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## DESCENSUS CHRISTI AD INFEROS: CHRIST'S DESCENT TO THE DEAD

MARTIN F. CONNELL

*[The narrative of Christ's descent was nearly omnipresent in the early Church. Yet a change of Latin vocabulary from "descensus ad inferos" (Christ's descent to the dead) to "descensus ad inferna" (Christ's descent into hell) prompted a change in what was proclaimed. The earlier stratum portrayed Christ preaching to those who, while on earth, did not hear the word of God, while the latter described the reconciliation of sinners. The author here considers the vitality of this creedal statement and what is lost when the descent is absent from Christian experience.]*

UNIVERSAL HUMAN EXPERIENCES are few. We have all been conceived and born. We eat, we sleep—to varying degrees. For Christians the universal experiences include several more. We have been knitted together by the sacraments of initiation, bathed at the font and anointed, gathered on Sundays to be offered bread and wine in the Eucharist. The teaching and preaching of the Church in the United States attend to these, but about death, the last common experience, the Church in this culture offers too little direction and formation. Like Jesus of Nazareth himself, all Christians die. Every human life will end, no matter what its degree of holiness or frequency of church attendance.

The Christian faith once proclaimed more widely a tenet that was a consolation to believers as they anticipated their inevitable deaths: Christ's descent to the dead. Some might remember the creedal statement "he descended into hell" as part of the Apostles' Creed, yet because the Nicene Creed is prescribed for Sunday Eucharist today,<sup>1</sup> remembrance and appre-

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<sup>1</sup> An exception is granted in the Directory for Masses with Children: "If the profession of faith occurs at the end of the liturgy of the word, the Apostles' Creed may be used with children, especially because it is part of their catechetical formation." Text from *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource*, 3rd edition (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1991) 229–47.

ciation of the descent are waning. Because the descent affirms God's presence in Christ with the dead, without this narrative the assurance of God's presence at the time of death is diminished. No other narrative or theological tenet attends to the state of the dead or to the possibility of God's presence with the dead.

The purpose of my article is to highlight key aspects of the theology of the descent to suggest that it be reconsidered for new places and times, and perhaps re-introduced into the confession of Christian life. Here I deal with five considerations: the descent in the New Testament; the descent in the early Church; the descent in Thomas Aquinas; the descent in Hans Urs von Balthasar; and candor about death and dying today.

### THE DESCENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Gospels testify to the burial of the body of Jesus in the span between his death on the cross and the proclamation of the Resurrection on the first day of the week, and it is this temporal span that the narrative of the descent occupies in theology and liturgy.<sup>2</sup> In the euchology and preaching of the early Church, the burial and the descent are part of the same narrative span. Yet the only account of the descent in the New Testament appears not in the Gospels but in the First Letter of Peter:

Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you (3:18–21a).

Although the tradition came to find traces of the descent in many other passages of the Bible (especially in the Psalms and the canonical Gospels), the passage in First Peter is the only scriptural passage with an explicit warrant for the descent of Christ. The link between those of "former times" and the hearers of First Peter is the water that prefigured baptism. The water of baptism, like the ark in the time of Noah, is the means of salvation, and because of it even death is not an impediment to God's grace.

The narrative of the descent demonstrates that, even though the ancients

<sup>2</sup> Consideration of the New Testament narrative of the descent and the chronology of liturgical time for its proclamation is taken up in Joachim Jeremias, "Zwischen Karfreitag und Ostern: Descensus und Ascensus in der Karfreitagstheologie des Neuen Testaments," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 42 (1949) 194–201, and Heinz-Jürgen Vogels, *Christi Abstieg ins Totenreich und das Läuterungsgewicht an den Toten. Eine bibeltheologisch-dogmatische Untersuchung zum Glaubensartikel 'descendit ad inferos'* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976).

had not been brought into the Church by the rites of baptism during their lifetimes, by God's grace even time would not prevent them from receiving baptism and salvation. The descent to the dead preserves the truth of God's unimaginable generosity, incarnate in the Son, a benefit that transcends the usual boundaries of human life.

