sir 17:27; Isa 38:18)."<sup>21</sup> It is a place where there is darkness, no joy, no knowledge of things on the earth, and no activity: "Deprived of all strength and vitality (Isa 14:10), the dead are called the *refa'im*, the powerless ones. They are as if they were not (Ps 39:14; Sir 17:28). They dwell in the country of forgetfulness (Ps 88:13)."<sup>22</sup> Based on this imagery, Balthasar argues that Sheol should not be understood as a place incorporating a "difference of destiny which distinguishes men by way of reward and penalty after death."<sup>23</sup> Admitting that such representations do occur in passages of the New Testament (in the parable of Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31 and in the address to the good thief in Luke 23:43), he suggests that the terms "Gehenna" and "Paradise" should be

<sup>20</sup> *Roman Catechism*, pt. 4, ch. 6, art. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Mysterium Paschale*, 161.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 161–62.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 161. Balthasar regards the idea of punishment and reward in the afterlife as characteristic of later Judaism, which was influenced by both Persia and Hellenism.



considered, rather, as being englobed and determined by the concept of Sheol itself.<sup>24</sup>

Balthasar acknowledges that co-operation with the grace of Christ was possible before the Incarnation and, consequently, that it was possible for the dead to be “just” and to await redemption. Nonetheless, he insists that all those who have died before Christ (“pre-Christian humanity”) fall under the same sentence due to original sin, which consists of the *poena damni*, or the deprivation of the vision of God. In fact, Balthasar states that this dialectic (that the “just” experienced the *poena damni*) “loses its bite if one naively ascribes to the pious men of the Old Testament the ‘light of hope,’” which he believes implies a “participation in the divine life” that “contradicts the *poena damni* and . . . the classical Old Testament texts on the concept of Sheol as well.”<sup>25</sup> Aquinas’s opinion that Christ had friends not only on earth but also in Hades<sup>26</sup> is described by Balthasar as a “naive, non-dialectical conception,” which he rejects for the following reason:

But Hades, seen christologically, takes on thereby a certain character of *conditionality*: the man who is already reconciled with God, who has faith, hope and charity, cannot, to be sure, theologically speaking, be reconciled except through Christ, and so, to possess this grace, he cannot really be waiting for Christ, since he already has something of the Christ-life in himself.<sup>27</sup>

In the above text, Balthasar reasons that, if we accept that the “just” in Hades possessed the theological virtues, then “we are forced into the paradoxical and self-annulling concept of a ‘provisional *poena damni*,’”<sup>28</sup> which he considers to be inconsistent with the Old Testament depiction of Sheol. Yet, he also suggests that, even if we do accept that these souls “did not experience the entire, truly merited *poena damni*” because they possessed the virtues of faith, hope and

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 165–66.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Sermon-Conferences of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. and ed. and introduced by Nicholas Ayo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Latin text: *Opuscula theologica*, vol. 2: *De re spiritali* (Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1954), 79.

<sup>27</sup> *Mysterium Paschale*, 160.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 166.

charity, then this can be due only to the fact that Christ has experienced the *poena damni* on their behalf.<sup>29</sup> It seems, then, that Balthasar imagines two possibilities for the condition of Sheol. In the first scenario, all of the dead, the “just” and “unjust” alike, share the one condition in Sheol, both suffering the full *poena damni*. In the second, the “just” do not suffer the entire *poena damni* like the “unjust,” which gives rise to two levels in Sheol.

Based on this reasoning, Balthasar regards Augustine’s definition of Hades as being “theologically strong” and describes it as follows:

Augustine’s distinguishes between a lower *infernium* (where the “rich man” lives) and a higher (where Lazarus dwells, in the bosom of Abraham). The two are separated by a chaos magnum, yet both belong equally to Hades. That Christ descended even to the lower *infernium*, in order to “deliver from their sufferings the tortured souls, that is, sinners” (*salvos facere a doloribus*) Augustine regards as certain (*non dubito*). The grace of Christ redeemed all those who tarried there.<sup>30</sup>

Balthasar reminds us that what Augustine intends here is “delivery from Sheol (Hades) and not from the Hell of the New Testament.”<sup>31</sup> Balthasar also believes that the concept of Hades should be understood as being more “spiritual than local” and favors the interpretation of the *chaos magnum* as something signifying a difference between the inner spiritual states of the “evil rich man” and Lazarus, rather than a localized division. This interpretation, Balthasar suggests “opens up the way to a psychic solidarity between the dead Christ and those who dwell in the Hades of the spirit.”<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, Balthasar rejects medieval theology, which divides Hades into four distinct levels (the Limbo of the Patriarchs, Purgatory, the Limbo of unbaptized infants, and the hell of the damned), arguing that we know nothing about the Limbo of unbaptized infants and that “before Christ (and here the term ‘before’ must be understood not in a chronological sense but in an ontological) there can be neither Hell nor Purgatory.”<sup>33</sup> This medieval scholastic schema

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 177.

that identifies part of Hades with the hell of the damned (Gehenna) and thus limits the salvific scope of Christ's descent is considered by Balthasar to be "poor theology" based on "a particular doctrine of predestination."<sup>34</sup>

In brief, then, while Balthasar seems to favor the idea of an undifferentiated Sheol that incorporates just and unjust alike (all of whom experience the *poena damni* but who have not, as yet, been judged definitively), he accepts that Hades might be speculatively divided into an upper and lower region with the "inter-relationship of the two remaining obscure."<sup>35</sup>

There are certain problems associated with both of these depictions of Sheol. The first scenario (that of an undifferentiated Sheol) assumes that all in Sheol essentially share the same condition, that both the good and the evil suffer the same fate before Christ's descent. This view is not supported by an impartial reading of the whole of Scripture, as Alyssa Pitstick has convincingly argued.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, it is contradicted by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter, CCC), which, relying upon the words of Christ, teaches:

Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, "hell"—Sheol in Hebrew or Hades in Greek—because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. . . . Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the Redeemer: which *does not mean that their lot is identical*, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into "Abraham's bosom." . . . "It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham's bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell [*Roman Catechism* 1, 6, 3]." Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly then, the fate of the righteous and the wicked in Sheol is not the same, and so Sheol cannot be "undifferentiated" as Balthasar claims. He is also incorrect to speculate that none of the dead possessed the theological virtues. The CCC plainly indicates that

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>36</sup> Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 318–22.

<sup>37</sup> CCC, §633 (emphasis added).

there were “holy souls” who awaited their savior. But it is impossible to be “holy” without the virtues of faith, hope and charity.

This leads us to the plausibility of Balthasar’s second option, which admits of some kind of division in Hades with the “inter-relationship of the two remaining obscure.” Although this division is presented in the Gospel of Luke (16:19–31) as a great chasm (*chaos magnum*) that cannot be crossed, Balthasar argues that it should be understood as signifying a difference in the inner spiritual state of the rich man and Lazarus, rather than a localized division. This interpretation, according to Balthasar, would allow Christ to be in solidarity with all those in Hades, regardless of their inner spiritual state.

