

Catholic Eschatology and the Development of Doctrine

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THE NOTION of development of doctrine has always been controversial, as it can too easily become a license for any innovation whatever, but it is never more controversial than when the issue is eschatology. I still recall the cartoon in *The New Yorker* that was published shortly after the bishops of the United States allowed American Catholics to eat meat on Fridays, something that had previously been prohibited under pain of mortal sin. The cartoon showed two devils conducting their business in hell, with one saying to the other: “What do we do now with all those in here who ate meat on Friday?” The ribbing was surely meant to be facetious, but the humor relies for its bite on this dilemma: What *do* we do with all those souls who died with one understanding of heaven, hell, death, and judgment, if the Church later proclaims what seems at first glance to be a different understanding of the Last Things?

Although the dilemma is real, I shall be arguing in this essay that development of doctrine in matters of eschatology is still inevitable, a development of understanding that will be forced on the Church’s collective mind both by the internal laws of doctrinal development and by the change in horizon brought about by the Church’s pilgrimage through history. To establish this thesis, I will concentrate here on two issues, limbo and hell, and show how they serve as the two loci where development has become both the most exigent, crying out for development, and the most obvious, in the sense that a denial of that development will lead to impossible conclusions at variance with the most ancient forms of the Church’s creed.

Limbo and Development

Even before the close of the Second Vatican Council the question of limbo was becoming more and more problematic.¹ Given the doctrinal confusions that invaded the Church in the wake of that epochal Council, it does not surprise the historian to discover that no theologian enthusiastic about the Council felt any attraction to the hypothesis of limbo or cared to defend it. But even among those theologians who most deplored what was happening to the doctrinal cohesion of the Church's message of salvation, limbo was rarely defended—or even much mentioned.² Other theologians of unimpeachable orthodoxy denied it outright, very much including Joseph Ratzinger. Indeed, in the very book that made his reputation as a vigorous defender of Church orthodoxy, he openly denied the doctrine. “Limbo was never a defined truth of the faith. Personally—and here I am speaking more as a theologian and not as Prefect of the Congregation—I would abandon it since it was only a theological hypothesis.”³

¹ See especially George Dyer, *Limbo: Unsettled Question* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), written in the midst of Vatican II but which was a briefer account for the general public of Dyer's doctoral dissertation, *The Denial of Limbo and the Jansenist Controversy* (Mundelein, IL: University of St. Mary of the Lake, 1955).

² For example, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., in his book *Life Everlasting*, trans. Patrick Cummins, O.S.B. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1952), mentions limbo only once (at 165); and there he was referring exclusively to the *limbus patrum*, where the Old Testament patriarchs awaited their release from bondage on Holy Saturday. Georges Panneton, in his book *Heaven or Hell*, trans. Ann M. C. Forster (French 1955; Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1965), mentions limbo only thrice (17, 19, 21), only the first and last referring to the *limbus infantium*. The fact that these books were both published before Vatican II is significant, but the same holds true after the Council. For example, Joseph Ratzinger, in his book *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein, ed. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (German 1977; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), never mentions the topic, a silence that would later become outright denial with *The Ratzinger Report* (see immediately below).

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 147. Far from representing some kind of postconciliar latitudinarianism, the cardinal makes it clear that the presence of heresy in the Church does great damage: “Thus you can see that even for the post-conciliar Church . . . , heretics and heresies—characterized by the new Code [of Canon Law] as ‘punishable offenses against religion and the unity of the Church’—exist, and ways have been provided to protect the community from them. . . . From this viewpoint, in regard to error, it must not be forgotten that the right of the individual theologian must be protected but that the rights of the community must likewise be protected” (ibid, 25).

These doubts were obviously shared by Pope John Paul II, because he was the pope who first directed the papally appointed International Theological Commission to study the question. After John Paul's death, Pope Benedict XVI asked the International Theological Commission to continue its work. It finally issued its report, with papal approval, on January 19, 2007.⁴

Whatever one thinks of this report, the fact that it was commissioned and later issued with papal approval shows the fact of development, one that I shall argue was due to an impasse that the history of development in other areas made necessary. It was, after all, this impasse that prompted two popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, to reopen the question. Moreover, a careful analysis of the history of this question will also show why the question of eschatology cannot avoid the laws of development that affect other Christian dogmas as well.

Not being a full-scale monograph, this article can only highlight four key milestones in the debate: (1) St. Augustine's rejection of the prospect of eternal life for unbaptized babies as a dangerously Pelagian innovation; (2) the mitigation of Augustine's grim conclusions by most medieval theologians with their own concept of a painless limbo; (3) the Jansenists' rejection of that mitigating hypothesis; and finally (4) the attack on the concept of "pure nature" by the Jesuit cardinal Henri de Lubac, which (assuming his arguments are cogent) made the concept of limbo even more problematic than it had been.

As I work through this quite brief *tour d'histoire*, it will become apparent that both the hypothesis of limbo and its rejection entail certain "antinomies," a word made famous by Immanuel Kant in the conclusion of his *Critique of Pure Reason* to refer to that reality often encountered in both philosophy and theology: Assert one thing, and soon history proves that the assertion's implications lead to the opposite problem.

1. In its normal acceptance, the term "limbo" conjures up a painless, *soteriologically neutral* place where unbaptized infants are deprived of the beatific vision but otherwise feel no further deprivation (and do not necessarily even notice that deprivation, apparently under the rubric of "what you don't know won't hurt you"). Unfortunately for that hypothesis, the fifth-century heretic Pelagius proposed something very similar, and therein lies the heart of the dilemma from the fifth century to ours.

⁴ International Theological Commission, "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised," www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html.

Pelagius's denial of original sin always had one great weakness: the universal practice of infant Baptism, which was too embedded in Church life for him to overthrow. But why baptize babies if original sin didn't exist?⁵ Citing the very verse that the orthodox used to insist on the necessity of Baptism (John 3:5: "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit"), Pelagius granted the point but then made a distinction between the kingdom of God (for access to which Baptism is required) and what he called "eternal life," which, he claimed, unbaptized infants enjoy by virtue of their having immortal souls.

Now if by "eternal life" Pelagius meant *supernatural* eternal life, then his exegesis of John's Gospel was obviously specious. But maybe he meant something like a purely "natural" eternal life? If one assumes with Pelagius that original sin does not exist, the latter option would seem not to run into the same exegetical difficulties. But of course for Augustine original sin *does* exist, which automatically precludes Pelagius's hypothesis of "eternal life" under any guise. But then comes the kicker in his logic: If unbaptized infants do not enjoy eternal life, then eternal death must be their fate:

Once he had dealt with the idea of "eternal life," Augustine was ready to close his trap on the Pelagians. Children who die unbaptized are certainly excluded from the kingdom of God; and since eternal life for them is out of the question, nothing remains but eternal death. The Pelagians were now in a dilemma. Either they had to question the justice of God, or they had to admit the existence of original sin. God admittedly does not condemn the innocent. The condemnation of the unbaptized child demands an explanation, and the sin of Adam is the only explanation.⁶

But if original sin is real and "justifies" God in condemning the unbaptized, where then do they go? Without a doubt, it must be hell. Dyer again deftly summarizes Augustine's entirely logical conclusion, most grimly portrayed in his influential *Sermon 294*:

⁵ "The smooth explanation of the Pelagian doctrine halted abruptly when it encountered the Sacrament of Baptism. How were they to explain the Baptism of children? If they were to challenge the necessity of infant Baptism, they would run full tilt against the universal practice of the time. If, on the other hand, they were to admit its necessity, they would destroy the logic of their system which denied original sin." Dyer, *Denial*, 14.

