

Pope Benedict XVI on Christ's Descent into Hell

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AFTER A RELATIVELY quiescent period of neglect, the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell has recently come to the fore as a controversial issue in theology, especially because of the central role which this mystery plays in the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Given that controversy, a sober look at Pope Benedict XVI's apparently similar (though certainly not identical) theology of Christ's descent should prove illuminating. Theological controversies have of course often served to advance the development of doctrine in the past, which indeed has largely been driven by controversy.¹ This overview of the pope's theology of the descent, however, wishes to eschew these controversies in order to be primarily expository, not interpretative: neither advocating nor attacking.² By calling this presentation

¹ As Augustine certainly recognized: "Only because of the heretics in her midst could the Catholic Church find a more exact way to express herself in words, and the orthodox were preserved in their right-thinking because of the false thinkers among them. . . . For example, was any complete account of the Trinity available before the Arians began to bay at it? . . . Nor had the unity of Christ's body [the Church] been discussed in such a developed, explicit way until [the Donatist] division began to trouble the weaker brethren." Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms*: 51–72, at Psalm 54:22, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001), 74–75. Modern observers, of course, readily agree: "Orthodoxy—the accepted truth—is established and articulated against a background of heresy. Paradoxically, more often than not dogmas are crystallized in the struggle against their rejection." Leszek Kolakowski, "Heresy," in *The Two Eyes of Spinoza & Other Essays on Philosophers*, trans. Agnieszka Kolakowska (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2004): 263–88; here 267.

² This article is a revised version of a lecture first delivered on November 12, 2011, at a conference on the Christology of Pope Benedict XVI sponsored by the Augustine Institute of Denver, Colorado.

expository, I mean that it intends to set out, more or less in chronological order and with only explicative comments added on my part, those passages from the writings of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI touching on the theme of Christ's descent into the underworld on Holy Saturday.

I. Background

But before I set out on that primary task, perhaps it would be pedagogically wise to begin with a few general remarks on the meaning of this obscure doctrine—obscure enough to be mentioned in the Apostles' Creed yet omitted (for whatever reason) in the Nicene Creed—a variation of presence and absence which itself might be an indication of the Church's puzzled reaction to this event, a puzzlement additionally shown in the variety of voices found in all eras of the Church about the meaning of this doctrine.

The obscurity of the teaching on the descent is the result of two factors: (1) those passages in the New Testament that can plausibly be said to refer to this event are not plentiful; and (2), wherever the New Testament does seem to mention the descent, it is not at all clear where exactly Christ descends. What kind of place is it whither he goes? Is it a vague underworld where all and sundry live out a kind of shadowy existence (the Sheol of the Old Testament or the Hades of Homer and Virgil); or is it the so-called *limbus patrum* ("limbo of the fathers"), where only those dwell who may expect a final redemption; or is it a veritable hell of the damned, where Christ actually must suffer the same kind of pain that the damned do?

As to the first point, the Gospels never mention anything at all about Holy Saturday as event, only as interval. For all four evangelists, that day of rest, the Sabbath, was merely the single interposed day between Jesus' death on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday, during which his body was also truly (and of course appropriately) *resting* in the tomb. Moreover, after the resurrection Jesus is never described in the Easter narratives of these four Gospels as having reported anything at all about his "experiences" in the underworld, one way or the other.

True, in his earthly ministry Jesus does say the following: "How can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then, he can rob the house. . . . A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign; but no sign will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Mt 12:29; 39–40).³ The

³ Luke abbreviates the second part of this saying, omitting mention of the three days and nights, but elaborates a bit more in recounting the first part: "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when

pairing of these two sayings would soon be taken to refer to the saving effects of Jesus's descent into the underworld (including by Benedict, as we shall see later).

The mention of the descent as an actual event with saving consequences (and not just as mere interval) is certainly much more explicit in the Petrine and Pauline corpus; but references to it are hardly plentiful even there. Given the relative paucity of Peter's voice in the New Testament outside of the Gospels, the references to Christ's descent are particularly striking in the Petrine writings, occurring three times: once in Acts and twice in the first Letter of Peter. On Pentecost Sunday, and therefore in his first "sermon," Peter says the following: "But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the pains of death [other manuscripts read the word Hades for death], because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. . . . Seeing what was ahead, he [David] spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:24, 31).⁴ Finally, in Peter's first Epistle we read: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom he also went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed God long ago. . . . For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God" (1 Pt 3:18–20a; 4:6).

Paul's references to Christ's descent (which are sometimes only mere allusions) are hardly more plentiful; and, given that more survives of his writings than is true of the Petrine corpus, these few references tend to get overwhelmed in the midst of his other concerns, like justification, circumcision, the law, sanctification, church order, and the like. Moreover, Paul will occasionally speak of the descent in rhetorical questions; and since rhetorical questions often presume a prior knowledge on the part of readers which the author assumes he can take for granted, later readers must often puzzle out what that assumed knowledge might be, as here: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to

someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils" (Lk 11:21–22).