The problem with this scenario (which is scripturally and doctrinally more sound than that of an undifferentiated Sheol) is that it seems to necessitate some kind of personal judgment at the moment of death, which is just what Balthasar’s doctrine seeks to deny. This is evident from the fact that Abraham explains to the rich man why he is now suffering torment in Hades and why Lazarus is being comforted. Both individuals are being enlightened as to the nature of their sins and the ensuing justice. Both are receiving the fruits of the deeds of their earthly lives according to divine judgment. If this were not the case, the rich man would not be in dialogue with Abraham and having his sins explained to him. He would simply be in a place where there is no activity, no joy, and “no knowledge of what happens on earth,” which is how Balthasar portrays an undifferentiated Sheol.<sup>38</sup> A differentiated Sheol, however, by its very nature, implies some kind of personal judgment, which poses serious problems for the plausibility of Balthasar’s Descent theology, as we shall presently discuss.

### *Particular judgment at the moment of death*

Inherent in Balthasar’s Descent doctrine is the hope that all men may be saved. However, this hope relies upon the assumption that, when Christ descended to Hades, there were none there who were already eternally damned. To admit that there were some who were already damned before Christ’s descent would naturally frustrate this hope. As we have seen, Balthasar therefore rejects any theology that identifies part of Hades with hell properly so-called (the hell of the damned), even though he is fully aware that this is precisely what many of the Fathers of the Church and great medieval theologians

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<sup>38</sup> *Mysterium Paschale*, 161.

taught.<sup>39</sup> Balthasar objects to the assumption that there were some in Sheol who were beyond salvation (damned) and calls it “poor theology.” The CCC, however, (which Pope John Paul II describes as “a sure norm for teaching the faith”),<sup>40</sup> does not support Balthasar’s opinion. It states:

Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ [2 Tim 1:9–10]. The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul—a destiny which can be different for some and for others.<sup>41</sup>

Against Balthasar’s thesis, the CCC (which was drafted after Balthasar’s death) certainly seems to affirm the theology of the “great Scholastics,” which taught that a person’s final destiny is definitively decided at death and can be different depending on the individual in question, thereby implying a variety of destinations in Hades. In response to this claim, advocates of Balthasar might argue that this personal or particular judgment at the moment of death applies to mankind only *after* Christ’s descent and resurrection (when hell and purgatory had been constituted by Christ) but that there was no such judgment beforehand.

This hypothesis, however, is clearly contradicted by the CCC’s reference to Lazarus and the rich man, whose final destinies are seen to be different. When Christ tells this parable and describes their

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<sup>39</sup> Balthasar states: “As Trinitarian event, the going to the dead is necessarily also an event of salvation. It is poor theology to limit this salvific happening in an a priori manner by affirming—in the context of a particular doctrine of predestination and the presumed identification of Hades (Gehenna) with Hell—that Christ was unable to bring any salvation to ‘Hell properly so called,’ *infernus damnatorum*. Following many of the Fathers, the great Scholastics set up just such a *prioristic* barriers” (*Mysterium Paschale*, 176).

<sup>40</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Fidei Depositum*, IV (available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_19921011\\_fidei-depositum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19921011_fidei-depositum_en.html)).

<sup>41</sup> CCC, §1021. Bracketed text appears as footnote in original.

respective destinations, he is obviously talking about the abode of the dead (Sheol) which existed before his own descent there. This is plainly seen by his reference to Abraham's bosom (Abraham's bosom ceased to exist after Christ's descent). The CCC clearly implies that these destinies are final (Lazarus is saved, the rich man is not) and, in so doing, explains the true nature of the great chasm that *cannot* be crossed.

Other references in the CCC confirm that the moment of death is the time when each individual receives from God his particular and definitive judgment that determines his destiny for eternity. For example, §1022 states that "each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven . . . through a purification . . . or immediately . . . or immediate and everlasting damnation."<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, we read that "by rejecting grace in this life, one already judges oneself, receives according to one's works, and can even condemn oneself for all eternity by rejecting the Spirit of love."<sup>43</sup>

Concerning whether there were damned individuals in Sheol before Christ's descent, the CCC states that "Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him."<sup>44</sup> Proponents of Balthasar could argue that this statement does not technically contradict his doctrine because he holds that the hell of damnation did not exist at the time of Christ's descent, and therefore no one was delivered from it, strictly speaking. However, the statement only makes sense in the context of an already existing hell of damnation. It would be absolutely superfluous, and even confusing, for the CCC to explain that Jesus did not descend to a place that did not exist. The only plausible interpretation of CCC §633 is that there were some who were damned in hell at the time of Christ's descent and that he did not save them.<sup>45</sup>

The question then arises, of course, of *how* the dead were judged by a "particular judgment that refers [their] life to Christ,"<sup>46</sup> given

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<sup>42</sup> CCC, §1022.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., §679.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., §633.

<sup>45</sup> This interpretation is clearly supported by the *Roman Catechism*, which describes the three abodes of hell as "hell, strictly so-called," "purgatory," and "the bosom of Abraham" (pt. 4, ch. 6, art. 5).

<sup>46</sup> CCC, §633.

that Christ did not yet exist. In fact, this is exactly the objection that Balthasar raises when contesting the idea of a pre-Christian hell and a pre-Christian purgatory such as conceived by many Patristic and Medieval theologians. Balthasar argues that “this whole construction must be laid to one side, since before Christ (and here the term ‘before’ must be understood not in a chronological sense but in an ontological), there can be neither Hell nor Purgatory.”<sup>47</sup> What Balthasar effectively assumes is that those who lived before Christ were not offered the grace of salvation while they lived and, therefore, cannot be judged definitively at the moment of death. Rather, this grace was offered to them after death when Christ descended into Sheol. Therefore, he believes that Christ must have offered salvation to all those in Sheol.

Here again, it is necessary to challenge Balthasar’s assumption. The doctrine of God’s universal will of salvation and the doctrine of grace itself allow for those who existed before Christ (the Old Testament calls certain individuals “friends of God”) to be granted grace in view of Christ’s redemption that was to take place. In fact, Aquinas, by making a distinction between “implicit” and “explicit” faith, claims that the grace of salvation must have been offered to *everyone* prior to the coming of Christ to fulfill the demands of divine justice. Referring to the Gentiles he remarks:

It was enough for them to have implicit faith in the Redeemer (*habere fidem de Redemptore implicate*), either as part of their belief in the faith of the law and the prophets, or as part of their belief in divine providence itself. Nevertheless, it is likely that the mystery of our redemption was revealed to many Gentiles before Christ’s coming, as is clear from the Sibylline prophecies.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Mysterium Paschale*, 177.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Truth* (hereafter, *De veritate*), trans. James V. McGlynn, S.J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), q. 14, a. 11, ad 5; Latin text: *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, Leonine ed., vol. 22/2 (Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, 1975).