⁶ Dyer, *Limbo*, 14

Augustine had employed his formidable scriptural armament to exclude children from eternal life and from the kingdom of God; . . . and so in language that was largely scriptural, he painted a chilling description of the future life of the unbaptized child. He must face the judgment of God, said Augustine; he is a vessel of wrath, a vessel of contumely, and the judgment of God is upon him. Baptism is the only thing that can deliver him from the kingdom of death and the power of the devil. If no one frees him from the grasp of the devil, what wonder is it that he must suffer in flames with Satan? There can be no doubt about the matter, the saint concludes, he must go into eternal fire with the devil.⁷

True, in a letter to Jerome, Augustine expressed certain misgivings about this conclusion, which is understandable, given how grim his position was.⁸ But the bulk of his writings never deviates from this basic conclusion—that at the end of time there will only be two regions: on the right hand of Christ, the kingdom of God where the sheep dwell; and on his left, the kingdom of Satan where the goats reside:

The Scriptural dichotomy of eternal life and eternal death runs like a refrain through Augustine's writings, . . . [which] recognized but two alternatives, heaven and hell. . . . Those unfortunate children who would die without Baptism must face the judgment of God; and their lot is one of most grievous damnation. They are vessels of contumely, vessels of wrath, and the wrath of God is upon them. Baptism is the only thing that can deliver these unfortunate infants from the kingdom of death and from the power of the devil. If no one frees them from the grasp of the devil, what wonder is it they must suffer in flames with him? There can be no doubt about the matter: they will go into eternal fire with the devil.⁹

⁷ Ibid., 14–15. In this debate Augustine will recognize only the exclusive and entirely binary categories of right and left: "Judgment will be passed on the living and the dead; some will be on the right, others on the left; I don't know any other destiny." Augustine, "Sermon 294," in idem, *Sermons* III/8 (273–305A), trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994), 181.

⁸ Augustine, *Epistle 166*, 16 (PL 33:727). But as Dyer points out, Augustine's real problem was the premature death of the unbaptized infant, not its ultimate fate in eternity (Dyer, *Denial*, 27–28). In his book *Contra Julianum*, Book V, ch. 44 (PL 44:809), the bishop of Hippo admits he is unable to define the "quae, qualis, et quanta" of infantile punishment, but that they would be punished he had no doubt: "Quaecumque autem sine gratia Mediatoris et Sacramento ejus, in quolibet corporis aetate, de corpore exierit, et in poenam futuram, et in ultimo iudicio recepturam corpus ad poenam." *Epistle 186*, 16, 5 (PL 33:722).

⁹ Dyer, *Denial*, 25–26, with numerous citations from Augustine's anti-Pelagian polemics, the starkest of which is probably *Sermon 294* (PL 38:1337): "Qui non

2. Augustine's vacillations, though diffidently expressed and generally misinterpreted, provided a modest amount of wiggle room for later theologians, but the real change came with the introduction of the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite into Western theology, who defined, in the typical neo-Platonist manner, evil as a privation. In that case, unbaptized infants merely *lacked* the grace of justification but had done nothing to *merit* punishment due to personal sin. Peter Lombard adopted this view in his famous *Sentences*,¹⁰ thereby insuring its semicanonical status, from which theologians drew various conclusions and hypotheses. Here again, rather than going into the plethora of suggestions proposed by medieval theologians, I will let Dyer provide the simple summary:

In 1255 [Aquinas] said that children are aware of their lost destiny but feel no regret. In 1265 he said they feel no regret because they have no idea of what they have lost. . . . Saint Bonaventure, however, had quite a different reason to offer. Children in limbo, he said, enjoy a perfect balance between their knowledge and their desires, thanks to the good offices of their Creator. Since grief would imply a lack of balance, it can have no part in the lives of these children. These children stand midway between the blessed and the damned, and so they share something of each state of life. Like the damned, they are exiles from heaven; like the blessed, they know no grief. . . . [For Duns Scotus] children die in a state of *personal* innocence [emphasis added: Scotus did not deny original sin]; by divine decree they will remain so for eternity. Were they to grieve over their loss of heaven, they would lose their innocence either by murmuring against God or by sinking into despair. This is clearly impossible. Since they died without personal fault, they will remain so for eternity. Therefore there can be no unhappiness among them over what they are or what they have lost. According to Scotus, there can be no unhappiness of any sort in limbo. Grief, he remarks, is a greater punishment than the pain of sense, because it attacks a higher faculty, the human will. Since children are spared the pain of sense, they must logically be free of any unhappiness. It would be absurd to suppose that they were spared the lighter punishment and left to bear the heavier.¹¹

in dextra, procul dubio in sinistra; ergo qui non in regno procul dubio in igne aeterno. . . . Ecce exposui tibi quid sit regnum, et quid sit ignis aeternus; ut quando confiteris parvulum non futurum in regno, fatearis futurum in igne aeterno."The operative logic here is always either/or.

¹⁰ *Petri Lombardi Episcopi Parisiensis Sententiarum libri quattuor* (Paris: Louis Vivès, 1892), the first volume of which has now been translated into English as Peter Lombard, *The Sentences: Book 1: The Mystery of the Trinity* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007).

¹¹ Dyer, *Limbo*, 52–54.

3. If these views seem perilously close to Pelagius's suggestion of a realm of "eternal life," Bishop Cornelius Jansen would agree. As he said in his massive two-volume *Augustinus*, "Scholastics who gave natural happiness or immunity from eternal fire to infants dying unbaptized had departed far from the mind of Augustine and perhaps of the Church, which had condemned the Pelagians according to his principles."¹² In this opinion Jansen not only had the backing of Augustine but also, it would seem, of the Second Council of Lyon (1274) and the Council of Florence (1438–45), which both taught, in almost identical words, that "[t]he souls of those who die in actual mortal sin or in *original sin only* immediately descend into *hell*, even though they *suffer* different penalties."¹³

The debate at this point gets complicated (as if it were not already complicated enough) with the overlapping theses of the Jansenists, the Jesuits, and the Augustinians (meaning here members of the religious order founded by St. Augustine and to which Martin Luther had once belonged). "The Jansenists denied limbo and accused its Jesuit defenders of Pelagianism. In their rebuttal Jesuit theologians" often went so far in their attacks on the Jansenists that they "angered the Augustinians, who then came to the defense of their patron."¹⁴ In this unpleasant and quite unedifying catfight,¹⁵ various popes intervened, both affirming the orthodoxy of the Augustinians who denied limbo but

¹² Cornelius Jansenius, *Augustinus seu Doctrina Sancti Augustini de humanae naturae sanitate, aegritudine, medicina adversus Pelagianos & Massilienses* (Paris: Sumptibus Michaelis Soly et Matthaei Guillemot, 1641), Tome II, Book II, ch. 25, 181: "longe ab Augustini & fortassis Ecclesiae, quae Pelagianos juxta ejus principia damnavit, mente recessisse Scholasticos, qui parvulis sine baptismo morientibus vel beatitudinem naturalem, vel immunitatem a sensibilibus ignis aeterni poenis tribuerunt."

¹³ The Second Council of Lyons: "Illorum autem animas, qui in mortali peccato vel cum solo originali decedunt, mox in infernum descendere, poenis tamen disparibus puniendas" (DS 859); the Council of Florence: "Illorum autem animas, qui in actuali mortali peccato vel solo originali decedunt, mox in infernum descendere, poenis autem disparibus puniendas" (DS 1306); emphasis added.