## THE DESCENT IN THE EARLY CHURCH

### The First Three Centuries

There is virtually no gap in the preaching and the literature about the descent after the First Letter of Peter. Even with so little scriptural testimony, Christ's descent is omnipresent in the Fathers of the next few centuries. For a purpose that I discuss later, it is key to recognize that the phrase used in these earliest Christian centuries is *descensus ad inferos*, literally, the "descent to lower places," or to the lower world.<sup>3</sup> (Since the cosmology of a round world makes "lower" archaic, translators have taken to calling it "Christ's descent to the dead," which captures the sense of *descensus ad inferos*.)<sup>4</sup>

Until the middle of the fourth century the descent was simply part of the narrative of Christ's saving work for humanity and of God's generosity in rescuing the lost and those who had not heard the proclamation of the good news during their life in the world.<sup>5</sup> Although there is a variety of charac-

<sup>3</sup> The Latin words *inferos* and *inferna* are so similar that they may be easily confused. English equivalents may be helpful. *Inferos* would be comparable to the English "inferior," though "inferior" has a comparative meaning, that is, not simply "low" but "lower." The Latin *inferos* is not comparative in this way, and also *inferos* is plural. This is why *inferos* is often rendered as "low places" or "lower world." *Inferna* is comparable to the English "infernal," an adjective meaning hellish. It inclines the reader to think of the flames and torments of hell.

<sup>4</sup> For a theological study of the earliest texts, see Alois Grillmeier, "Der Gottessohn im Totenreich: Soteriologische und christologische Motivierung der Descensuslehre in der älteren christlichen Überlieferung," in *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 71 (1949) 1–53, 184–203. The descent to the dead is taken up in, among others, the works of Justin Martyr and Ignatius of Antioch; in Irenaeus of Lyons; Cyprian of Carthage; and, at greater length, in the writings of Tertullian. Testimony is found in the second-century eucharistic prayers of pseudo-Hippolytus and Melito of Sardis. The descent is mentioned in the writings of Epiphanius and Hilary of Poitiers; in the Alexandrians Origen, Clement, and Cyril.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the witness of the Fathers to the descent, see H. Quilliet, "Descente de Jésus aux enfers," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 4.1 (Paris, 1924) 565–619; Gérard-Henry Baudry, "Le Retour d'Adam au Paradis, symbole du salut d'humanité," *Mélanges de science religieuse* 51 (1994) 117–47; Raniero Cantalamessa, "Il descensus ad inferos," in *L'omelia 'In S. Pascha' dello pseudo-Ippolito di Roma. Ricerche sulla teologia dell' Asia Minore nella seconda metà del II secolo* (Milan: Vita e pensiero, 1967) 242–59; Laval Letourneau, "Mythe ou réalité? La

ters in the descent narrative as it is manifest in the many languages, places, and cultures of the early churches that bear witness to it, most visual and textual representations (after First Peter's mention of Noah and the eight who were saved at the time of the flood) have Adam and Eve as the central characters. In a sense, Adam and Eve's place in the narrative, as Christ reaches out to grasp their hands, is symbolic of his salvific sweep throughout all of human history before and after the Incarnation. As the first parents and as those whose disobedience brought sin into the world, Adam and Eve, rescued from hell by the hands of Christ, bring with them all who had lived before the Incarnation. Imaginatively, one might picture in the icons of the descent, the arms of Christ, Adam, and Eve as spanning to include all who, for whatever reason, had not heard the full proclamation of the good news while alive.

Beginning in the middle of the fourth century, the descent continued to be included in catechesis about Christ's saving work, but acceptance was no longer unanimous. Writers in the last quarter of the fourth and first quarter of the fifth centuries point to the issues that are eventually attached to the descent and that contribute to its virtual disappearance from the tradition. The presentation of these works is complicated, for, though they all testify to the descent, they do so with a mix of literary genres and purposes. One finds, first, a *catalogue of heresies and heretics* from a virtually unknown bishop, Philastrius of Brescia, in northern Italy; second, a *commentary on the Apostles' Creed* by Rufinus of Aquileia; third, a *sermon from the Easter vigil* preached in Rufinus's church by one Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia; and last, a *letter* written by Augustine to a fellow bishop who had inquired about the descent.