⁴ Of all the books of the New Testament, Acts of the Apostles has the most textual variants in the surviving manuscripts, so much so that the cluster of variants (about ten percent of the text) has merited its own moniker: the Western text. At verse 24 the Western text reads Hades for death, the former of which is obviously of greater relevance for the issue at hand. But all manuscripts read *Hades* at verse 31, so the sermon on the whole is still relevant for the descent, no matter how Luke's autograph might have read at verse 24.

bring Christ up from the dead)” (Rom 10:6–7). Perhaps the Roman recipients of this letter understood the reference; but it seems Paul had to make his meaning clearer to the Ephesians, for here he is less allusive, even if he still resorts to rhetorical questions: “This is why it [Scripture] says: ‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men’ [Psalm 68:18]. But what does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the depths of the earth? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill all things” (Eph 4:7–10).⁵

From these assertions of the universal reach of Christ’s descent/ascent, Paul is able elsewhere to draw further dogmatic conclusions, even where he is not specifically speaking of the descent, as here: “So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be the Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Rom 14:8–9), a view also reflected in Revelation, where Jesus is heard proclaiming: “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the Living One. I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades” (Rv 1:17b–18).

Which brings us to the second issue raised by these verses: What does the word *Hades* mean here, both in Revelation and in Peter’s Pentecost sermon? What kind of “place” is it? In the New Testament, Hades usually

⁵ The implication here seems to be that Christ’s descent, precisely by filling *all* things (*ta panta*), entails the definitive conquest of evil. After the fourth century, this interpretation would later gain added plausibility, especially among the Latin Fathers, when the *Day Star* mentioned in Isaiah 14:12 was translated by the Vulgate as *Lucifer*. Even in its original context, it seems that Isaiah is speaking not of some unnamed Babylonian king, or at least not exclusively, but of Satan himself: “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven, above the stars of God. I will set my throne on high. I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit. Those who see you will stare at you, and ponder over you: ‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?’ All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb; but you are cast out, away from your sepulcher, like a stunted branch clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the Pit, like a dead body trodden underfoot” (Is 14:12–19; emphases added). In other words, a kind of chiasmic effect becomes apparent here when Isaiah is paired with Ephesians: Satan tries to ascend from the depths of hell to claim the throne of God and for his pains gets hurled back to the Pit; whereas Christ descends from heaven to claim his own, and then ascends back to heaven, leading “captives in his train.”

refers to a *generic* underworld where all the dead dwell without regard to their final destiny at the end of time (the rough equivalent of the Hebrew Sheol), whereas by contrast Gehenna will usually refer to something like our notion of a specific and permanent hell of the unredeemed and damned. Then that contrast will double-back on the usual generic connotation of the former word, thereby making Hades something more *specific*, the rough equivalent of the *limbus patrum*, where dwell only those plausibly awaiting redemption.⁶ But if this distinction is meant to assert that Jesus went only to a now-specific Hades but not to Gehenna, then we must conclude that such a distinction finds no support in the New Testament, at least if we take seriously Paul's line that Christ's descent into the underworld and his later ascent into heaven was meant "to fill *all* things" (Eph. 4:10), by which Christ thereby extended the range of his rule to all the living and the dead (Rv 1:18). Nor does Peter distinguish Hades from Gehenna when he is speaking of Christ's descent to the former; indeed his mention of the "pains of Hades" (Acts 2:24; Western text) and his reference to Christ preaching to "spirits in *prison* who *disobeyed* God long ago" (1 Pt 3:19b–20a) indicates that he is speaking of a generic Hades, irrespective of the differentiated state of these "prisoners" according to the differences in their earthly merits.

In the patristic period, however, some early Christian writers did begin to distinguish Hades from Gehenna—and they did so specifically in order to limit Christ's sojourn in the underworld solely to the former. Origen, for example (and quite ironically, considering his later reputation as a universalist), makes heavy use of this distinction, as one noted Origen scholar points out: "By His descent [according to Origen], Christ destroys the Devil's dominion over captured humanity. . . . [But] if the saints and repentant sinners eventually dwell in heaven, . . . the wicked—unrepentant and hardened sinners—are damned to Gehenna, the place of fire."⁷

⁶ "Gehenna is to be distinguished from Hades, which is either the abode of all the dead in general (Acts 2:27, 31; Rv 20:13–14) or the place where the wicked await the final judgment. . . . Gehenna designates the place or state of the final punishment of the wicked." *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 335. Only once is Hades used in the New Testament to mean "hell," at Luke 16:23.

⁷ Lawrence R. Hennessey, "The Place of Saints and Sinners after Death," in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 295–312; here 299, 306. In another passage Origen does not explicitly distinguish Hades from Gehenna, but he does imply that Christ's sojourn in the underworld did not bring about the conversion of everyone he encountered there: "He [Celsus] says to us: *You will not say of him, I presume, that having failed to convince men on earth he travelled*

To add to the irony, Augustine—who certainly held to a vastly populated hell of the eternally miserable—rejects this distinction and holds that Christ descended not just to some realm of the already justified just (the “bosom of Abraham” in his terminology) but also to the very realm of the miserable:

Consequently, if holy Scripture had said that Christ after death came [solely] into the 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 [of 1 Pt] 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 [only] certain ones 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*.⁸

Just from this quick look at these two authors, we gain some idea of the diversity of voices in the early Church regarding this clause in the Apostles' Creed. But we can also draw some general conclusions as well. First, as noted patristic scholar J. N. D. Kelly points out: “The belief that Christ spent the interval between His expiry on the cross and his resurrection in the underworld was a commonplace of Christian teaching from the earliest times.”⁹ Building on that common fund, and as the perspective of the Church widened as she moved out of her Jewish

to Hades to convince them there. Even if he dislikes it, we do maintain this: that when he was in the body he convinced not merely a few, but also so many that the multitude of those persuaded by him provoked the conspiracy 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* II.42, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 99–100. The implication of this passage seems to be that roughly the same percentage of those who rejected him on earth and brought about his death would be reflected in the underworld: most would be convinced of his mission, but not all.