¹⁴ "In the discussion that followed there were times when it was difficult for some of the Jesuit theologians to distinguish Jansenist from Augustinian, and heated accusations were often made, . . . [generating] more fire than light." Dyer, *Limbo*, 76–77.

¹⁵ "The Jansenists detested the Jesuits, the Jesuits reciprocated, and the Augustinians disliked both. The air was charged with suspicion and at times with libel. The Jesuits were denounced as Pelagians; the Augustinians as Jansenists; and the Jansenists, rightly enough, as heretics." Dyer, *Limbo*, 81.

also condemning the Jansenist assertion that the Jesuit defense of limbo was inherently Pelagian.¹⁶

It might seem that the Jesuit defense of a painless limbo conflicted with the Councils of Lyons and Florence, already cited above, which clearly envisioned some sort of punishment. But that was not the view of Pius VI, who condemned the Jansenist Synod of Pistoia (1786) in his bull *Auctorem Fidei*, published in 1794 (ironically, this defense of the Jesuit position came during the years of their suppression, so they can hardly be accused of having undue influence in its formulation). Given the fact that earlier popes had cleared the Augustinians of heresy for denying limbo in favor of an actual hell of suffering for unbaptized infants, Pius could hardly claim the hypothesis of limbo was an obligatory belief. But the Synod of Pistoia went too far, for it openly asserted that limbo was part and parcel of the Pelagian heresy; and this, said Pius, was false as well as insulting to a great number of Catholic theologians, including, most uncomfortably for the Jansenists, nearly every medieval theologian who took up the topic.¹⁷ (Perhaps Pius was wistfully thinking here of the Jesuits, now no longer available to defend the pope against the onslaughts of the anticlerical Jacobins of the French Revolution, now proceeding apace.)

But the story does not quite end there. For several popes in succession condemned the Jansenists for a whole host of other heresies, including the following condemned propositions: All the works of unbelievers are sinful and the virtues of the philosophers are mere depravity (DS §1925); the death of Jesus was not for all mankind (DS §2005); only evil exists outside the grace of Christianity (DS §§2438, 2440, 2459). These propositions obviously have implications for the

¹⁶ It should be stressed, however, that the lines of the debate were not always to be neatly pigeonholed by religious orders. For one of the first theologians to trump the scholastic notion of a painless limbo in favor of Augustine was a French Jesuit, Denis Petau, and one of the more balanced Augustinians was Henry Noris (despite his English name, an Italian Augustinian). See Dyer, *Denial*, 83–107, for the details of this extremely convoluted debate.

¹⁷ As the International Theological Commission Report on Limbo rightly notes (§38), *Auctorem fidei* “is not a dogmatic definition of the existence of Limbo; the papal Bull confines itself to rejecting the Jansenist charge that the ‘Limbo’ taught by the scholastic theologians is identical with the ‘eternal life’ promised to unbaptized infants by the ancient Pelagians. Pius VI did not condemn the Jansenists because they denied Limbo, but because they held that the defenders of Limbo were guilty of the heresy of Pelagius. By maintaining the freedom of the Catholic Schools to promote different solutions to the problems of the fate of unbaptized infants, the Holy See defended the common teaching as an acceptable and legitimate option, without endorsing it.”

notion of limbo, since if pagans can (theoretically) be saved, then why not their young children, whose only “sin” was to die before reaching the age of reason, where they perhaps could have made the same saving choice as their parents?

4. Parallel to this debate on limbo was another concerning “pure nature.” If we grant that God created us all with a desire for union with him, does that not imply an “obligation” on his part to grant us the fulfillment of that desire, since he created us *for* union with him? But does that “obligation” on God’s part not in turn undermine the concept of the gratuity of grace, which says that God is under no obligation to grant what is freely his to give? Hence the concept of “pure nature,” which was, as everyone conceded, a purely *theoretical* distinction, made solely to guard the concept of gratuitous grace. But as far as *de facto* creation went, Augustine himself says, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” And does not Thomas Aquinas say that “every intellect *naturally* desires the vision of the divine *substance*” (SCG, bk. III, ch. 3)?

That of course is only one sentence from the vast sea of Thomas’s writings; and many other Thomists dispute the point, citing other texts.¹⁸ I cannot take a position on that debate here. All I want to say is that *if* Henri de Lubac is right in his book *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, then this conclusion inexorably follows:

For this desire [for God] is not some “accident” in me. It does not result from some peculiarity, possibly alterable, of my individual being, or from some historical contingency whose effects are more or less transitory. . . . It is in me as a result of my belonging to humanity as it is, that humanity which is, as we say, “called.” *For God’s call is constitutive.* My finality, which is expressed by this desire, is inscribed upon my very being as it has been put into this universe by God. And, by God’s will, I now have no other genuine end, no end really assigned to my nature or presented for my free acceptance under any guise, except that of “seeing God.”¹⁹

Which conclusion leads us back, by the same inexorable logic, to a final Eschaton that knows only a heaven and a hell, with no room for limbo:

¹⁸ Most recently by Ralph McInerny, *Praeambula Fidei: Thomism and the God of the Philosophers* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 69–90.

¹⁹ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, introduction by David L. Schindler (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 54–55, emphasis added.

It is said that a universe might have existed in which man, though without necessarily excluding any other desire, would have his rational ambitions limited to some lower, purely human, beatitude. Certainly I do not deny it. But having said that, one is obliged to admit—indeed one is automatically affirming—that in our world as it is this is not the case. . . . [Thus] the “desire to see God” cannot be permanently frustrated without an essential suffering. To deny this is to undermine my entire Credo. For is not this, in effect, the definition of the “pain of the damned”? And consequently—at least in appearance—a good and just God could hardly frustrate me, unless I, through my own fault, turn away from him by choice. The infinite importance of the desire implanted in me by my Creator is what constitutes the infinite importance of the drama of human existence.²⁰

This is hardly the place to resolve this extremely complex debate.²¹ I only wish to point out how many theological presuppositions come into play when theologians discuss the Eschaton in its relation to the sacraments, grace, free will, and sin (both original and personal). In a way, because these issues are still outstanding, the concept of limbo has served as a kind of *pis aller*, an expedient invoked because something seems not quite right about either Augustine or Pelagius. Pelagius was condemned easily enough, but did Augustine have the right answer when he claimed that all newborns are vessels of wrath deserving of hell unless their parents make it to the baptismal font before the baby dies of some congenital defect or because of the ministrations of an unhygienic midwife?

The International Theological Commission certainly demurs from the authority of Augustine here when it points to this central flaw in his reasoning: “Every man is Adam,” he said, “just as, *in the case*

²⁰ Ibid., 54.