### Philastrius of Brescia and Belief in the Descent as Heresy

In a northern Italian catalogue of heresies from Philastrius of Brescia, written around 380, one finds the following strident passage on the descent: "Others are heretics because they claim that the Lord descended into hell, and that he again preached to all who were there after death, so that, assembling in faith there, they might be saved. Against this one can find the prophetic saying of David: 'But who will believe in you in hell?' [Psalm 6:6]. And in the apostle: 'As many who sinned without the law, will perish without the law' [Romans 2:12]."<sup>6</sup> Among those whom the bishop had in

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descente du Christ aux enfers aux 2e et 3e siècles," *Studies in Religion* 3 (1973) 249–59; J.A. MacCullough, "Patristic References to the Descent," chapter 7 of *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930) 83–173.

<sup>6</sup> Philastrius of Brescia, *Diversarum hereseon liber*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, volume 9, ed. F. Heylen (Turnholt: Brepols, 1957) 288–89; my translation.

mind as he erased the possibility of salvation for the already dead are the “false poets and vain philosophers who, rebelling against God, tried to be saved.” They were those who “strayed by their sins and dissented from the truth and sowed the seeds of pagan depravity; they are none other than those self-promoting poets and philosophers who spread about the names of the gods and goddesses.” Philastrius’s case eliminates salvation for those who died before the coming of Christ.

The theological problem with Philastrius’s indictment is his presumption that grace is dependent on human effort, while the tradition—at least until the fourth century—had clearly preached that God’s grace was bounteous and completely undeserved. The descent, expressing God’s love for the already dead, is an expansive theology, one that widened the embrace of God’s grace. What is striking about Philastrius’s relegating to heresy those who confessed the descent is that his condemnation appeared as others in neighboring churches were promoting the descent as a key element in the salvation won in the death and Resurrection of Christ. Among those whom Philastrius would have condemned was the translator into Latin of Scripture, Rufinus of Aquileia.

### Rufinus and the Vocabulary Shift from *Inferos* to *Inferna*

While Philastrius condemned those who were confessing a belief in Christ’s descent into hell, Rufinus wrote that others were professing it as a tenet of the Apostles’ Creed. In fact, Rufinus wrote a “Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed,” the earliest source for a creed that includes the confession of the descent<sup>7</sup> between the burial and rising: “I believe in Jesus Christ . . . , who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, was buried, who descended into hell, and on the third day rose from the dead.”

A consequential vocabulary change appeared in Rufinus’s work. He was one of the first to use the word *inferna*, “hell,” not the more ancient *inferos*, “lower world,” for the confession of faith by which many would come to know of the descent. This word shift was a key contribution to subsequent changes in the meaning and theology of the descent, for the earlier usage of *inferos*, “lower world,” indicated that God’s grace would reach beyond

<sup>7</sup> This needs to be somewhat qualified because the descent was a tenet of the creed of Sirmium of 359, which was condemned in the anti-Arian fervor of the latter fourth century. Another homoiousian creed came out of Milan just before Ambrose was elected. Recent study of the topic of Arianism in northern Italy is growing rapidly. Among the many sources, those centering on the Nicene-Arian conflicts in Milan are Neil B. McGlynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), and Daniel H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Nicene-Arian Conflicts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

the confines of human limits to such a great extent that even time itself would not be a barrier to God's love. The use of *inferos* indicates that in Christ God saves even those who had lived before the Incarnation. The move to Rufinus's word *inferna*, "hell," would start to change the result of the descent from one of God's presence with the dead to a belief in Christ's reconciliation of sinners. While the reconciliation of sinners is no mean salvific feat, it is one that has an abundance of scriptural, liturgical, and theological testimony and recognition apart from the descent. But once the meaning of the descent shifted from a narrative expressing God's bounteous love and presence with the dead to yet another expression of God's love in spite of human sinfulness, the descent became just another narrative about God's reconciling sinful humanity. Yet God's love for the dead, beyond the limits of time, had no alternative narrative or theological metaphor outside the descent. Without it God's love for the dead is not given voice or expression.

The word choice of Rufinus might not have had such consequence had it not been promulgated in his commentary on the creed, by which it would be delivered to and prayed by Latin-language Christians for many centuries. Coupled with newly emerging emphases on human unworthiness, the word shift toward those being punished for their sins would soon overshadow the more ancient suggestion by which the dead Christ is in solidarity with the dead.