For a detailed discussion of St. Thomas’s understanding of how those of non-Christian religions can be said to possess implicit faith in Christ, see Benoît-Dominique de La Soujeole, “Foi implicite et religions non chrétiennes,” *Revue Thomiste* 106 (2006): 315–34. For an analysis of certain Church Fathers’ understanding of the divinely inspired nature of the Sibylline writings, see Damian Macura, “Le prophétisme païen: existe-t-il et comment?” licentiate in theology thesis, University of Fribourg (2011), 21–32.

Whether righteous pagans were in purgatory or in Abraham's bosom when Christ descended into hell is never discussed explicitly by Aquinas. What is clear is that Aquinas proposes a much more general criterion for salvation than many previous Western theologians (for example, St. Gregory and St. Augustine) who held that only those who had explicit faith in Christ and looked forward to his coming were saved. Aquinas, on the other hand, maintains that, to be saved, one "is bound explicitly to believe that God exists and exercises providence over human affairs" (with reference to Heb. 11:6).<sup>49</sup> He clarifies the implications of this requirement by taking the example of a savage raised in the wild:

Granted that everyone is bound to believe something explicitly, no untenable conclusion follows even if someone is brought up in the forest or among wild beasts. For it pertains to divine providence to furnish everyone with what is necessary for salvation, provided that on his part there is no hindrance. Thus, if someone so brought up followed the direction of natural reason in seeking good and avoiding evil, we must most certainly hold that God would either reveal to him through internal inspiration what is necessary to be believed (*ea quae sunt necessaria ad credendum*), or would send some preacher of the faith to him as he sent Peter to Cornelius (Acts 10:20).<sup>50</sup>

Aquinas, though always insisting on the necessity of faith, claims that, if we follow our natural reason and do our best to lead good lives, God's providence will provide whatever is necessary for salvation. Thomas Joseph White, a Dominican friar, notes that this solution is "universalist through and through" and avoids the weaknesses of Balthasar's theory, which includes "the notion that . . . persons prior to Christ were not offered the grace of salvation (and therefore could seemingly only be offered it in the hell of the damned)" and "the idea that this historical offer of grace could not be refused definitively."<sup>51</sup>

Contrary to what Balthasar maintains, therefore, we must conclude that it was possible for those who lived before Christ to be

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<sup>49</sup> *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 11, corp.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 14, a. 11, ad 1 (translation slightly modified).

<sup>51</sup> Thomas J. White, "On the Universal Possibility of Salvation," *Pro Ecclesia* 17, no. 3 (2008): 269–80, at 278.



offered grace *through faith in the Mediator* (that is to say, in virtue of Christ's Incarnation and death), and that it was possible for them to freely and culpably reject this grace. Consequently, it was possible for them to be judged definitively at the moment of death by a particular judgment that referred their life to Christ (even if Christ had not yet come) and to be condemned eternally to hell. The nature of such a judgment is clearly explained in Matthew 25:31–46. In this parable we see that explicit knowledge of the person of Christ during one's life is not required to be saved, but that one is judged according to the love with which one has treated others. The fact that those in the parable do not understand the relationship between Christ and their neighbor does not change the nature of their actions, diminish their culpability, or excuse them from being judged.<sup>52</sup> If sanctifying grace was available to those who lived before Christ, then judgment was its logical consequence. The CCC confirms that this judgment takes place at the moment of death and is definitive in nature.

*Balthasar's notion of Christ's solidarity with the damned*

The final aspect of Balthasar's Descent theology that we shall consider is his belief that it was possible for Christ to be in some way in solidarity with the damned in Sheol. This represents a cornerstone of Balthasar's doctrine upon which his hope for universal salvation depends. Balthasar's understanding of how Christ enters into solidarity with the damned is perhaps best illustrated by the following passage:

But there is, on Holy Saturday, the descent of the dead Jesus into hell: that is (speaking very simplistically), his solidarity in nontime with those who have been lost to God. For these people, their choice is definitive, the choice whereby they have chosen their "I" instead of God's selfless love. Into this definitiveness (of death) the Son descends; but he is no longer *acting* in any way but from the Cross is instead robbing every power and initiative by being the Purely Available One, the Obedient One. . . . He is dead with the dead (but out of a final love). But this is precisely how he disturbs the absolute loneliness that the sinner strives for: the sinner who wants to be "damned" by

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<sup>52</sup> Matthew 25:44–45: "Then it will be their turn to ask, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or lacking clothes, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help?' Then he will answer, 'In truth I tell you, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.'"

God now rediscovers God in the absolute impotence of love. For now God has placed himself in solidarity with those who have damned themselves, entering into nontime in a way we could never anticipate.<sup>53</sup>

There are several theological difficulties with the above text that illustrate Balthasar's understanding of Christ's solidarity with the "damned." The first of these relates to the possibility of conversion after death and the possibility of damnation. From what we have said above, it is evident that the Church teaches that all human beings are judged at the moment of death (whether they lived before or after Christ). This judgment excludes the possibility of conversion after death because it is definitive in nature. In contrast, Balthasar's notion of solidarity with the "damned," as outlined in the above text, allows for such a possibility. It is clear that, although the "damned" consider themselves to be damned because, in their own estimation, they have definitively rejected God, according to Balthasar, they are not actually damned because they can still be converted in Sheol after death (in "nontime") on account of Christ's vicarious suffering.

Even if we do accept this theologically problematic possibility that God gives sinners in Sheol a chance to convert, we are then still left with the question of how and when they are judged definitively and whether or not it is possible for them to be damned. According to Balthasar, when Christ descends to hell, he suffers the punishment of the damned (the "second death") and thereby wins the grace of conversion for *all* sinners, even those who are seemingly damned. This gift of grace allows sinners who are in Sheol to see themselves as God sees them (they have full knowledge of their sins) and makes them perfectly free to reject or accept God's love (although he doesn't discuss it explicitly, Balthasar presumably believes that those who live after Christ's resurrection are given full knowledge of their sins at the moment of death and are then free to accept or reject God's mercy).