⁸ *Saint Augustine's Letters*, vol. 3 (131–64), trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953), 386, emphases added. In other words, Origen, the alleged universalist, divides the underworld into two “chambers,” Hades and Gehenna, and holds—at least in *Contra Celsum*—that Christ went only to the former; whereas Augustine, who certainly held to a populated hell, divides the underworld into two realms, the bosom of Abraham and hell (*infernum*), to *both* of which Christ descended, and he leaves open (at least in this passage) the question of exactly how many were rescued from their sorrow.

⁹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, third edition (London: Longman Group, and New York: David McKay Company, 1972), 379.

matrix into the larger pagan world, the event of Christ's descent began to be seen in more universalist terms:

What is important for us to observe . . . is that by the time the Descent became an accepted article in the creed, a rather different complex of ideas was being associated with it according to which Christ's activity consisted in completely subjugating hell and the ruler of the underworld. . . . We can see it taking shape in the thought of Rufinus, who argued that Christ consented to die in order that He might spoil death, and expatiated on His victorious combat in the underworld with the Devil. For him, it would appear, the underworld meant hell, and the Descent was coming to be viewed as the occasion of the redemption, not just of the patriarchs of old, but of mankind in general.¹⁰

All that needs to be added here for purposes of providing the background to Benedict's theology of Christ's descent is the medieval contribution. Precisely because medieval piety increasingly stressed the role of Christ's suffering as the specific modality of his saving activity,¹¹ it began to be seen

¹⁰ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 381. As mentioned earlier, the identification of the Day Star of Isaiah 14:12–19 would also prove determinative in this universalizing perspective, especially when paired with Matthew 12:29—the “strong man” Lucifer has now been despoiled. Jaroslav Pelikan gives a similar summary: “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 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. . . . [which] 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 [already] interpreting the atonement as a sacrifice and increasingly as an act of satisfaction offered by the death of Christ.” 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.

¹¹ As in the popular devotion of following the Stations of the Cross along erected panels inside the nave of churches; see also Aquinas: “Christ grieved not only over the loss of his own bodily life, but also over the sins of all others. And this grief in Christ surpassed all grief of every contrite heart, both because it flowed from a greater wisdom and charity, by which the pang of contrition is intensified, and because he grieved at the one time for all sins, according to Isaiah [53:4]: *Surely he hath borne our sorrows*. But such was the dignity of Christ's life in the body, especially on account of the Godhead united with it, that its loss, even

how the saving effects of Christ's descent in the underworld were brought about through Christ's continued suffering during his sojourn in hell. So we read in Thomas Aquinas's *Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*, where he says that the first reason Christ descended into hell was "to endure the entire punishment due to sin and thereby to atone for all of its guilt."¹²

II. Pope Benedict XVI

1. *Introduction to Christianity* (1968)

What remains as the task for the rest of this overview is simply to set out what Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI has made of this variegated tradition. To the best of my knowledge, the first place in his writings where the future pope takes up this theme is in his *Introduction to Christianity*. A treatment of the mystery of Holy Saturday in this work should not be surprising, since the book is in its entirety a theological exposition of the Apostles' Creed, the earliest extant creed in which Christ's descent to hell is mentioned. The author's first task, of course, is to establish the relevance of the descent clause. For after the middle ages the history of theology witnesses a noticeable falling-off of interest in the doctrine, sometimes amounting to its downright denial, especially among Protestants.¹³ Nowadays, however, one notices not so much a denial of this particular mystery of redemption as a kind of bafflement, a "shrug of the shoulders," so to speak, a nonplussed perplexity at what the clause could mean, as the Bavarian theologian notes in this key passage:

Possibly no article of the Creed is so far from present-day attitudes of mind as this one. Together with the belief in the birth of Jesus from the

for one hour, would be a matter of greater grief than the loss of another man's life for howsoever long a time. . . . And in like fashion Christ laid down his most beloved life for the good of charity, according to Jeremiah [12:7]: *I have given my dear soul into the hands of her enemies*" (ST III, q. 46, a. 6, obj. 4).

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *The Sermon-Conferences of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Apostolic Creed*, trans. Nicholas Ayo, C.S.C. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 78: "ut sustineret totam poenam peccati, et sic totam culpam expiaret."

¹³ Methodists even dropped the descent clause from the Apostles' Creed altogether, based on John Wesley's objections: "Wesley's resistance to this doctrine is well known and documented. He omitted reference to it from his Twenty-Five Articles [his truncated version of Anglicanism's Thirty-Nine Articles], and the American Methodist Conference of 1786 followed his lead and deleted the article from the Apostles' Creed as used in Sunday services. In handling the classical texts, Wesley uniformly opposes the doctrine. . . . [His] note on Acts 2:27 makes the flat statement: 'It doth not appear that ever our Lord went into hell.'" John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), 50–51.