On the theological level, Rufinus admitted that belief in the descent was new in a creed, and he apologized for the divergence from what the church of Rome and the Eastern churches professed: "It should be known that the phrase, 'he descended into hell,' is not part of the creed of the church of Rome, nor is it in those of the Eastern churches."<sup>8</sup> His witness here might have continued as a rather brief testimony to the belief in the descent in Aquileia, but it was complemented by a sermon rather recently ascribed to Chromatius, the bishop of Rufinus's church.

### Chromatius and the Christology of the Descent

Here we make yet another shift of literary genre regarding the descent; as Philastrius supplied a catalogue of heresies and Rufinus a commentary on the Apostles' Creed, Chromatius, bishop of Aquileia from 388 until 407, now delivers a sermon at the Easter vigil.<sup>9</sup> It comes as something of a surprise, perhaps, to discover that the descent was the main subject of the

<sup>8</sup> Commentary on the Apostles' Creed, 18.

<sup>9</sup> On the descent in Chromatius, see Duilio Corgnani, *Il Mistero Pasquale in Cromazio d'Aquileia* (Udine: La Nuova Base, 1979) 135–54, though it forwards only negligibly the theological understanding of the descent in the early Church.

sermon at the Easter vigil,<sup>10</sup> but this contributes to our appreciation of how significant the descent was in the pastoral theology of the time. Although the bishop's language is rather bland and at times rhetorically awkward, there are two particular theological reasons why Chromatius's sermon contributes to our understanding of the problems the descent encountered in later estimations, the first christological, the second soteriological.

First, on the Christology in the descent, we find that bishop Chromatius recounted the narrative of what Christ did after his death by juxtaposing and commenting on a number of biblical verses about "vigil" and "sleep," as he described the event:

This night is called the "vigil of the Lord" because even in the sleep of his passion he kept vigil, as he himself anticipated when he said through Solomon: "While I sleep, my heart keeps vigil," through which he makes something clear about the mystery of his divinity and his flesh. For his flesh was sleeping while his divinity kept vigil, because his divinity was not able to sleep. . . . He slept in the flesh in the sleep of his passion, but his divinity illuminated hell.<sup>11</sup>

The sermon reveals that, in this period between the councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) and the councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), the christological contentions about the person and natures of Christ resulted in some awkward configurations of the person of Christ in the span between death and Resurrection. There was a problem about how the salvation borne by the descent could have happened if the body or "flesh" was in the silence of the tomb.

The narrative of the descent had existed from the earliest sources without the pressure of christological controversy pushing for anthropological particulars, but Chromatius's sermon reveals that these problems were coming to the surface in the controversies of the late fourth and early fifth centuries. The bishop of Aquileia worked out the spatial and temporal complexity of the person of Christ in the descent by having the humanity and divinity of Christ act separately; this was not, in retrospect, a resolution that would strengthen belief in the descent and in Christ's oneness with the dead.

The second point of note is the soteriology of Chromatius's sermon in which the descent makes salvation available to all. In fact the main em-

<sup>10</sup> From *Sermo XVI*, "First Sermon on the Great Night," *In nocte magna I*, as in Chromace d' Aquilée, *Sermons*, Tome I (Sermons 1–17A), intro., text, notes Joseph Lemarié; trans. Henri Tardif (Paris: Cerf, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> *Dicitur ergo nox haec vigilia Domini quia etiam in ipso passionis suae somno vigilavit, sicut ipse per Salomonem demonstrat cum dicit: Ego, inquit, dormio et cor meum vigilat; per quod evidenter in se mysterium divinitatis et carnis ostendit. Dormivit enim carne, vigilavit divinitate, quia divinitas dormire non poterat. . . . [I]n passionis suae somno carne dormivit, sed divinitas inferna lustrabat [Sermo XVI.1: 17–27].*



phasis at the end is the universality of salvation brought about by the descent:

For our Lord and Savior wanted to bring light to every place so that he might bring mercy to all . . .<sup>12</sup> The angels in heaven and humanity on earth and the souls of the faithful in hell celebrate this vigil of the Lord. . . . The angels in heaven, humanity on earth, and the very powers of hell rejoice on the solemnity of this great vigil.<sup>13</sup>

This is a wonderfully embracing soteriology, in which the descent has the possibility of filling in the temporal span before the incarnate life of Jesus of Nazareth and the spatial span of the then three-tiered universe—heaven above, earth, hell below. By his descent the Son could preach the good news to those who had lived before his Incarnation. He could bring it to those who lived in places other than those in which as a man he had preached, taught, healed, and witnessed to God's bounty and love. The descent, as Chromatius preached, displayed the reality of God's wide embrace of all people, at all times, in all places. Yet this kind of soteriology will be problematic when it is associated with Origen, the third-century Alexandrian theologian, in the controversies of succeeding times and deliberations.