One would expect that, if the sinner rejects God's mercy at this point, then eternal damnation would result. At first glance, Balthasar's theology appears to agree with this assumption for he admits that damnation occurs if, having received this gift of grace, the sinner continues to "resist the triune work of atonement with full conscious-

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<sup>53</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, "On Vicarious Representation," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, *Spirit and Institution*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995): 415–22, at 422.

ness and realization.”<sup>54</sup> However, Pitstick has provided a comprehensive, convincing argument as to why Balthasar’s theology does not, in fact, allow for eternal damnation but inevitably implies universal salvation.<sup>55</sup> The details of this argument will not be reiterated here, but it is basically dependent upon Balthasar’s conviction that, because Christ has suffered the “second death” in man’s place, he has already “assumed man’s *eschatological* ‘no.’”<sup>56</sup> This effectively means that man’s definitive “no” has already been atoned for and is, consequently, a sin that is always pardonable. In other words, according to Balthasar, man can make a fully conscious decision after death (hence the term “eschatological”) to reject God’s love with full knowledge of his own culpability and of God’s redemption and still not necessarily be eternally damned. To be eternally damned, according to Balthasar, the sinner must *persist*<sup>57</sup> in this attitude of resistance to God, which Balthasar believes is possible, at least in principle, because he recognizes that “Scripture prohibits us from saying that this deliberate No is impossible.”<sup>58</sup>

Pitstick has persuasively argued, however, that this persistence in sin does not appear to be possible in light of Balthasar’s other remarks that “God’s love is stronger than any resistance to accepting it” and that “we cannot predict which will go on longer: God’s ‘yes’ or men’s ‘no.’”<sup>59</sup> She correctly observes that “the metaphor of time ‘loads the question’: it invites an expectation that God’s yes will last ‘longer’ than man’s no, because unlike man, God is both eternal and omnipotent.”<sup>60</sup> She concludes that, although Balthasar himself does not explicitly state that all men will ultimately be saved, his Descent theology implies it.

Furthermore, Balthasar’s suggestion that there is no sin of man that cannot be pardoned is contrary to Catholic theology, which clearly

<sup>54</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *The Action* (hereafter, *Theo-Drama IV*), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 350.

<sup>55</sup> Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 264–72.

<sup>56</sup> Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 172 (emphasis added).

<sup>57</sup> Balthasar states that “if created freedom chooses itself as the absolute good, it involves itself in a contradiction that will devour it. . . . This contradiction if persisted in, is hell”; see *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act* (hereafter, *Theo-Drama V*), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 341.

<sup>58</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, 350.

<sup>59</sup> Balthasar, “The Descent into Hell,” *Chicago Studies* 23 (1984): 223–36, at 234.

<sup>60</sup> Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 272.

recognizes the possibility of the unforgivable sin of final impenitence at the moment of death.<sup>61</sup> Concerning the finality of one's decision at death, Aquinas states: "for, so long as men live here below, they can be converted to faith and charity, because in this life men are not confirmed either in good or in evil, as they are after quitting this life."<sup>62</sup> This is to say that, at death, man makes a definitive decision either to accept God's particular judgment of his life and to repent of his sins or to obstinately persist in them through final impenitence. This decision is, by nature, final. There is no question of change in eternity, contrary to what Balthasar proposes.<sup>63</sup> The decision that man makes when he is judged by God at the end of his life represents an act of the will that is taken with "full knowledge and complete consent"<sup>64</sup> and is, therefore, immovable and irrevocable.<sup>65</sup>

Once again we see the inconsistency of Balthasar's theology with Catholic doctrine. While he tries to maintain that damnation is a possibility for sinners who refuse God's grace, he undermines this possibility by removing the very means by which this damnation occurs—namely, committing an unforgivable sin (a sin against the

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<sup>61</sup> "'Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin [Mk. 3:29]. There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. . . . Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss" (CCC, §1864, bracketed text is footnote in original).

<sup>62</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, a. 6, ad 3; Latin text: Thomas de Aquino, *Summa Theologiae*, Tomus 4: *Tertia Pars*, ed. Cura et studio Instituti Medievalium Ottaviensis, revised ed. (Ottawa, ON: Collège Dominicain d'Ottawa, 1953).

<sup>63</sup> Balthasar's phrasing is: "We cannot predict which will go on longer: God's 'yes' or men's 'no'" ("Descent into Hell," 234), treats eternity as an infinite duration of time rather than its traditional conception as an unchanging state which is "the simultaneously-whole and perfect possession of interminable life." See also *ST* I, q. 10, a. 1.

<sup>64</sup> CCC, §1859.

<sup>65</sup> *ST*, supplement, q. 98, a. 1, sc: "An obstinate will can never be inclined except to evil. Now men who are damned will be obstinate even as the demons. Further, as the will of the damned is in relation to evil, so is the will of the blessed in regard to good. But the blessed never have an evil will. Neither therefore have the damned any good will." *ST* I, q. 64, a. 2, corp., states: "We must seek for the cause of this obstinacy, not in the gravity of the sin, but in the condition of their nature or state. For as Damascene says (*De Fide Orth.* II, 4), 'death is to men, what the fall is to the angels.' Now it is clear that all the mortal sins of men, grave or less grave, are pardonable before death; whereas after death they are without remission and endure forever."

Holy Spirit). By insisting that Christ has atoned for *all* of man's sins (hence an unforgivable sin is no longer possible) and by positing continual persistence in sin as the only means of damnation, Balthasar proposes a theology of damnation that clearly departs from traditional Catholic teaching.

The fact that Balthasar's notion of solidarity with the damned seems to preclude a definitive "no" on man's part and, consequently, his definitive damnation also calls into question the genuineness of human freedom.<sup>66</sup> Balthasar responds to this potential problem by stating that "man's verdict on himself in his relation to God cannot be the last act of the Judgment. . . . While infinite freedom will respect the decisions of finite freedom, it will not allow itself to be compelled, or restricted in its own freedom, by the latter."<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere, Balthasar states that "the necessity whereby God has to reject the man who rejects his love appears to signal a defeat for God."<sup>68</sup> This is, however, clearly an unsatisfactory construal of human freedom. By opposing human freedom and divine freedom in such a way, Balthasar effectively limits human freedom in its relation to God and implicitly suggests that, were man to choose damnation, God's will would be somehow frustrated, presumably given God's desire that all men be saved (1 Tim 2:4).

The teaching of the CCC, in contrast, recognizes that man *does* have the final say in whether he is damned or not, precisely because God's liberality allows man the freedom to accept or reject his love:

God, while desiring "all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9), nevertheless has created the human person to be free and responsible; and he respects our decisions. Therefore, it is the human person who freely excludes himself from communion with God if at the moment of death he persists in mortal sin and refuses the merciful love of God.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Pitstick argues that, according to Balthasar's theology, definitive rejection of God by man *after* death seems impossible because the opportunity for conversion is always available to him (*Light in Darkness*, 268–69).

<sup>67</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 295.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, V:193.

<sup>69</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), §213 (available also at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium\\_ccc/documents/archive\\_2005\\_compendium-ccc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium_ccc/documents/archive_2005_compendium-ccc_en.html)).

God's will is not frustrated by man's misuse of freedom, even though he may be gravely saddened by it. On the contrary, man's freedom is a gift that divine freedom affords him in accordance with divine love. Moreover, the above text outlining the CCC's understanding of human freedom seems to exclude the very possibility of solidarity with the "damned," for it clearly teaches that God does not remain in solidarity with an individual who does not desire this communion.