Virgin Mary and that in the Ascension of the Lord, it seems to call most of all for “demythologization,” a process that in this case looks devoid of danger and unlikely to provoke opposition. The few places where Scripture seems to say anything about this matter . . . are so difficult to understand that they can easily be expounded in many different ways. Thus if in the end one eliminates the statement altogether, one seems to have the advantage of getting rid of a curious idea, and one difficult to harmonize with our own modes of thought, without making oneself guilty of a particularly disloyal act.¹⁴

But it quickly emerges that Ratzinger is arguing in the medieval manner here, by first giving the case that he will soon be arguing against (as when a disputed question in the medieval classroom will begin with the *Videtur quod* passage, outlining the contrary case; then comes the position the author will be advocating). Hence the concessions made in the above passage (a strategy the Roman rhetorician Quintilian called *concessum, non datum*): for Ratzinger, the descent clause only *looks* irrelevant, but it is in fact strikingly relevant to the modern situation:

But is anything really gained by this [dismissal of the clause]? Or has one simply evaded the difficulty and obscurity of reality? One can try to deal with problems either by denying their existence or by facing up to them. The first method is the more comfortable one, but only the second leads anywhere. Instead of pushing the question aside, then, should we not learn to see that this article of faith . . . is particularly close to our day and is to a particular degree the experience of our [twentieth] century?¹⁵

In a way, the desuetude into which the mystery of Holy Saturday fell in modern times can be readily explained by a liturgical quirk: not only are the references in the New Testament to the descent few and those extremely ambiguous, there is also no opportunity in the liturgical calendar for any preaching on the events of Holy Saturday. In the services for Good Friday the preacher obviously will be focusing on the sufferings of Christ's Passion; the next opportunity for a homily comes at the Easter Vigil late in the night of Holy Saturday, after the *Exultet* has been sung and the gospel of the resurrection proclaimed, where Christ's victory over sin and death will be the sole theme of preaching.¹⁶ Yet that very

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 293–94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁶ Of course, there was even less opportunity for homiletic reflection on the mystery of Holy Saturday when the (by now misnamed!) “Vigil” was celebrated on Saturday *morning*, a trend that began in the late middle ages, at just the time when, not

silence of the Church on Holy Saturday, when the tabernacle is empty and all liturgical services cease, is for Ratzinger precisely what constitutes the relevance of this day for our time:

On Good Friday our gaze remains fixed on the crucified Christ, but Holy Saturday is the day of the “death of God,” the day that expresses the unparalleled experience of our age, anticipating the fact that God is simply absent, that the grave hides him, that he no longer awakes, no longer speaks, so that one no longer needs to gainsay him but can simply overlook him. “God is dead and we have killed him.” This saying of Nietzsche’s belongs linguistically to the tradition of Christian Passiontide piety: it expresses the content of Holy Saturday, “descended into hell.”¹⁷

Silence, in other words, is the whole *point* of the doctrine: liturgical silence serves merely to indicate and symbolize a more embracing silence—God’s:

Thus the article about the Lord’s descent into hell reminds us that not only God’s speech but also his silence is part of the Christian revelation. God is not only the comprehensible word that comes to us; he is also the silent, inaccessible, uncomprehended, and incomprehensible ground that eludes us. To be sure, in Christianity there is a primacy of the *logos*, of the word, over silence; God *has* spoken, God *is* word. But this does not entitle us to forget the truth of God’s abiding concealment. Only when we have experienced him as silence may we hope to hear his speech, too, which proceeds in silence. Christology reaches out beyond the Cross, the moment when the divine love is tangible, into the death, the silence and the eclipse of God. Can we wonder that the Church and the life of the individual are led again and again into this hour of silence, into the forgotten and almost discarded article, “Descended into hell”?¹⁸

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of Christ’s descent into hell as the turning point of salvation history, as the completion of Christ’s work on the cross, the moment when it becomes true what John says in

surprisingly, the theme of Christ’s descent into hell was being either ignored or attenuated. As is well known, Pope Pius XII moved the Vigil service back to its traditional place on Saturday night: first on an experimental basis in his *motu proprio* of 1951, *De solenni vigilia paschali instauranda*, and then four years later on a permanent basis for the whole Latin Church in his 1955 decree *Maxima redemptionis nostrae mysteria*, the latter of which also extensively revised the rites for Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. With this important shift, the liturgical silence of the Triduum was extended from the conclusion of the Good Friday service all the way into the dark hours of Holy Saturday night.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 294.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 296–97; italics in the original.

his first Epistle, that Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for our sins alone, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn 2:2):

“The gospel was preached even to the dead” [1 Pt 4:6]. 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.¹⁹

We find an early adumbration of that same point when the future pope (and of course also the future guiding hand in the drafting of the *Catechism* during the papacy of John Paul II) says that “in Jesus’ death cry, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34), the mystery of Jesus’ descent into hell is illuminated as if in a glaring flash of lightning on a dark night.”²⁰ The Bavarian theologian concedes that exegetes point out—and rightly—that this cry is drawn from the opening line of Psalm 22, which itself culminates in a paean of praise for God’s victory over death. But he demurs when those same exegetes go on to conclude from this universally admitted fact that either Jesus or Mark is signaling thereby that Jesus’ death on the cross *in and of itself* terminates in victory. Rather, for Ratzinger the final hymn of victory in that psalm only *becomes* true in the course of Christ’s sojourn in hell, a sojourn culminating in the resurrection:

This prayer that rises from the sheer misery of God’s seeming eclipse ends in praises of God’s greatness. This element, too, is present in Jesus’ death cry, which has been recently described by Ernst Käsemann as a prayer *sent up from hell*, as the raising of a standard, the first commandment, in the midst of God’s apparent absence: “The Son still holds on to faith [says Käsemann] when faith seems to have become meaningless and the earthly reality proclaims absent the God of whom the first thief and the mocking crowd speak—not for nothing. His cry is not for life and survival, not for himself, but for the Father. His cry stands against the reality of the whole world.” 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?²¹

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 364.