²¹ Although I do accept de Lubac’s basic point, as I have already tried to show in this journal: see Edward T. Oakes, “The Paradox of Nature and Grace,” *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): 667–95. And dare I add that the debate on pure nature has already been resolved by Vatican II? “Human dignity rests above all on the fact that humanity is called to communion with God. . . . Since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery” (*Gaudium et Spes*, §§19, 22). Even assuming the (highly debatable) claim that de Lubac misinterpreted Thomas, Church teaching now emphatically proclaims the truth that *de facto* all humanity is called by God to communion with Him; indeed that call constitutes man’s very dignity, a dignity that has always been assumed to arise from his nature. *Roma locuta, causa finita*.

of those who believe, every man is Christ, for they are his members.”²² As the Commission rightly observes, this inverts the perspective bequeathed to us by revelation: “Many traditional accounts of sin and salvation (and of Limbo) have stressed solidarity with Adam more than solidarity with Christ, or at least such accounts have had a restrictive conception of the ways by which human beings benefit from solidarity with Christ” (§91). In other words, this entire debate has been conducted by looking at the issue of limbo, as it were, through the wrong end of the telescope:

We wish to stress that humanity’s solidarity with Christ (or, more properly, Christ’s solidarity with all of humanity) must have priority over the solidarity of human beings with Adam, and that the question of the destiny of unbaptized infants who die must be addressed in that light. (§91)

The traditional view is that it is only through sacramental Baptism that infants have solidarity with Christ and hence access to the vision of God. Otherwise, solidarity with Adam has priority; we may ask, however, how that view might be changed if priority were restored to our solidarity with Christ (i.e., Christ’s solidarity with us). (§93)

A further point to mention is that before the opening session of Vatican II, some bishops asked the council fathers to declare officially that unbaptized babies are eternally deprived of the beatific vision. But the proposal was rejected because so many other bishops testified that this view *did not correspond to the faith of their people*.²³ And thank God it was rejected, for it would have made so many other statements the council did make about ecumenism and world religions (and even atheism) impossible, especially the declaration that all human beings have been created with that same humanity that Christ himself had assumed, so that everyone lives in some kind of relation to him (*Lumen Gentium*, §16; see Col 1:15–18). But given the fact that the council *did* so declare our primal and universal solidarity with Christ, it rendered limbo even more problematic: What was made possible by the council’s refusal to consign unbaptized infants to limbo itself undermines limbo, once the priority of Christ over Adam was proclaimed.

²² Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 70, Book II, ch. 1 (PL 36:891): “Omnis autem homo Adam; sicut in his qui crediderunt, omnis homo Christus, quia membra sunt Christi.” Cited by the International Theological Commission report at note 123.

²³ See the International Theological Commission Report on Limbo, §96, for a reference to this objection.

So what about the necessity of Baptism? The solution to this conundrum, the International Theological Commission report says, lies in seeing salvation as social (§96), a point explicitly taught by Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, §12). I would even go further and say that salvation is not just social but even more it is *cosmic* and *physical*: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as if in the pangs of childbirth right up to the present day. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our *bodies*” (Rom 8:22–23).

What has so bedeviled, so to speak, this debate on limbo and the unbaptized is how little consideration has been given to St. Paul’s insistence that in Baptism we are baptized into the *Body* of Christ. To hear some people’s reaction to the Vatican’s statement on limbo “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised,” one would think that Baptism is a kind of celestial life-insurance policy, of relevance for the recipient alone but of no consequence to the body of the cosmos whatever (and certainly worthless tender when debased by the non-baptized getting into heaven too!). In this context I am once again reminded of the shrewd insight of John A. T. Robinson in his study of Pauline anthropology, *The Body*, which opens with this important (and often overlooked) insight:

One could say without exaggeration that the concept of the body forms the keystone of Paul’s theology. In its closely interconnected meanings, the word *soma* [body] knits together all his great themes. It is from the body of sin and death that we are delivered; it is through the body of Christ on the Cross that we are saved; it is into His body the Church that we are incorporated; it is by His body in the Eucharist that this Community is sustained; it is in our body that its new life has to be manifested; it is to a resurrection of this body to the likeness of His glorious body that we are destined. Here, with the exception of the doctrine of God, are represented all the main tenets of the Christian Faith—the doctrines of Man, Sin, the Incarnation and Atonement, the Church, the Sacraments, Sanctification, and Eschatology. To trace the subtle links and interaction between the different senses of this word *soma* is to grasp the thread that leads through the maze of Pauline thought.²⁴

Although the doctrine, or rather the hypothesis of limbo, hardly takes a place high up on the hierarchy of truths spoken of by Vatican II, a history of the debate on this much controverted issue does high-

²⁴ John A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1952), 9.

light a genuine development here. To go from Augustine's *Sermon 294* and *Contra Julianum* to the International Theological Commission's "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised" cannot help but show development at work. Perhaps the most significant signpost of the necessity for that development comes from this remarkable distinction made in the International Theological Commission report:

In summary: the affirmation that infants who die without Baptism suffer the privation of the beatific vision has long been the common *doctrine* of the Church, which must be distinguished from the *faith* of the Church. As for the theory that the privation of the beatific vision is their sole punishment, to the exclusion of any other pain, this is a theological opinion, despite its long acceptance in the West. The particular theological thesis concerning a "natural happiness" sometimes ascribed to these infants likewise constitutes a theological opinion. (§40, emphasis added)

Whether, how, and to what extent this distinction between the doctrine and the faith of the Church plays a role in the debate on hell as well will now be the focus of the next part of this article.

Hell and Development

Although the place of hell surely ranks higher in the hierarchy of truths than does limbo (for one thing, the existence of hell is no mere "hypothesis" but established doctrine), that does not mean that the Church's understanding of hell's place in the economy of salvation is not subject to development, as can readily be seen in the few years that separate St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) from Dante Alighieri (1265–1321). Because of his reputation as *the* Christian poet (who could be more medieval, Catholic, orthodox?), and despite the huge success of his *Divine Comedy* even upon its immediate publication, Dante was not infrequently regarded as a heretic by his contemporaries. Not everyone, Peter Hawkins reports, acclaimed the Florentine as "divine":

Some clerics thundered from their pulpits against his flights of fancy. The Dominican Guido Vernani went so far as to condemn Dante as a "vessel of the devil" and "a man who wrote many fantastic things in poetry, a verbose solipsist [who] fraudulently seduces not only sickly minds but even zealous ones to the distraction of salutary truth."²⁵

²⁵ Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 27; citations from Vernani in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Lansing (New York: Garland, 2000), 855.

Elsewhere Hawkins mentions the late fourteenth-century bishop of Florence, Antonino, who dismissed the entirety of Dante's vision as "nothing but poetry."²⁶

The anxiety provoked by Dante among his contemporaries surely tells us much about the state of the Italian church in the fourteenth century. No doubt his heated denunciations of certain popes and bishops, whom he did not hesitate to place in hell, must have played a role. But surely the greatest of his "heresies" was his placement of certain pagan and Muslim(!) notables in limbo, not hell. We know this represents an innovation, for in *De veritate* Thomas asserts the contrary: "Augustine says that the concupiscence deriving from original sin makes infants disposed to experience concupiscence, and adults actually do so. For it is unlikely that one who is infected with original sin will not submit to the concupiscence of sin by consent to a sin."²⁷ Dante also innovates when he downplays the role of fire in eternal punishment, a point noticed by one of his English translators, Anthony Esolen:

Readers may be surprised at first by how little fire there is in Dante's Hell. That is because the *meaning* of fire is incompatible [for Dante] with the punishment of most sins. Lesser portrayers of eternal damnation have fixed upon fire for obvious reasons: fire is often (though by no means exclusively) so used in Scripture, and fire hurts. But Dante, considering fiery heavens above, the nature of fire to rise, the liveliness of flame, and, of course, such scriptural passages as "Our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29), will not suffer the indecorous presence of that noble element in Hell.²⁸

These "innovations," such as they are, might not seem like much; but the years that divide Thomas from Dante are not much either. So what can we say of development of the doctrine of hell across all the centuries of Church tradition and teaching? Here I shall be concentrating not so

²⁶ Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 316, note 27.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Truth* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1952–1954), q. 28, a. 3, ad 4. Admittedly, this passage stands in a certain tension with other passages where Thomas seems more open to at least the possibility of pagan redemption; see *ST* II–II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 3. My point is only that, to judge by some contemporary reactions, Dante was seen as a dangerous innovator, and condemned for that reason: Once pagans and Muslims are allowed to make it into a post-Incarnation version of the pre-Christian *limbus patrum*, who knows what will follow?