Aquinas's theology, upon which Church teaching on the Descent is founded, also appears to rule out such solidarity. Speaking of the possibility of deliverance from damnation, he states that "punishment cannot be taken away so long as one remains culpable. But the damned are obstinate in malice, like the demons. It is impossible, therefore, that they can be delivered from their sin, not because of any insufficiency on the part of the liberator [Christ] but because of their personal disposition."<sup>70</sup> Even if Christ were to suffer the "second death" for sinners, Aquinas's theology makes it abundantly clear that such suffering would be pointless because it is not possible for the damned to be united to Christ in any way that could prove salutary for them.<sup>71</sup> For Aquinas, "light" and "darkness," or love and hatred, are by nature incompatible. The solidarity of Christ with the damned of which Balthasar speaks is impossible for Thomas, not due to a lack of mercy or compassion on God's part, but because of the radicalness of the divine gift of human freedom that allows man to choose his final destiny even if this choice should entail eternal separation from God. In light of such obvious inconsistencies between Balthasar's Descent thesis and traditional Catholic teaching, it seems like an appropriate point in our analysis to consider the various arguments in favor of Balthasar's interpretation to determine if such differences can

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<sup>70</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi episcopi Parisiensis* (hereafter, *Sentences*), vol. 3, ed. M. F. Moos (Paris: Lethielleux, 1933), III, dist. 22, q. 2, a. 2, quaestiuncula 2, corp.: "[...] poena non potest tolli manente culpa. Illi autem qui sunt damnati in inferno, sunt obstinati in malitia, sicut daemones; et ideo de poena illi liberari non potuerunt. Et hoc non fuit ex insufficientia liberantis, sed ex indispositione ipsorum."

<sup>71</sup> "Christ's Passion works its effect in them to whom it is applied, through faith and charity and the sacraments of faith. And, consequently, the lost in hell cannot avail themselves of its effects, since they are not united to Christ in the aforesaid manner" (*ST* III, q. 49, a. 3). See also *ST* III, q. 52, a. 2, sc: "Now there is no 'fellowship of light with darkness, according to 2 Corinthians 6:14. Therefore Christ, who is 'the light,' did not descend into the hell of the lost."

be reasonably accounted for.

### Arguments in Favor of Balthasar's Doctrine

There are many theologians who view Balthasar's theology favorably, but few who have attempted to defend his Descent doctrine specifically. Most who have defended it have done so in response to Pitstick's criticism in her doctoral thesis, *Light in Darkness*. The principal advocate of Balthasar's doctrine, in this respect, is the late Edward T. Oakes, S.J., who makes his most comprehensive case for Balthasar in an article entitled: "*Descensus* and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders."<sup>72</sup> Here, Oakes argues for the orthodoxy of Balthasar's doctrine as a legitimate development of traditional doctrine on the basis of several observations.

Firstly, Oakes maintains, Balthasar's thesis is consistent with what certain passages of Scripture tell us about the Descent into hell, atonement and representation, and Christ's power to judge. For example, Oakes claims that passages such as 1 Peter 3:18–19 and 4:5–6 understand the Descent "as in some sense a *saving* descent."<sup>73</sup> He cites Galatians 3:13 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 as evidence that "Christ effects salvation by assuming the punishment that was due to us (Gal 3:13) and by taking our place as the true sinner in the eyes of God (2 Cor 5:21)."<sup>74</sup> He claims that 1 John 2:1–3 implies that there is no sin of humanity that is left un-atoned for, while he takes Revelation 1:18 to mean that, should anyone end up in hell after Christ's descent there, "it would only be because of Christ's personal judgment."<sup>75</sup> The theological significance of each of the above scriptural references gives credibility to Balthasar's doctrine, according to Oakes.

Secondly, Oakes argues that many of the Church Fathers understood Christ's descent as entailing much more than the release of merely the "just" in "Abraham's bosom." Oakes makes clear, for example, that St. Augustine believed that Christ descended to hell to release those who experienced its "sorrows" and that it is unsure whether he saved all he found there or only those who were

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<sup>72</sup> See Oakes, S.J., "*Descensus* and Development. Oakes has also written on the subject in "The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 2 (2007): 184–99, and most recently in "Pope Benedict XVI on Christ's Descent into Hell," *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 1 (2013): 231–52.

<sup>73</sup> Oakes, "*Descensus* and Development," 9.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

worthy.<sup>76</sup> Oakes holds that other prominent figures such as Cyril of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa also understood the soteriological range of the Descent in a much broader sense than freeing only those confined in the Limbo of the Fathers.<sup>77</sup> Oakes admits, however, that this does not necessarily mean that they considered Christ's descent to be expiatory.

Thirdly, Oakes states that, after the Middle Ages, there were many mystics who began to tell of their own spiritual experiences of hell, such as St. John of the Cross, Blessed Angela of Foligno, St. Rose of Lima and, in more recent times, St. Therese of Lisieux. All of these, he argues, bear further testimony to the possibility that Christ suffered the pains of hell.

Finally, Oakes makes an appeal to the work of some contemporary theologians that he believes vindicates Balthasar's Descent theology. The most notable of these figures is Joseph Ratzinger, whose career, according to Oakes, "shows a remarkable consistency when he comes to discuss the connection between Christ's vicarious, atoning suffering and his descent into hell."<sup>78</sup> Primarily on the basis of Ratzinger's texts on Christ's suffering, Oakes concludes that Balthasar's Descent theory represents a valid development of Catholic tradition.<sup>79</sup>

Another theologian who contests the objectivity of Pitstick's critique of Balthasar's theology is David Lauber, a member of the Evangelical Covenant Church.<sup>80</sup> While acknowledging the value of Pitstick's work, he accuses her of disallowing "any charitable reading and critical appropriation of Balthasar's creative and, at times, sublime theology."<sup>81</sup> Unlike Pitstick, Lauber sees the substitutionary aspect of Balthasar's doctrine as being thoroughly scriptural and as taking seriously "the extent to which God is for us and the length to which God has gone to save sinners and to reconcile his enemies to himself."<sup>82</sup> Lauber advocates a suffering Descent and defends Balthasar's contention that Christ must experience not only death on the cross but also

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 10, citing a letter from Augustine found in *Saint Augustine: Letters*, vol. 3. (Letters 131–64), trans. Sr. Wilfrid Parsons (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 386.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>79</sup> A detailed discussion of the similarities between Balthasar's and Ratzinger's Descent theology may be found in Oakes, "Pope Benedict XVI on Christ's Descent into Hell."

<sup>80</sup> David Lauber, "Response to Alyssa Lyra Pitstick."

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 196.



the “second death” in hell. Lauber believes that “Jesus could taste the full reality of death only if he experienced death in God-abandonment, displayed both in the cry of dereliction on Good Friday and in being ‘apart from God’ in the descent into hell of Holy Saturday.”<sup>83</sup> He also maintains that, for Christ’s death to be properly substitutionary, Christ must experience, in solidarity with sinners, their lostness and their God-forsakenness in the underworld.<sup>84</sup>

In summary, the arguments of those who defend Balthasar have not, to date, focused on the specific content of his Descent doctrine, but have tended instead to make a general case for its orthodoxy based on certain claims. These are: (1) that the doctrine has its basis in Scripture; (2) that it is consistent with the mystical experiences and writings of saints and of theologians on the subject of the Descent; (3) that it best describes the substitutionary nature of Christ’s sacrifice in the absence of which Christ’s redemption would be somehow deficient; and (4) that it most aptly accounts for the Descent as a saving event of universal significance. We shall now examine the validity of each of these assertions.