²⁰ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 297.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 297; emphasis added. Unfortunately, no reference is given in the text for the quotation from Käsemann.

As he did on the cross on Good Friday, Jesus continues to endure abandonment on Holy Saturday, but now in the very underworld of abandonment; and he does so by undergoing in our place the fate that should rightfully be ours. But here there is a difference: What to the world looks like Jesus' final defeat, the ultimate refutation by the Romans of his claim to be "King of the Jews," now turns into the validation of his claim, precisely through his bringing the standard of love into the ultimate realm where love is rejected:

Death is absolute loneliness. But the loneliness into which love can no longer advance is—hell. 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.²²

Hell now, and henceforth, is marked by the presence of Christ.

2. *The Sabbath of History* (1969)

Introduction to Christianity caught on with the public and became a best-seller in Germany. The next year saw the publication of a set of talks Professor Ratzinger had given earlier for a Bavarian radio station; they were translated much later into English as *The Sabbath of History*.²³ In these talks he again strongly asserts the direct relevance of the mystery of Holy Saturday for our time:

Repeated talk of God's death haunts our time. For [the German novelist] Jean Paul [1763–1825] it was only a nightmare. The dead Jesus proclaims to the dead from the rooftop of the world that he found no heaven in his trip to the beyond, no requited God, only infinite nothingness, the silence of the gaping void. . . . One hundred years later it was Nietzsche in dead earnest who uttered a shrill cry of dread: "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!" . . . For this is Holy Saturday, day of the hiddenness of God. It is the day of that frightful paradox that we recite in the Creed with the words "descended into hell," descended into the mystery of death. On Good Friday we could at least

²² Ibid., 301.

²³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Meditationen zur Karwoche* (Freising: Kyrios-Verlag, 1969), translated as *The Sabbath of History*, trans. John Rock, S.J. (Washington, DC: The William G. Congdon Foundation, 2000). This English edition also contains an additional essay from Cardinal Ratzinger written in 1997, which will be discussed in its proper place in this chronological exposition of the pope's theology of Christ's descent.

look at the pierced one. But Holy Saturday is empty, the heavy stone of the new tomb covers the deceased, everything is over, faith seems definitely unmasked as wishful thinking. No God has saved this Jesus who called himself his son. One can rest assured. The sober ones, who privately may have vacillated at times in their conviction that there is nothing else—they were right all along. Holy Saturday, the day of the burial of God—is that not in an uncanny way our day? Does our century not begin to become one large Holy Saturday, a day of God's absence . . . ?²⁴

Here we see once more the implied medieval structure of his presentation: it first *seems* as if God is absent, silent, withdrawn. But the mystery of Holy Saturday proves otherwise:

The darkness of God of this day, of this century, that is becoming more and more a Holy Saturday, addresses our consciences. . . . But despite everything, it also has something consoling about it. For God's dying in Jesus Christ is at the same time expression of his radical solidarity with us. The darkest mystery of faith is simultaneously the brightest sign of a hope that is without limits. . . . Only through the failure of Good Friday, only through the deathly stillness of Holy Saturday could the disciples be led to grasp who Jesus really was and what his mission truly meant. God had to die for them, so that he could truly live in them. . . . We needed the darkness of God, the silence of God, in order to experience the chasm of his greatness and the abyss of our nothingness, which would become manifest if he were not.²⁵

3. *Eschatology* (1977)

After Professor Ratzinger left the University of Tübingen (where he delivered the lectures that were later published as *Introduction to Christianity*), he moved to the University of Regensburg, where he lectured on and published a textbook called simply *Eschatology*.²⁶ Though his remarks on hell here are relatively brief and quite outweighed by his treatment of such extremely knotty questions in dogmatic eschatology as the immortality of the soul, temporality in purgatory, the already-present reality of the eschaton in the kingdom of God preached by Jesus, and other complex issues,

²⁴ Ratzinger, *Sabbath*, 37–38. The reference to Jean Paul refers to the German novelist Johann Paul Friedrich Richter who used the pseudonym Jean Paul. His novels are part of the *Sturm und Drang* movement of German Romanticism but also anticipated, as Ratzinger notes, the Nietzschean nihilism that has so characterized the twentieth century, a nihilism that is answered by God on Holy Saturday.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

²⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein, trans. edited by Aidan Nichols, O.P. second edition (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988).

nonetheless his remarks on hell and Christ's descent thereto add two new notes not found in his previous book from Tübingen: first, given the condemnation of Origenism, he takes up the question of the range of Christ's conquest of evil in his descent; and second, he introduces the witness of the Carmelite tradition into his reflections.