Though Origen himself had died in the middle of the third century, some theological ideas associated with Origen in the fourth century were exaggerated to the point of being declared heretical. Among these heterodox notions was an exaggeration of Origen's teaching on *apokatastasis*, or the restoration of all souls, including the soul of Satan himself. When the teachings of Origen were under scrutiny in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Rufinus of Aquileia was a staunch defender of Origen and his teaching. (Rufinus had in fact translated some of the works of Origen into Latin, and without Rufinus's translations some of Origen's most contributory work, including *On First Principles*, would not be extant.)

Rufinus was a member of the community for which Chromatius was the bishop. If the closing of Chromatius's sermon—"The angels in heaven, humanity on earth, and the very powers of hell rejoice on the solemnity of this great vigil"—were considered from the point of view of those searching for traces of Origen in the anti-heresy fervor of Chromatius's time, the association with Rufinus and the rhetoric about the salvation of the powers of hell would be enough to link the descent with errant ideas. This is yet another contribution to the retraction of the descent in centuries to come.

<sup>12</sup> *Voluit enim Dominus et Salvator noster omnia loca lustrare ut omnium miseretur. . . . De terra iterum ad inferna descendit ut illuminaret eos qui in inferno tenebantur.*

<sup>13</sup> *Gaudent angeli in caelo ad huius vigiliae sollemnitatem. Gaudent homines in terris. Gaudent ipsae infernae potestates . . . [XVI.3:68–70]*

### *Exinaniti Inferi: Augustine's Thoughts on an "Empty Hell"*

The last literary genre of the examples from the early Church is a letter from one bishop to another. It is not an exaggeration to say that the descent into hell stirred up significant puzzlement for the prolific bishop of Hippo in ancient North Africa.<sup>14</sup> The ecclesial context for the inquiry was due in part to the unsettled canonical status of the Letters of Peter, for some in the fifth-century Church did not yet consider them part of the canonical New Testament.<sup>15</sup> In his letter to Augustine, Bishop Evodius's main inquiry was about the descent and about who the "spirits" were whom Christ visited in hell. Augustine was evidently engaged to the point of distraction by Evodius's question, for he took it up quickly and admitted from the start that the inquiry "disturbs me profoundly."<sup>16</sup>

Rhetorically, Evodius had directed a particular question for Augustine's attention and response, "Who are those 'spirits' to whom Peter refers?" Evodius himself quoted the passage from First Peter (3:18–19) and continued his inquiry wondering, "Since the descending Christ had preached to them all and set them all free from darkness and suffering by his grace, would judgment [day] find an empty hell? I am anxious to know what your holiness thinks."

Augustine sought to dispel from Evodius the possibility that the efficacy of the descent and of God's grace offered by it might empty hell completely. It seems to have been beyond Augustine's imagination that the grace of God could be so, well, to use Augustine's own phrase, *prorsus indebitum*, "completely undeserved" and universal. An "empty hell," *exinaniti inferi*, was not an option according to Augustine. Yet the epistolary exchange between Evodius and Augustine reveals again the soteriological associations of the descent and it foreshadows the Origenist controversy and the condemnation of salvation for all with which the descent came to

<sup>14</sup> A brief theological assessment of Augustine's contribution in Basil Studer, "Der Abstieg Christi in die Unterwelt bei Augustinus von Hippo," in *Psallendum*, ed. Ildebrando Scicolone, *Studia Anselmiana* 15 (Rome: St. Anselm's, 1992) 267–74. Access to the Latin text from the Patrologia Latina Database, at <http://pld.chadwyck.com>, volume 33, column 709; English translation of Letters 163 and 164 based on Saint Augustine, *Letters*, Volume 3 (131–64), trans. Wilfrid Parsons (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953) 381–98.