#### *A Doctrine Based on Scripture*

Some of the passages of Scripture which are principally cited in support of Balthasar’s Descent doctrine are 1 Peter 3:18–19 and 4:5–6, Galatians 3:13, and 2 Corinthians 5:21, as we have already noted. Yet, these passages can be interpreted in many different ways and need not necessarily be understood as affirming Balthasar’s doctrine. For example, 2 Corinthians 5:21 (“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”) does not necessarily mean that Jesus was mysteriously conformed to sin in Sheol, as Balthasar and his advocates maintain. It could equally well refer to Christ’s experience of mankind’s sins during his Passion, as described, for example, by Cardinal Newman.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, if some

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 197–98.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Cardinal John Henry Newman describes Christ’s agony in the garden as follows: “O tormented heart, it was love, and sorrow, and fear, which broke Thee. It was the sight of human sin, it was the sense of it, the feeling of it laid on Thee; it was zeal for the glory of God, horror at seeing sin so near Thee, a sickening, stifling feeling at its pollution, the deep shame and disgust and abhorrence and revolt which it inspired, keen pity for the souls whom it has drawn headlong into hell—all these feelings together Thou didst allow to rush upon Thee. Thou didst submit Thyself to their powers, and they were Thy death. That strong heart, that all-noble, all-generous, all-tender, all-pure heart

Scriptural passages seem to support Balthasar's doctrine, there are also many passages that seem to contradict its fundamental tenets. These are generally not mentioned by Balthasar or his advocates, or if they are, they are given an interpretation that is often counter-intuitive.

For example, Christ's own words on the Cross, "*Consummatum est*"—"It is consummated" (John 19:30)—seem to strongly suggest that his work is definitively finished, that the mystical marriage between Christ and his Church has been consummated and mankind has thus been reconciled to God. Balthasar maintains, however, that the work of redemption is only "fundamentally finished" on the Cross and that Christ's "preaching" in the realm of the dead "should be conceived as the efficacious outworking in the world beyond of what was accomplished in the temporality of history."<sup>86</sup> This may seem a plausible claim if Christ's preaching consists of the bestowal of the fruits of the redemption on those who have already died, as the traditional Descent doctrine teaches, but it is very difficult to see how Christ's work can be "fundamentally finished" if he has still to suffer the "second death" in hell, a suffering that far exceeds in intensity his torment on the Cross.

Similarly, we might ask how we can reconcile Christ's words on the Cross to the thief—"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43)—and to his Father—"Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit" (Luke 23:46) with Balthasar's doctrine. Surely the most obvious meaning of these words is that Christ knows he is about to die and enter into the presence of his Father ("paradise") and is reassuring the thief that he will accompany him.<sup>87</sup> They certainly do not suggest that Christ is about to experience the depths of "God-forsakenness" in hell immediately after his death.

Given the fact that quotations that purportedly support Balthasar's doctrine can and have been interpreted in many ways other than those offered by advocates of Balthasar's doctrine and that there are

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was slain by sin." John Henry Newman: *Meditations and Devotions*, ed. Ian Ker (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2010), 27.

<sup>86</sup> Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 151.

<sup>87</sup> The validity of this interpretation is affirmed by Pope John Paul II who states: "If death implies the separation of the soul from the body, it follows that in Christ's case also there was, on the one hand, the body in the state of a corpse, and on the other, the heavenly glorification of his soul from the very *moment* of his death." Pope John Paul II, "He Descended into Hell," General Audience of January 11, 1989, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, January 16, 1989, 7 (emphasis added).

many examples of scriptural quotations that do not support Balthasar's interpretation of the Descent,<sup>88</sup> it seems reasonable to conclude that Balthasar's doctrine does not have any particular claim to being a faithful expression of biblical accounts of the Descent event.

### *A Doctrine Consistent with Tradition*

A second argument that defenders of Balthasar's doctrine put forward is that it represents a legitimate development of an existing tradition. This tradition concerns itself with the subject of Christ's infernal sufferings and consists of descriptions of the mystical experiences of certain saints and the writings of various theologians, as mentioned above. The problem, however, with this type of general appeal to a tradition that deals broadly with the same subject as Balthasar's Descent doctrine (Christ suffering the pains of hell for our salvation) is that it fails to address the question of *when* Christ suffered these torments. From the Gospels we know without doubt that Christ suffered "God-forsakenness" on the Cross and spiritual desolation in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>89</sup> We know from the personal testimony of certain saints that many of them have also experienced the feeling of abandonment by God. In fact, this experience has been described in detail by St. John of the Cross, who famously called it "the dark night of the soul." While it seems reasonable, then, to interpret the sufferings of these saints as a participation in the sufferings of Christ, they do not necessarily imply that Christ suffered in Sheol. Indeed, these sufferings could quite equally, and maybe even more plausibly, be viewed as a mystical sharing in Christ's Passion.

The same is true of the writings of theologians on the subject. While many have speculated on the nature of Christ's suffering in terms of the pains of hell (e.g., Calvin and Barth), very few have maintained explicitly that Christ suffered on Holy Saturday. Even Joseph Ratzinger (a contemporary and theological ally of von Balthasar), whose reflections on Christ's suffering in the context of his Passion and Descent into hell can be interpreted as implicitly offering support to Balthasar's theology, has never stated explicitly that Christ suffered the "second death" in Sheol on Holy Saturday. Even if Ratzinger unequivocally stated this in his writings, it does

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<sup>88</sup> Pitstick gives a comprehensive list of such quotations from both the Old and New Testaments (*Light in Darkness*, 56–59).

<sup>89</sup> On the Cross, Christ says, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" (Matt 27:46), and in the Garden of Gethsemane he says, "My soul is sorrowful, even unto death" (Matt 26:38).

not represent Church teaching, but only the speculations of an intellectually exceptional theologian. While advocates of Balthasar point to a particular intellectual and mystical tradition within the Church in support of his Descent doctrine, then, one can equally argue that this tradition does no more than affirm what the Gospels already tell us about Christ's suffering during his Passion.