As to the first issue, Origenism, the Regensburg theologian notes that in Origen's book *On First Principles*, where he supposedly asserted the doctrine of universal salvation, the Greek Father was in fact just tossing out a hypothesis, not asserting a *de facto* universal salvation.²⁷ Ratzinger is not so much exonerating Origen here as pointing out the weakness of any speculative hypothesis of a *de facto* universal salvation when set over against the reality of evil: Although to the philosopher and theologian evil might be regarded as a privation of being, it nonetheless *feels* real; and *that* kind of evil Jesus most definitely experienced, especially on the cross:

That Cross throws light upon our theme from two directions. First, it teaches us that God himself suffered and died. Evil is not, then, something unreal for him. For the God who is love, hatred is not nothing. He overcomes evil, but not by some dialectic of universal reason which can transform all negations into affirmations. God overcomes evil not in a "speculative Good Friday," to use the language of Hegel, but on a Good Friday which was most real. He himself entered into the distinctive freedom of sinners but went beyond it in that freedom of his own love which descended willingly into the Abyss.²⁸

The second additional element the future pope adds to his reflections on this mystery comes from the Carmelite tradition, which (especially in the writings of John of the Cross) makes central to its spirituality the journey to God through a "dark night of the soul," whereby it is seen that the individual Christian is in fact often closest to God when he or she feels God's distance and silence the most. But in the most recently canonized Carmelite, Thérèse de Lisieux—who was in addition declared a Doctor of

²⁷ "Origen himself regarded his outline systematics as no more than a hypothesis. It was an approach to a comprehensive vision, an approach which did not necessarily claim to reproduce the contours of reality itself. While the effect of Neo-Platonism in the *Peri Archōn* [*On First Principles*] was to over-accentuate the idea that evil is in fact nothing and nothingness, God alone being real, the great Alexandrian divine later sensed much more acutely the terrible reality of evil, that evil which can inflict suffering on God himself and, more, bring him down to death. Nevertheless, Origen could not wholly let go of his hope that, in and through this divine suffering, the reality of evil is taken prisoner and overcome, so that it loses its quality of definitiveness." Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 215–16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

the Church by Pope John Paul II in 1997—we find a quite new accent: here we encounter someone who actually *volunteers* for hell, a moment she recounts in her remarkable autobiography *The Story of a Soul*:

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.²⁹

With this passage presumably in mind, the Regensburg professor draws these fresh dogmatic conclusions about the descent:

While the real quality of evil and its consequences become quite palpable here [in hell] the question also arises . . . whether in this event we are not in touch with a divine response able to draw freedom precisely as freedom to itself. The answer 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 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. Here hope does not emerge from the neutral logic of a system, from rendering humanity innocuous. Instead, it derives from the surrender of all claims to innocence and to reality's perduringness, a surrender which takes place by the Cross of the Redeemer.³⁰

4. *The English Preface to The Sabbath of History (1997)*

As mentioned above, when the English translation of his radio talks of 1969 was in preparation, the author had an opportunity to pen some additional

²⁹ Thérèse de Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, trans. Robert J. Edmonson (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 122.

³⁰ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 217–18; emphases added.

reflections on this theme. In these, he focused especially on the knotty exegetical question of the various meanings coalescing around the words Sheol, Hades, and hell.³¹ The problem is that, whereas ancient references to the underworld (including in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament) are usually vague, they become increasingly specific as doctrine develops. (Think of Dante, who with unrivaled poetic genius painted the afterlife with a powerful specificity not equaled before or since.) So although exegetes rightly point to the vagueness of the concepts of Sheol or Hades in the Bible, Cardinal Ratzinger (as he was at the time of this writing) finds the observation rather beside the point, “banal,” in his word.³² According to this mitigating interpretation,

the *infern* of the Creed, that in German was first translated by *hell* and more recently by *kingdom of death*, 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. It is very similar to the image of *hades* we have inherited from Homer that coincides rather with the view of the dead of the Ancient East. Accordingly, the word expresses only that Jesus died.³³

The cardinal is not attacking historical criticism here; rather, he is saying that the results of scholarly exegesis serve only as a starting point: “Since I always had great respect for the exegetes, I assumed that this statement was as such correct, but saw too that it was not thought through to the end.”³⁴ What is missing in this overly schematic exegesis is an explicit acknowledgment that, yes, Jesus was truly dead, that is, went to the realm where all of us go at death; but more crucially, his death was a *transforming* death that accomplishes its purposes precisely by Jesus being in solidarity with all the dead in the realm of the dead:

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, being cut off from God and man. But wherever he goes, “hell” ceases to be hell, because he himself is life and love, because he is the bridge which connects man

³¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Reflections on the origin of my meditations on Holy Week,” in *The Sabbath of History*, 17–23.