²⁸ Anthony Esolen, introduction to *Dante's Inferno*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), xvii–xviii, original emphasis.

much on the question of the population of hell as on the question of Christ's descent thereto, a doctrine made especially prominent (and controversial) in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar but which also marks in significant ways the theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI. Again, my *tour d'histoire* must needs be brief; but I think—as with the treatment of limbo above—its brevity will serve to highlight the significant points of development more than a full-scale monograph can do (“seeing the forest for the trees” and all that).

Given his importance for determining the terms of debate on limbo, perhaps the best place to begin with the question of Christ's descent into hell will be with Augustine again. In his famous *Letter 164* to Bishop Evodius that proved decisive for later medieval discussion of this theme, Augustine confesses his bafflement at the doctrine, not least because of his views on the pervasive range of the effects of original sin. But pondering the lines from 1 Peter that after his death Christ “went to preach to those spirits in prison who disobeyed God long ago” (3:19–20), with the result that “the gospel was preached to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in the spirit” (4:6), he comes to this important conclusion:

Consequently, if holy Scripture had said that Christ after death came into that bosom of Abraham, without naming hell and its sorrows, I wonder if anyone would dare to affirm that He descended into hell. But, because this clear testimony mentions both hell and its sorrows, I can think of no reason for believing that the Savior went there except to save souls from its sorrows. I am still uncertain whether He saved all those whom He found there or certain ones whom He deemed worthy of that boon. I do not doubt, however, that He was in hell, and that He granted this favor to those entangled in its sorrows.²⁹

On Augustine's *dubium* about the soteriological range of Christ's descent Cyril of Alexandria at least has no doubts. In one of his Easter homilies he says that as a consequence of Christ's descent, the devil was left all alone with a devastated hell, sulking in a corner like a pouty schoolboy: “For having destroyed hell and opened the impassable gates for the departed spirits, He left the devil there abandoned and lonely.”³⁰ To be sure, opinion among the Fathers about the number of the liberated ranges all over the

²⁹ Augustine, Letter 164 “To Evodius,” in idem, *Saint Augustine: Letters*, vol. III, 131–164, trans. Sr. Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc. 1953), 386. Also: “Who, then, but an unbeliever will deny that Christ was in hell?” Ibid., 383.

³⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, 7th *Paschal Homily* 2 (PG 77, 552 A; also 657).

map, from the most generous, Gregory of Nyssa, to the narrowest, Pope Gregory the Great.³¹ But the real significance of their common teaching emerges in a trope commonly used in early Christian literature to explain the atonement, the fishhook that Satan swallows: The bait is Christ's human nature, the hook is his divinity, and the devil is the deceived Leviathan whose innards are ripped apart when he ingests the hook. This piscine imagery has been much derided by later theologians for its implication that Satan had a "right" to all the other "bait" (the rest of us) and needed to be "deceived" in order to be induced to swallow Christ's divinity. Perhaps so, but to concentrate on the folksy naivete of the imagery is to miss its real point: that Satan's kingdom could only be destroyed when God's power breaks into the underworld and destroys it *from within*.

This motif of conquest from within is surely the point of Jesus' prediction of his death and descent when he compares his fate with that of Jonah in "the belly of the beast" (Mt 12:40) and insists that no one can despoil a strong man's house unless he first overpowers and ties up the owner of the house (Mt 12:29); and after he has accomplished this task on Holy Saturday, he can say in his risen state: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever. I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Rev 1:18).

But the question that will preoccupy the tradition is not so much the fact of the descent, but *how* Christ overcame the "strong man" of evil. Here one notices a definite development, especially in the West, where the connection between suffering and atonement was especially strong. But that connection was also made, however embryonically in the East as well, as deftly summarized by Jaroslav Pelikan:

The words of Jesus in Matthew 12:29 meant that Satan would be bound with the very chains with which he had bound man and would

³¹ In a delicious irony, Cyril of Alexandria (a man not exactly known to history for his friendliness to heretics) preaches a complete vastation of hell (see previous note), but Origen holds that during his sojourn in the underworld Christ left some behind, men judged worthy of hell: "Even if he [Celsus] dislikes it, we maintain that when he [Christ] was in the body he convinced not merely a few [Jews], but so many that the multitude of those persuaded by him led to the conspiracy [of the few] against him; and that when he became a soul unclothed by a body, he conversed with souls unclothed by bodies, converting also those of them who were *willing* to accept him, or those who, for reasons which he himself knew, he saw to be ready to do so." Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), bk. II, §43 (pp. 99–100). The implication seems to be that as Christ converted "many" Jews but a few conspired against him, leading to his execution, the same outcome played itself out in the underworld.

be led captive. Paraphrasing the passage, Irenaeus said: "He [Christ] fought and was victorious; for he was man doing battle for the fathers, and by his obedience utterly abolishing disobedience. For he bound the strong man, liberated the weak, and by destroying sin endowed his creation with salvation."

From [this statement of Irenaeus] it is evident that not only the resurrection of Christ, but especially his passion and death belonged to the description of salvation as the victory of Christ over the enemies of man. Another event sometimes associated with that victory was the descent into hell. . . . But it was in the West that the descent acquired creedal status with its incorporation into the final text of the Apostles' Creed, no earlier than 370. By that time, however, Western theology was interpreting the atonement as a sacrifice and increasingly as an act of satisfaction offered by the death of Christ. . . . As "the harrowing of hell," the descent played a significant part in the arts as well as in the church's teaching, but it was not until the Middle Ages and the Reformation that it became an issue of dogmatic debate.³²

In that debate Thomas Aquinas strikes an important note, one that will become increasingly dominant later, especially in the mystical tradition. In his *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed* (written in the last year of his life), Thomas explains this Creed's famous descent clause thus: "There are four reasons why Christ descended in his [human] soul to hell. The first was to take on the entire punishment of sin and thereby to atone [*expiaret*] wholly for its guilt."³³ Once Thomas had made that link explicit between atoning suffering and the descent, certain mystics begin to speak ever more frequently of their own souls' experiences of hell ("cum animis eorum," as it were), most prominently of course St. John of the Cross but also Blessed Angela of Foligno³⁴ and St. Rose of Lima.³⁵

³² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. I, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 150–51, quoting Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, bk. 5, ch. 21, §3.

³³ Thomas Aquinas, *In Symbolum Apostolorum Expositio*, art. 5, 926, in *Opuscula Theologica*, vol. II, ed. Raimund Spiazzi, O.P. (Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1954), 204: "Sunt autem quatuor rationes quare Christus cum anima ad infernum descendit. Prima ut sustineret totam poenam peccati, ut sic totam culpam expiaret."