### *The Necessity of Christ's Suffering in Hell*

A further claim that those who attempt to defend Balthasar's theology make is that an expiatory Holy Saturday was necessary in order for Christ to be fully in solidarity with sinners and for the redemption to be properly substitutionary. This aspect of Balthasar's thesis undoubtedly lends a certain attractiveness to it that the traditional doctrine appears to lack (a God who, out of love, goes to the very depths of hell for the salvation of sinners admittedly seems more merciful than a God who does not). It also seems to provide more hope for universal salvation than the traditional doctrine because it appears to offer a chance for conversion after death. Against these arguments for Balthasar's doctrine, we must first respond that Christ loves sinners infinitely, so there can be no question of him not doing all that was necessary to save them. If Christ did not suffer the pains of hell, as the traditional doctrine supposes, it is because he was constrained by love to allow man to freely choose his own destiny, even if this could mean damnation. God unconditionally respects human freedom. This is why the substitutionary aspect of Christ's death is in no way lacking. The "second death" results from man's final refusal of God. There can be no solidarity with man after this refusal without disrespecting his freedom, as we have previously argued.

In addition, Balthasar's doctrine seems to suggest that Christ's love can be measured by how much he suffered. If Christ's love "reaches all the way into hell," then it supposedly reveals a more compassionate and merciful God than traditionally imagined.<sup>90</sup> Again, we must

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<sup>90</sup> Commenting on Balthasar's Descent doctrine, David Schindler remarks that "Balthasar's theology of Christ's descent presupposes an understanding of creaturely being in terms of a love centered in Christ as the revelation of the Trinitarian God. And it is in that context that he portrays Christ's redeeming love as a suffering solidarity with sinners that reaches all the way into hell"; see "Modernity and the Nature of Distinction—Balthasar's Ontology of Generosity," in *How Balthasar Changed My Mind: Fifteen Scholars Reflect on the Meaning of Balthasar for Their Own Work*, ed. Rodney A. Howsare and Larry S. Chapp (New York: Crossroad, 2008), 224–58, at 255.

remind ourselves that Christ's love for man is infinite and that love can never be expressed adequately in terms of suffering. Suffering alone is not meritorious and does not save. It must be united to love to be redemptive, "for satisfaction would not be efficacious unless it proceeded from charity (*nisi ex caritate procederet*)."<sup>91</sup> Satisfaction is a mode of expression of that love and not an accurate measure of it. Taken "materially" (so to speak), Christ's physical and spiritual sufferings on earth were obviously not infinite, yet they were greater than the suffering of any other individual who has ever existed<sup>92</sup> and are perfectly sufficient to atone for all the punishments that man's sins have merited.<sup>93</sup> Nor was it necessary to descend into Sheol to suffer all the sins of mankind, as Balthasar implies.<sup>94</sup> The Church believes that Christ had foreknowledge of all the sins of humanity during his Passion (a fact that Balthasar denies)<sup>95</sup> and that this "bearing of our sins" (1 Pet 2:24) constituted his greatest suffering that made his soul sorrowful unto death.<sup>96</sup> Suffering the "second death" was unnecessary because it could bear no fruit for the damned who had deliberately chosen to be beyond redemption. For those who are in danger of being damned, Christ's suffering on earth, united to his love, has merited superabundant grace for their salvation. They remain free, however, to accept or to reject this grace.

### *The Descent as a saving event of universal significance*

Finally, advocates of Balthasar often accuse the traditional doctrine of being overly restrictive concerning who was released from Sheol (only

<sup>91</sup> ST III, q. 14, a. 1, ad 1.

<sup>92</sup> See ST III, q. 46, a. 6, corp.

<sup>93</sup> See ST III, q. 49, a. 3, corp. See also ST III, q. 48, a. 2, ad 3: "The dignity of Christ's flesh is not to be estimated solely from the nature of flesh, but also from the Person assuming it, namely, inasmuch as it was God's flesh, the result of which was that it was of infinite worth [*dignitatem infinitam*]."

<sup>94</sup> "The condition of timelessness undergone by the Son on the Cross . . . must have sufficient 'space' for the (infernally) experience of sinners abandoned by God, in two aspects: the intensity of the Son's forsakenness on the Cross and its worldwide extension" (Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 308).

<sup>95</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 143. See Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 158–66, for detailed discussion.

<sup>96</sup> Pope Pius XI, *Miserentissimus Redemptor* (1928), §13: "because of our sins . . . which were as yet in the future, but were foreseen, the soul of Christ became sorrowful unto death" (available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_08051928\\_miserentissimus-redemptor\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_08051928_miserentissimus-redemptor_en.html)).

holy souls who awaited their savior) and, consequently, of being limited in its salvific value.<sup>97</sup> In response to this charge, however, we need only invoke Aquinas's "universalist" concept of "implicit faith," which, as White reminds us, offers good reason to believe that all who lived before Christ (pagans and Jews) were offered the grace of salvation and so all could potentially belong to the number of the just in Abraham's bosom.<sup>98</sup> We cannot of course determine the proportion of those who lived before Christ that accepted this grace, but we can certainly hope that it consisted of a very large number of persons (in consonance with the *pro multis* of the liturgy).

While many of these individuals may have had to spend time in purgatory, there is also reason to hope that most of these "who were such as those who are now in purgatory"<sup>99</sup> would have been sufficiently purified to be granted liberation from all punishment upon Christ's descent. It is plausible, I believe, to suggest that even the souls who were not sufficiently purified *could* have had their punishment remitted by an act of Christ's mercy.<sup>100</sup> The liberation of souls from purgatory upon Christ's descent would provide an alternative and perhaps more satisfactory explanation to Augustine's and Aquinas's query regarding how to interpret the words of St. Peter in Acts 2:24<sup>101</sup> and, in so doing, respond adequately to advocates of Balthasar who claim that Augustine's reference to the release of captives "entangled"

<sup>97</sup> Oakes, "Descensus and Development," 10.

<sup>98</sup> White, "On the Universal Possibility of Salvation," 278.

<sup>99</sup> This is the proper expression used by Aquinas in *ST* III, q. 52, a. 8, corp.: "illi qui fuerunt tales quales nunc sunt qui in Purgatorio detinentur."

<sup>100</sup> Although Aquinas thinks that the souls in Sheol were not, by necessity, liberated from purgatory by Christ's descent (*ST* III, q. 52, a. 8, ad 2), he admits that some may have been depending on their personal disposition (*ST* III, q. 52, a. 8, ad 1). Theologically, there are no obstacles for being released from purgatory other than divine justice. Yet, Christ can be merciful to whomsoever he wills, as his promise to the good thief (Luke 23:42–43) and the parable of the worker's wages (Matt 20:1–16) prove. In addition, there are saints, for example, Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich, whose writings (based on her mystical experiences of Christ's descent into hell) suggest that Christ did indeed liberate many souls from purgatory; see "A Detached Account of the Descent into Hell," ch. 59 in *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1904), 305–10. Furthermore, in his commentary on *ST* III, q. 52, a. 8 (Leonine edition, *Opera omnia*, 11:502), Cajetan states that "it can be rationally said that Christ, by descending into hell . . . freed many who were in purgatory, and who would not have been freed so quickly, by a special grace."