³² “A banal suggestion of some exegetes . . .” *ibid.*, 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

and God and thereby also connects men among themselves. And thus the descent is at the same time also transformation. The final solitude no longer exists—except for the one who wants it, who rejects love from within and from its foundation, because he seeks only himself, wants to be from and for himself.³⁵

5. Jesus of Nazareth Volume I (2007)

The final location where Pope Benedict speaks of the descent is in the first volume of his now three-volume meditation, *Jesus of Nazareth*. At first it might surprise the reader to learn that the pope does not refer to the descent at all in his second volume, which is, after all, devoted (for the most part) to the mysteries of Passiontide and Easter. But since none of the four Gospels treats of what “happened” while the body of Jesus lay in the tomb (as we noted above), the absence of any treatment on the pope’s part here should not surprise us. In the first volume, however, Benedict makes a most fascinating connection between Jesus’ descent into the River Jordan at his baptism and his later descent into hell (the connection between Jesus’ descent into the Jordan and his descent into the underworld, with the former serving as the foretype of the latter, is itself a common motif in patristic literature):

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

³⁵ Ibid., 22. These views from 1997 are also reflected in the 1969 book: “[S]till the question remains: what does the puzzling formula, Jesus ‘descended into hell,’ actually mean on closer analysis? Let us say it openly. No one can really explain it; and it does not become essentially clearer by establishing that hell is here a false translation of the Hebrew word *sheol* that simply signifies the realm of the dead as a whole, and so the formula originally means only this, that Jesus descended into the depths of death, was really dead and participated in the chasm of our mortal destiny. For the questions emerge: what in fact is death? And what actually happens when one descends into the depths of death? We shall have to think too that death is no longer the same since Christ descended into it, since Christ pervaded and accepted it, just as life and human existence are no longer the same since the human nature of Christ was and is allowed to touch God’s own being. Before, death was only death, separation from the land of the living and—even if in contrasting depth—something like hell was the nocturnal side of existence, impenetrable darkness. Now, however, even death is still life, and when we pass through the icy solitude of the gate of death, we even encounter him who is the life, the one who wanted to be the companion of our final loneliness and who in the deadly solitude of Gethsemane’s fear and his cry from the cross, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me,’ became sharer of our abandonments” (ibid., 42–43).

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. Luke 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 into identity with the fallen*. This struggle is the "conversion" of being that brings it into a new condition, [one] 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.³⁶

In this passage one may note two accents that were not as stressed in his meditations on Holy Saturday cited so far: First, the radical distinction of Christ's descent into the inferno from the one Dante underwent in his poem of that name. For the pope, the central difference is that Christ, in his descent, was affected, that is, *moved*: he *suffered* ("whose suffering-with-others is a transforming suffering"), whereas Dante entered hell merely as an unaffected *observer*. This insight was presumably influenced by Balthasar's monograph on Dante.³⁷ Second, the pope places special stress on the exceptionless character of Christ's suffering in hell and his

³⁶ 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; emphases added.

³⁷ "Dante does not distinguish theologically between the pre-Christian Hades (Sheol) and the Hell of the New Testament, nor does he grasp the connection between this Hell and the distinctive kerygma of the New Testament. This journey through Hell, therefore, follows in the footsteps of Virgil rather than of Christ, which for the Christian would be the only possible way of entering this 'place.'" Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Volume III: *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, John Saward, Martin Simon, and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 100. Significantly, when Dante weeps over the fate of the diviners and soothsayers (whose heads were placed backwards "since seeing forward was denied them"), Virgil reprimands him for his lachrymose compassion: "'Are you still witless as the rest? Here piety lives when pity is quite dead'" (Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XX, lines 15, 27–28). In other words, Virgil is ordering Dante *not to be moved*, whereas for Pope Benedict, Christ omitted nothing in his dolorous and compassionate *identification* with the fallen.

complete identification with the fate and condition of the fallen (“omitting *nothing* on the downward path into identity with the fallen”).

Such a stress on Christ's full identification with all those suffering in hell of course raises the dread specter, once again, of the heresy of Origenism—even if the historical Origen was not its real author but it was only attributed to him by his enemies (enemies who appeared long after his death). But there are enough indications in what has been quoted above to show that the pope fully concedes the freedom of the individual to reject the proffered love of Christ, whether manifested here or in the underworld, a point also repeated in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*.³⁸ Moreover, in his criticisms of Origen in *Eschatology*, he makes clear that Origen's real problem, at least in his more speculative moments, was an attempt at over-systematization.³⁹ In other words, the outcome of final

³⁸ The views in *Spe Salvi* were already anticipated in *God and the World*: “There will be few people whose lives are pure and fulfilled in all respects. And, we would hope, there will be few people whose lives have become an irredeemable and total No. For the most part, the longing for good has remained, despite many breakdowns, in some sense determinative. God can pick up the broken pieces and make something of them.” Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time. A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 129. For parallels to *Spe Salvi* see nos. 45–46: “There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth and readiness to love, people for whom everything has become a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. . . . On the other hand there can be people who are utterly pure, completely permeated by God, and thus fully open to their neighbors—people for whom communion with God even now gives direction to their entire being and whose journey towards God only brings to fulfillment what they already are. Yet we know from experience that neither case is normal in human life. For the great majority of people—we may suppose—there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil—much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul.” In other words, there seems to be a kind of “Bell Curve” operative here, with roughly equal numbers destined for immediate heaven or hell, with the vast majority obliged to pass through the fires of purgation. Of course, no one knows for sure, which is why the pope explicitly concedes he is hypothesizing here (“we may suppose”).