³⁴ "I perceive that demons hold my soul in a state of suspension; just as a hanged man has nothing to support him, so my soul does not seem to have any supports left. . . . While I am in this most horrible darkness caused by demons, it seems to me that there is nothing I can hope for. . . . When I am in that darkness I think I would prefer to be burned than to suffer such afflictions. I even cry out for death to come in whatever form God would grant it. I beseech him to send me to hell without delay. 'Since you have abandoned me,' I tell him, 'make an end to it now and completely submerge me.'" Angela of Foligno, *Memorial*, ch. VIII, a and b, in *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance, O.F.M. (New

Rather than continue on in this vein,³⁶ I prefer to bring this motif to its apparent culmination in the remarkable autobiography of St. Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, where the author recounts how she came to *volunteer* for hell:

One night, not knowing how to tell Jesus that I loved Him and how much I desired that He be everywhere loved and glorified, I was thinking with sorrow that He could never receive in hell a single act of love. So I told God that to please Him I would willingly consent to find myself plunged into hell, so that He might be eternally loved in that place of blasphemy.³⁷

It was left to several twentieth-century theologians to realize that the Persons of the Trinity could hardly be less generous in their desire to find love in the underworld of rejected love than was a bourgeois French adolescent. The most obvious proponent of this view that the Trinity is fully engaged in the event of Christ's descent into hell is, of course, Hans Urs von Balthasar, who draws on all the authors so far cited and then adds four key motifs from the tradition to forge his own account of the descent: Pauline soteriology, patristic accounts of Christ's vastation of hell, the Christology of Maximus the Confessor, and the medieval distinction

York: Paulist Press, 1993), 197, 198. See also Paul Lachance, O.F.M., *The Spiritual Journey of Blessed Angela of Foligno According to the Memorial of Frater A.* (Rome: Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, 1984), especially here: " 'Surrounded on all sides by demons,' she feels trapped in a kind of hell, even damned to its lowest depths. Not only is all hope lost, . . . her soul is reduced to a complete blankness about God's presence (and the memory of it), and is brimming over with that of the evil one" (312–13).

³⁵ "She was daily visited by the most frightful nights of the soul which . . . for hours caused her anxiety that she knew not if she were in hell. . . . Her will wanted to tend to love, but was paralyzed as if petrified in ice. . . . Terror and anguish took possession of her totally, and her heart, overwhelmed, cried out: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' But no one replied. . . . Yet what was worst of all in her sufferings was that these ills presented themselves as having to last eternally; that no glimpse was given of an end to the distress; and that, since a wall of bronze made all escape impossible, no exit from the labyrinth could be found." Quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 87, note 77.

³⁶ Auguste Poulain, *Des grâces d'oraison* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1921), names Francis de Sales, Philip Beniti, Hildegard of Bingen, and Marguerite Marie Alacoque as those who directly experienced their damnation.

³⁷ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, trans. Robert J. Edmonson, C.J. (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 122. This passage occurs where the saint is describing her experiences roughly a year before she entered Carmel at the age of fifteen.

between the immanent and economic Trinity. But as to the specific link, already made by Aquinas, between atoning suffering and Christ's descent, Balthasar is hardly alone among his contemporary peers. He himself cites Jean Daniélou, Maurice Blondel, and numerous French exegetes who agree with him (and Thomas) here.³⁸ But obviously his most important ally on this theologoumenon will surely prove to be Joseph Ratzinger, whose career shows a remarkable consistency when he comes to discuss the connection between Christ's vicarious, atoning suffering and his descent into hell. As early as his *Introduction to Christianity* (originally published in German in 1968), the future pope has this to say:

After this, do we still need to ask what worship must be in our hour of darkness? Can it be anything else but the cry from the depths in company with the Lord who "has descended into hell" and who has established the nearness of God *in the midst of abandonment by God?* . . . This brings us back to our starting point, the article of the Creed that speaks of the descent into hell. This article thus asserts that Christ strode through the gate of our final loneliness, that in his Passion he went down into the abyss of our abandonment. Where no voice can reach us any longer, there is he. Hell is thereby overcome, or, to be more accurate, death, which was previously hell, is hell no longer. Neither is the same any longer because there is life in the midst of death, because love dwells in it. *Now only deliberate self-enclosure is hell* or, as the Bible calls it, the second death (Rev 20:14, for example). But death is no longer the path into icy solitude, the gates of *sheol* have been opened.³⁹

In his 1977 book *Eschatology*, the professor of dogmatic theology (as he still was at the time) makes the link between Christ's suffering in hell, the experiences of the mystics, and a renewed *theology* of the descent even more explicit:

The answer [to the mystery of evil] lies hidden in Jesus' descent into Sheol, in the *night of the soul which he suffered*, a night which no one can observe except by entering this darkness in suffering faith. Thus, in the history of holiness which hagiology offers us, and notably in the course of recent centuries, in John of the Cross, in Carmelite piety in general, and in that of Thérèse of Lisieux in particular, "Hell" has taken on a completely new meaning and form. *For the saints, "Hell" is not so much a threat to be hurled at other people but a challenge to oneself.* It is a challenge to suffer in the dark night of faith, to experience communion with

³⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. IV, *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 96–97.

³⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Porter (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 297, 301; emphases added.

Christ in solidarity with his descent into the Night. One draws near to the Lord's radiance by sharing *his darkness*. One serves the salvation of the world by leaving one's own salvation behind for the sake of others. In such piety, nothing of the dreadful reality of Hell is denied. Hell is so real that it reaches right into the existence of the saints. Hope can take it on, only if one shares in the suffering of Hell's night by the side of the One who came to transform our night *by his suffering*.⁴⁰

Finally, there is his most recent book, written entirely during his tenure in the Chair of Peter, *Jesus of Nazareth*, which draws on a traditional patristic theme that interprets Jesus' descent into the river Jordan at his Baptism as an anticipation of his descent into hell:

Jesus' Baptism, then, is understood as a repetition of the whole of history, which both recapitulates the past and anticipates the future. His entering into the sin of others is a descent into the "inferno." But he does not descend merely in the role of a spectator, as in Dante's *Inferno*. Rather, he goes down in the role of one whose suffering-with-others is a transforming suffering that turns the underworld around, knocking down and flinging open the gates of the abyss. His Baptism is a descent into the house of the evil one, combat with the "strong man" (cf. Lk 11:22) who holds men captive (and the truth is that we are all very much captive to powers that anonymously manipulate us!). Throughout all its history, the world is powerless to defeat the "strong man"; he is overcome and bound by one yet stronger, who, because of his equality with God, can take upon himself all the sin of the world and then suffers it through to the end—omitting nothing on the downward path

⁴⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 217–18, emphases added. In hindsight, this passage also shows why Cardinal Ratzinger expressed reservations about limbo (and, *a fortiori*, Augustine's consignment of unbaptized infants to hell proper). He is even more explicit in this passage: "We cannot start to set limits on God's behalf; *the very heart of the faith has been lost to anyone who supposes that it is only worthwhile, if it is, so to say, made worthwhile by the damnation of others*. Such a way of thinking, which finds the punishment of other people necessary, springs from not having inwardly accepted the faith; from loving only oneself and not God the Creator, to whom his creatures belong. That way of thinking would be like the attitude of those people who could not bear the workers who came last being paid a denarius like the rest; like the attitude of people who feel properly rewarded only if others have received less. This would be the attitude of the son who stayed at home, who could not bear the reconciling kindness of his father. It would be a hardening of our hearts, in which it would become clear that we were only looking out for ourselves and not looking for God; in which it would be clear that we did not love our faith, but merely bore it like a burden. . . . It is a basic element of the biblical message that the Lord died for all—being jealous of salvation is not Christian." Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 35–36, emphasis added.

into identity with the fallen. This struggle is the “conversion” of being that brings it into a new condition, that prepares a new heaven and a new earth. Looked at from this angle, the sacrament of Baptism appears as the gift of participation in Jesus’ world-transforming struggle in the conversion of life that took place in his descent and ascent.⁴¹

To be sure, Pope Benedict explicitly avows that he is not writing these lines *as pope* but is “merely” speaking his own opinions *in propria persona*:

It goes without saying that this book is in no way an exercise of the magisterium, but is solely an expression of my personal search “for the face of the Lord” (cf. Ps 27:8). Everyone is free, then, to contradict me. I would only ask my readers for that initial goodwill without which there can be no understanding.⁴²

That said, I would nonetheless argue that the developments sketched here are not just legitimate as private opinions of individual theologians, but inevitable. Maybe the linkage between Christ’s suffering soul in his passion and his descent into hell will never reach the level of infallible, obligatory teaching,⁴³ but I predict the link will become (if it has not already done so) the consensus among theologians.