<sup>101</sup> See *ST* III, q. 52, a. 2, ad 2.

in the “sorrows” of hell somehow supports Balthasar’s thesis.<sup>102</sup>

Even if there were certain people who were not liberated from such punishment, we can still conjecture that Christ’s descent into Hades involved the liberation of a vast number of souls and was utterly universal in its significance. Unlike Balthasar’s doctrine, however, this thesis is completely orthodox and does not contradict the teaching of the CCC. It also respects human liberty and admits the possibility of damnation for those who lived before Christ while still allowing us to hope that all may have been saved.

### Conclusion

The current investigation set out to determine the theological orthodoxy of Balthasar’s Descent doctrine by examining the compatibility of its essential elements with established Catholic teaching on particular subjects of relevance.

The first of these concerned Balthasar’s belief that Christ’s soul suffered after death and thereby merited salvation for all of humanity. Against this claim, it was shown that the Church plainly teaches that man exists as a unity of body and soul and that the chance to receive grace or to merit it for others ceases with death. The *whole* man (body and soul) receives his divine judgment at the moment of death. This expressly rules out the possibility of performing meritorious acts without a human body after death, as a disembodied soul in Sheol. Furthermore, the *Roman Catechism* explicitly states that, in contrast to the rest of humanity, Christ did not suffer in Sheol because he was without sin, but descended there in glory to liberate others from their suffering. This view is also confirmed by a recent papal homily that states that Christ’s entered into the *full* glorification of his soul from the moment of his death, thus contradicting Balthasar’s belief that Christ suffered the “second death” in Sheol.

The second aspect of Balthasar’s Descent theology that we examined was his understanding of Sheol as an undifferentiated abode that allowed Christ to be in solidarity with the dead, all of whom could potentially still be saved. Our present analysis has shown, however, that such a concept of Sheol is not justified, firstly, because it is not supported by an impartial reading of all of Scripture (Balthasar’s methodology relies upon an overly selective reading of Scripture that ignores potentially contradictory material) and, secondly, because it

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<sup>102</sup> See Oakes, “Pope Benedict XVI,” 236.

is directly contradicted by Church teaching. The *Roman Catechism*, for example, teaches that the afterlife is differentiated and consists of the three abodes of "Abraham's bosom," purgatory, and the hell of the damned. In addition, the CCC clearly states that every person (whether they lived before or after Christ) receives his particular judgment that determines definitively his eternal destination at the *moment* of his death. This rules out the possibility that those in Sheol were awaiting judgment by Christ. It also assures us that the destinies of the good and the wicked after death are not the same. Lastly, the same CCC strongly indicates that hell properly so-called existed before Christ's descent by explaining that Christ did not descend there to deliver the damned or to destroy the hell of damnation.

The final element of Balthasar's thesis that was scrutinized was his conviction that, by suffering the "second death" in Sheol, it was possible for Christ to be in solidarity with all of the dead and thereby atone for all of mankind's sins, making it possible to save even the seemingly damned. Here again, our analysis has demonstrated that Balthasar's concept of solidarity with the damned is not consonant with orthodoxy and is directly contradicted by Church teaching. The CCC teaches that now is the time of grace (not the next life) and that each person is judged at the moment of death according to the deeds of his life. Conversion after death is thereby ruled out. This is confirmed by the *Compendium of the Catholic Church*, which states that those who, by their own free choice, die in a state of mortal sin are eternally damned. The CCC also clearly recognizes the possibility of deliberately rejecting God's mercy and thus committing the unforgivable sin of final impenitence, which it describes as a sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, Balthasar's theology seems to deny the possibility of committing an unforgivable sin. This is why he concludes that continual persistence in sin after death is necessary for damnation, thus adopting a theological position that departs radically from traditional Catholic teaching. In fact, by requiring the sinner to continually reject God in the next life rather than make a once-off, final decision, Balthasar effectively limits man's ability to definitively reject God, thus compromising man's freedom. The CCC, in contrast, respects the radical nature of human freedom and allows man to make a definitive and irrevocable decision at the moment of death. In Balthasar's theology, the apparent refusal on Christ's part to take man's "no" seriously means he can be in solidarity even with those



who reject him, hoping for their conversion at some unspecified time in the future. According to the CCC, however, this type of solidarity is impossible if a person freely excludes himself from communion with God during this life and at the moment of death. This does not result from any lack of love on God's part but from the disposition of the damned person who deliberately refuses God's mercy.

The claims of those who support Balthasar's doctrine and view it as a legitimate development of tradition were also addressed to determine if the obvious contradictions between Balthasar's doctrine and traditional Church teaching could be accounted for. On the whole, it was found that, while these arguments initially seemed to be persuasive, they proved to be far too general to properly address the particular doctrinal inconsistencies in Balthasar's theology. Even as general arguments, their validity was still deemed to be questionable.

For example the first of these arguments, which claimed that Balthasar's Descent theology was firmly based on Scripture, was undermined by showing that, while a selective reading of Scripture did indeed appear to show agreement between Balthasar's doctrine and particular Scriptural passages, alternative interpretations of these passages that did not support his doctrine were equally valid. Furthermore, an impartial, comprehensive reading of all of Scripture was shown to reveal many passages that seemed to directly contradict Balthasar's doctrine and for which Balthasar and his advocates can find no satisfactory interpretation. It was reasonably concluded that Balthasar's doctrine cannot be said to be an especially faithful expression of biblical theology, as some had maintained.

The second argument, that Balthasar's doctrine is supported by the mystical experiences of saints and the writings of theologians on the subject of the Descent, was also called into question by pointing out that the writings and mystical experiences of saints and theologians offer no explicit evidence that Christ suffered after death and can equally, and perhaps even more plausibly, be interpreted as a participation in Christ's suffering during his Passion.

The third argument, that Christ's suffering in hell is necessary to fully describe the *pro nobis* or substitutionary character of the redemption was contested, primarily because it compromises human freedom by seeming to preclude a definitive rejection of God on man's part. It was also pointed out that Christ's incorrupt body in the grave bears witness to the fact that Christ did not experience *everything* that sinful man was destined to suffer. Because God judges the whole

person as a unity of body and soul, it was suggested that it would be incongruous for the soul to suffer the effects of sin (i.e., punishment in Sheol) while the body did not.

Lastly, in response to those who have claimed that Balthasar's Descent doctrine describes an event of universal salvific significance and thus reveals a more compassionate God than that of the traditional doctrine, it was argued that the traditional doctrine is equally universal in its significance but reveals a God who, out of love for man, allows him to choose his destiny, however radical that choice may be.

In summary, the aim of the present work was to attempt to clarify whether or not Balthasar's Descent doctrine represented a legitimate development of the existing Catholic tradition. Having compared it to relevant sources of Catholic Church teaching, it was concluded that Balthasar's theology of the Descent contradicts some fundamental aspects of the Catholic faith. It is therefore the present author's theological judgment that, although Balthasar's speculative account of Holy Saturday may represent an original thought-provoking work of an undeniably great theologian, it is unlikely ever to be accorded the official doctrinal status that perhaps Balthasar himself would have desired. 