³⁹ As Ratzinger says in his entry on hell for a German reference work: “The kerygmic meaning of the dogma of hell is based, according to what was said above, in a statement about God and man. It lets us see, on the one hand, God's unconditional respect for man's free decisions. God offers his love but does not impose it; this shows us, on the other hand, the irreversible character of human historicity, whose total decision has definitive force. But both must constantly be linked with the message of God's mercy and the power of grace in Christ Jesus. For that

judgment must remain unknown, precisely so that hope may be given its proper room and not be trumped by certainty.⁴⁰

III. Conclusion

While this article has attempted to set out those passages in the large writings of Pope Benedict touching on Christ's descent into hell without much comment on my part beyond the obviously explicative, so that it almost constitutes a kind of catena of passages, nonetheless I hope it will not seem out of place if I draw some conclusions from this presentation. Even if there are surely distinct accents found in individual passages that are not so stressed in others, still one can easily detect certain common themes in the pope's theology of the descent, motifs that can be categorized under four headings: (1) silence, (2) relevance, (3) solidarity, and (4) suffering.

The stress on God's *silence* during Holy Saturday—which is also reflected in the Church's liturgical silence on that day, when no rites take place (and therefore no homiletic reflections either) until the Easter Vigil—emphasizes the ultimate mystery of that great event, the final import of which remains unknown until the Last Assizes. As we saw, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls this event the turning point in the history of salvation, but the final outcome of that turning point remains uncertain to us.

reason, every frivolous application of the dogma of hell, for example in preaching about sin, must be rejected." Joseph Ratzinger, "Hölle," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1986): 446–50; here 449; my translation.

⁴⁰ The same point applies of course *pari passu* to Augustine's certainty that unbaptized infants go to hell; indeed both certainties cancel each other out, as Balthasar explains here: "A classic example of this [taking one of two apparently contradictory statements from revelation and making either one absolute in order that it might be used as a steppingstone for further logical deduction] is the doctrine of double predestination (irrespective of whether *ante* or *post/praevisa merita*). According to this, God's sublime foreknowledge has from the outset appointed a number of men to eternal bliss and a number to eternal damnation. People can adduce God's absolute sovereignty in support of this, but also man's freedom. They can quote passages such as Matthew 25. They can do all this without noticing that they have clearly moved away from the central message of revelation and, having reduced the mystery of God's dealings with us to a logic, they have robbed him of his divinity. Does this mean that we are forced to adopt the converse teaching of the 'restoration of all things' and the abolition of hell? By no means. For that too would be to rationalize the love that is only encountered where it actually takes place, a love that demands our participation. We cannot man an observation post over and against this love. The Christian hope for this world is something quite different from rational reportage." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Truth Is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 65–66.

Second, Benedict's stress on God's silence paradoxically highlights the great *relevance* of this mystery for our godless age. For the pope, the mystery of Holy Saturday tells Christians that God has already enfolded into his providence the "drama of atheist humanism." Indeed, God speaks through the very pain that arises in the breasts of those who long for God's presence in the world and cannot find it.

Third, attempts by exegetes and later theologians to create a set of differentiations in the underworld to which Christ descended (Hades vs. Gehenna, for example) must take second place to the central and primary reality to which Holy Saturday always refers: the universality of death and the essential loneliness that is its distinguishing mark, no matter who the dead person is or how he lived, how his virtues match up with his vices, and so forth. *Solidarity* is the key. As the pope says in *Spe Salvi*:

Our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine, in what I think, say, do and achieve. And conversely, my life spills over into that of others: for better and for worse. (no. 48)⁴¹

Fourth, Jesus genuinely *suffered* in hell, in the underworld of our darkness.⁴² The accent on Christ's suffering in hell is especially noticeable in the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, where he speaks of Jesus taking upon himself all the sin of the world and then suffering it through to the end—omitting nothing on the downward path into identity with the fallen. Of course he is not implying thereby that Jesus was *stuck* in hell. Rather, just

⁴¹ Solidarity is also the crucial concept that runs through Benedict's social teaching, but that is a topic for another day.

⁴² Readers of Mother Teresa's remarkable book *Come Be My Light* will recall that she finally came to see her long spell of darkness as itself a participation in Jesus' own darkness: "At the Incarnation Jesus became like us in all things except sin; but at the time of the Passion, He became sin.—He took on our sins and that was why He was rejected by the Father. I think that this was the greatest of all the sufferings that He had to endure and the thing He dreaded most in the agony in the Garden. Those words of His on the Cross were the expression of the depth of His loneliness and Passion—that even His own Father didn't claim Him as His Son. That, despite all His suffering and anguish, His Father did not claim Him as His beloved Son, as He did at the Baptism by St. John the Baptist and at the Transfiguration. You ask 'Why?' Because God cannot accept sin and Jesus had taken on sin—He had become sin. Do you connect your vows with this Passion of Jesus? Do you realize that when you accept the vows you accept the same fate of Jesus?" Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the "Saint of Calcutta,"* edited and with commentary by Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C. (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 250–51.

as it was on the Cross, so too is Jesus' suffering in hell precisely a transforming suffering, "for Hades could not keep its grip on him" (Acts 2:24; Western text). Hell could not keep its hold on him because he transformed this godforsaken realm of darkness, loneliness, and silence by "overpowering the strong man" (Lk 11:22). How did that happen? Precisely by Christ taking on the punishment due to us: "For God made him who knew no sin to become sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). N-V