Perhaps the best way to establish the inevitability of this consensus would be to examine the consequences that befall theology when this development is *denied*, the best example of which is provided by Alyssa Lyra Pitstick’s recent book *Light in Darkness*.⁴⁴ In this work, and even more in the dissertation on which it is based, Pitstick resolutely insists that Christ’s human soul underwent no suffering whatever in his sojourn in the underworld but went solely to greet the souls of the patriarchs of the Old Testament and perhaps a few pagans (note the unacknowledged influence of Dante here) who were already redeemed and in the state of grace before the death of Christ. I think the passages I have already cited

⁴¹ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 20.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xxiv.

⁴³ The way the descent clause tends to bob up and down in the Creeds (present in the Apostles’, absent in the Nicene, etc.) is just one indication among many of how puzzled the Church remains about this obscure point of revelation.

⁴⁴ Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), a somewhat abbreviated version of her doctoral dissertation, *Lux in Tenebris: The Traditional Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell and the Theological Opinion of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Rome: University of St. Thomas Aquinas [Angelicum] Press, 2005).

are enough to prove that the tradition of Christ's descent is too varied to admit of so univocal a reading as she provides. But the real crunch comes when she has to dispatch Aquinas's linkage of atoning suffering of Christ's soul with his descent into hell. Her interpretation takes two tacks, the first of which goes like this:

Yet here St. Thomas Aquinas seems to differ from the Church's liturgy. In his commentary on the Apostles' Creed, St. Thomas Aquinas writes that the first reason Christ descended into hell was "to undergo the entire punishment of sin and thus to expiate all guilt." If the Descent is expiatory, must it not also have been meritorious and have continued Christ's work on the cross? As St. Thomas would be understood consistently with the Church in her liturgical tradition, however, it seems one must distinguish between Christ's death as perfect expiation in that it accomplished man's redemption, and Christ's descent as expiatory insofar as it is essentially connected to that perfect expiation.⁴⁵

But since that is precisely Balthasar's (and Ratzinger's!) point, she has not succeeded in dispatching what she obviously regards as a threat to her entire case. So she must take a second tack, as explained here:

His soul deserved to enter heaven immediately on His own merits. Instead, however, He descended in His soul into limbo. He did not suffer there the delay of the vision of God, however, for Christ always possessed the beatific vision. (*In a certain sense, one might say His soul was in heaven immediately after death as it deserved to be, insofar as the joy of heaven's beatitude which He always had filled His entire soul after the end of the sorrows of the Passion.*)⁴⁶

Unfortunately for her thesis, she is not interpreting the notion of the beatific vision here *secundum mentem divi Thomae*, who never held that the beatific vision served as a kind of celestial anesthetic, inuring the human soul of Christ from pain, as can be proved from an abundance of passages in which Thomas consistently holds that Christ endured every human suffering—not specifically of course, since no man can suffer both the pains of dying in a burning building and of death by drowning, but generically, since Christ knew all types of suffering.⁴⁷ Nor is this compat-

⁴⁵ Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 66, with almost identical wording in idem, *Lux in Tenebris*, 84.

⁴⁶ Pitstick, *Light*, 66, emphasis added; idem, *Lux*, 85. Tellingly, the parenthetical (and here italicized) sentence appears only in the dissertation, presumably lest her outright denial of the Descent clause in the Apostles' Creed become too glaring.

⁴⁷ For example: "In His head He suffered from the crown of piercing thorns; in His hands and feet, from the fastening of the nails; on His face from the blows and

ibility of the most intense suffering with Christ's consciousness of union with his Father—however paradoxical it at first seems—merely a theological opinion, for it has now received magisterial status in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Novo millennio ineunte*, where the pope teaches:

At the very moment when he identifies with our sin, "abandoned" by the Father, he "abandons" himself into the hands of the Father. Precisely because of the knowledge and experience of the Father which he alone has, even at this moment of darkness he sees clearly the gravity of sin and suffers because of it. He alone, who sees the Father and rejoices fully in him, can understand completely what it means to resist the Father's love by sin. More than an experience of physical pain, his passion is an agonizing suffering of the soul. Theological tradition had not failed to ask how Jesus could possibly experience at one and the same time his profound unity with the Father, by its very nature a source of joy and happiness, and an agony that goes all the way to his final cry of abandonment. The simultaneous presence of these two seemingly irreconcilable aspects is rooted in the fathomless depths of the hypostatic union. (§26)⁴⁸

Another problem with Pitstick's assertion that Christ really went to heaven rather than hell from the moment of his death is that such a thesis implies that the damned are already damned before Christ came on earth "for us and for our salvation." In Pitstick's reading of the tradition, those who were damned before the coming of Christ stay damned, since Christ never visited them in the first place. But it is precisely Catholic teaching that no one is damned except through the judgment of Christ himself, one made fully applicable to all those born before the coming of Christ by his descent into the abode of the dead:

The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus' messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption.⁴⁹

spittle; and from the lashes over His entire body. Moreover, He suffered in all His bodily senses: in touch, by being scourged and nailed; in taste, by being given vinegar and gall to drink; in smell, by being fastened to the gibbet in a place reeking with the stench of corpses; in hearing, by being tormented with the cries of blasphemers and scorners; in sight, by beholding the tears of His Mother and of the disciple whom He loved." *ST III*, q. 46, a. 5.

⁴⁸ For a fascinating commentary on this passage as a window of interpretation into Balthasar's theology, see Matthew Levering, "Balthasar on Christ's Consciousness on the Cross," *The Thomist* 65 (2001): 567–81.

⁴⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §634. In contrast Pitstick insists that when Jesus said "It is accomplished/finished/completed" (Jn 19:30) the moment before he

But the whole point of John's Gospel is that the power of judgment has been handed over to Christ:

For the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. . . . Amen I tell you, a time is coming and is now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.⁵⁰

There are two implications to be drawn from this passage. First, as regards the history of salvation, it is not even possible to give a definitive No to God until God has definitively revealed himself in his total identity by sending his Son.⁵¹ Second, this means that the underworld populated by the dead born before Christ *must* remain undifferentiated until Christ comes to complete his work by descending into the underworld. As the Bible teaches (Revelation 20:13–5), hell does not become defin-

died, he was referring to the end of his mission, not his life, an idiosyncratic interpretation followed by no contemporary exegete and which in any event is contradicted by the *Catechism* here cited.

⁵⁰ John 5:22–23, 25–27. This passage also explains why I have insisted throughout this section that the question of *apokatastasis* (universal redemption) must be distinguished from the descent as such. There is, in other words, no conflict between asserting a connection between atonement and descent and saying that, ultimately, some men might not be saved. In fact, I would go further and insist that there is really no development at all on the question of the population of heaven and hell, precisely because the Church has received no revelation on that issue. Different ages will be more or less pessimistic about that; but no one knows. All we do know is that no one can say that all men *will* be saved (that is Origenism), nor that some have definitely not been saved, which would make the Church's prayer that no one be lost a lie. On this, see the wise words of Pope John Paul II: "Who will these [condemned to hell] be? The Church has never made any pronouncement in this regard. This is a mystery, truly inscrutable, which embraces the holiness of God and the conscience of man. The silence of the Church is, therefore, the only appropriate position for Christian faith. Even when Jesus says of Judas, the traitor, 'It would be better for that man if he had never been born' (Matthew 26:24), His words do not allude for certain to eternal damnation." John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, trans Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994), 185–86.

⁵¹ This is the direct correlate of Paul's line that "the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not Yes and No, but in him it has always been Yes. For no matter how many promises God has made, they are all Yes in Christ" (2 Cor 1:19–20). Definitive reprobation can thus only arise by a human's free No to that definitive Yes.

itive until Christ *truly* descends there. As then-Cardinal Ratzinger says on this point:

In reality, the “inferi” [lower regions referred to by the Apostles’ Creed] . . . , that in German was first translated by *hell* [*Hölle*] and more recently by *kingdom of the dead* [*das Reich des Todes*], is simply the Latin equivalent of the Hebrew word *sheol* which indicates a realm of the dead that can be imagined as a kind of shadowy existence, existence and non-existence at the same time. . . .

Yes, Jesus died, he “descended” into the mysterious depths death leads to. He went to the ultimate solitude where no one can accompany us, for “being dead” is above all loss of communication. It is isolation where love does not penetrate. In this sense Christ descended “into hell” whose essence is precisely the loss of love, of being cut off from God and man.⁵²

Needless to say, this brief snapshot of theological developments regarding Christ’s descent into hell does not, in and of itself, fully account for—let alone justify—the vast theological vision of Hans Urs von Balthasar, which would in any event require much fuller treatment than is possible here.⁵³ But to show the inevitability of a theology that will at least roughly resemble something like what Balthasar has produced, let me

⁵² Joseph Ratzinger, “Reflections on the Origin of My Meditations on Holy Week,” in Joseph Ratzinger and William Congdon, *The Sabbath of History* (Washington, DC: The William G. Congdon Foundation, 2000), 21–22. This quotation comes from the cardinal’s preface to this book of meditations on Holy Week accompanied by Congdon’s artwork; the preface was written in 1997. In my debate with Pitstick in *First Things* on her book, she claimed that in this hard-to-locate book Cardinal Ratzinger supported her thesis of Balthasar’s heresy, which cannot be remotely justified by what the cardinal actually says, not only in the quotation given above but especially here: “‘Descended into hell’—this profession of Holy Saturday means that Christ has traversed the gate of loneliness, that he has descended into the unreachable, insurmountable ground of abandonment. It means that even in the last night in which no word can be heard, in which we are all like crying, forlorn children, there is a voice that calls us, a hand that takes and leads us. The insuperable loneliness of man is overcome since He was there in it.” Ratzinger, “Reflections,” 45.

⁵³ Such a full treatment can be found in Helmut Dieser, *Der gottähnliche Mensch und die Gottlosigkeit der Sünde: Zur Theologie des Descensus Christi bei Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1998). See also Thomas Rudolph Krenski, *Passio Caritatis: Trinitarische Passiologie im Werk Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1990). This last work, however, occasionally obscures a point often overlooked by both Balthasar’s supporters and his opponents: the distinction between “Jesus’ experience of the abyss from that of the damned,” for which see *Theo-Drama*, vol. IV, *The Action*, 297, note 55.

conclude this account with his interpretation of these lines from St. Paul, with emphases added:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men" [Ps 68:18]. But what does "he ascended" mean except that *he also descended to the depths of the earth*? He who is descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, *in order to fill all things*. (Eph 4: 7–10)

For Balthasar, Paul's expression "all things" [*ta panta*] must truly mean *all things*. First he insists that Jesus' claim to be *the* Truth (John 14:6), and not just a way *to* the truth, means that he differs from all other founders of world religions and philosophies without exception. But how can that be unless Christ does actually "fill all things"? Here is his interpretation:

If this claim stands, the whole Truth must possess a ballast, an absolute counterweight, that can be counterbalanced by nothing else; and because it is a question of truth, it must be able to show that it is so. The stone in the one pan of the scales [of justice] must be so heavy that one can place in the other pan all the truth there is in the world, every religion, every philosophy, every complaint against God, without counterbalancing it. Only if that is true is it worthwhile remaining a Christian today. If there were any other weight capable, ever so slightly, of raising up the Christian side of the scales and moving that absolute counterweight into the sphere of relativity, then being a Christian would be a matter of preference, and one would have to reject it unconditionally. Somehow or other it would have been outflanked. To think of [this kind of relativized Christianity] as of more than historical interest would be a waste of time.⁵⁴

The great irony in this debate is that many liberal Christians distance themselves from the atonement during Christ's passion as representing a theology of patriarchal child-abuse, while certain conservative Catholics of an Infernalist bent object to any hint of atonement in hell, *pace* Aquinas and a host of others, very much including the present pope *felicitur regnans*. But both groups will inevitably end up relativizing Christ's claim to absoluteness, making him but one more way "to" the truth, but not the Truth itself.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Why I Am Still a Christian," in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Two Say Why*, trans. John Griffiths (London: Search Press, 1973), 29–30.

⁵⁵ I have tried to argue that point specifically elsewhere. See Edward T. Oakes, "The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007): 184–99, where the focus is on

Finally, let me conclude with an observation made by Pope John Paul II in a message he sent in June 1988 to a group of scientists and theologians gathered by papal invitation at the Vatican Observatory, where he pointed out how much more development of doctrine the Church could expect in the future, given how vast in time that future now seems to open up before us, given the findings of cosmology:

If the cosmologies of the ancient Near Eastern world could be purified and assimilated into the first chapters of Genesis, might contemporary cosmology have something to offer our reflections upon creation? Does an evolutionary perspective bring any light to bear upon theological anthropology, the meaning of the human person as the *imago Dei*, the problem of Christology—and even upon the development of doctrine itself? What, if any, are the eschatological implications of contemporary cosmology, especially in light of the vast future of our universe?⁵⁶

I suspect the Church has barely begun the task of plumbing the depths of meaning lurking in the Apostles' Creed. What will prove to be a long story has just begun. N V

the consequences for Christological relativism if a radical theology of the descent is denied in favor of Pitstick's insistence that Christ went directly to heaven after his death.

⁵⁶ Pope John Paul II, "Message to the Director of the Vatican Observatory," in *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A Quest for Common Understanding*, ed. Robert J. Russell, William R. Stoeger, S.J., and George V. Coyne, S.J. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), M11. Compare this position to the attitude of so many Muslims to the rationality of science: "They were some of the best and brightest in the Muslim world who toiled for years to master their knowledge. Now they stand accused of seeking mass murder. For weeks, commentators and analysts in the Muslim world have been grappling with the implications that a Muslim doctor and engineer, at the pinnacle of their society, may have been behind the failed car bombings in London and Glasgow last month. The question being asked in many educated and official circles is this: How could such acts be committed by people who have supposedly dedicated their lives to scientific rationalism and to helping others? The answer, some scientists and analysts say, may lie in the way that a growing movement of fervent Muslims use science as reinforcement of religious belief, rather than as a means for questioning and exploring the foundations of the natural world. . . . In other words, science is a tool for furthering an ideology rather than a means of examining core beliefs." Hassan M. Fattah, "Radicalism among Muslim Professionals Worries Many," *New York Times*, July 14, 2007, A3 (National Edition, filed from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, July 13, 2007).