<sup>15</sup> Anne-Marie la Bonnardière, "Evodius et Augustin: Lettres 163 et 164," in *Saint Augustine et la Bible*, *Bible de tous les temps* 3 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1986) 213–27. English translation here is a simplification of that in Augustine of Hippo, *Letters*, Volume 3 (131–64), trans. Wilfrid Parsons (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953) 381–98.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

be associated. These associations, however, are just another aspect of the descent that signals trouble regarding its survival in the tradition.

### Summary of Early Church Evidence

Until the fourth century no Father of the Church had questioned the veracity of the descent and most left some evidence that they accepted it with ecclesial impunity. Yet the fourth century brought many theological changes, and many of the new innovations and expressions were occasioned by Christologies that church leaders judged as a threat to the integrity of the faith. Christ's descent to the dead was associated with some of the threatening teachings and led to the condemnatory reactions like that of Philastrius.

Moreover, in the absence of later canons of christological agreement, the descent was explained by some, like Chromatius, in language that would not be theologically acceptable by later standards. Chromatius's sermon antedated the debates about the personhood and natures of Christ at Ephesus and Chalcedon, yet one can begin to see how some christological uncertainties, coupled with the silence of the canonical Gospels on the descent, would have cast suspicion on the belief in the descent and led to what was the most consequential of the changes in the fourth century, the vocabulary shift from *descensus ad inferos* to *descensus ad inferna*, indicating that the descent would eventually come to be confessed and understood as a narrative expression of the reconciliation of sinners who had died separated from God's grace. But the descent began to move away from the message that it originally carried: The embrace of God's grace is so wide and generous that even the dead get a second chance at salvation.

### THE DESCENT IN THOMAS AQUINAS

The descent is taken up in the *Summa theologiae* 3, q. 52, of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>17</sup> Aquinas's inquiries about the descent and his choice of vocabulary for "hell" are telling for the period in which he was writing.<sup>18</sup> Aquinas used both *inferos*, "lower world," and *inferna*, "hell," in the eight queries about Christ's descent. Yet, unlike the random method of Augustine's

<sup>17</sup> The text used for this study is the Blackfriars edition, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, volume 54, *The Passion of Christ*, Latin text, English trans., intro. and notes Richard T.A. Murphy (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 152–79.

<sup>18</sup> For other medieval testimonies to the descent, particularly Peter Abelard and Alain of Lille, see Ralph V. Turner, "Descendit ad inferos: Medieval Views on Christ's Descent into Hell and the Salvation of the Ancient Just," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966) 173–94.

usage, the words bore theological, anthropological, and indeed moral consequences in the *Summa*.<sup>19</sup> Although Aquinas's compendia have had tremendous impact in so many areas of theology, his contribution on the descent seems to have brought little change to Christology in this regard. Yet a review of some significant aspects of Aquinas's summary of the descent will help us understand its cardinal place in history and in the tradition up to his time.

Aquinas made a unique parallel between the means to life for the living and the means to life for the dead in replying to objection 2 of article 1, on "whether it was fitting for Christ to go down into hell." Yes, Aquinas replies, it was fitting so that we ourselves might be free from death, and he continued by considering how this freedom was won:

Christ's passion is as it were the universal cause of salvation for both the living and the dead. But a universal cause is applied to particular effects through something special. As therefore the power of Christ's passion is applied to the living through the sacraments which configure us to his passion, that power was also applied to the dead through his descent into hell.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> First, the presentation of the question itself gives priority for the topic to the more ancient usage, to *inferos*, for Thomas began the presentation "on the subject of the descent of Christ to the dead" with *inferos* chosen over *inferna*. The theological and pastoral content of each of the eight inquiries to follow in this *quaestio* determined which of the words would be chosen in each case. Unfortunately, nearly all vernacular translations of the *Summa* did not follow Aquinas's careful distinction between the two meanings and used the word "hell" for both *inferos* and *inferna*. The English "hell," for example, is used about 200 times in the translation of the question in the Blackfriars edition, thereby blending the distinguishing nuance of "place of the dead," on the one hand, and "place of punishment for sin," on the other. But one can generally distinguish the method for Aquinas's use of the words *inferos* and *inferna*, as done below, even though translations tend not to do so.

Worth noting, in particular, is that when the noun *descensus* (or its declined variants) was followed by the preposition *ad*, *inferos* was almost always used by Thomas. This is notable because the more than eight centuries between Augustine and Thomas saw the gradual lapse toward employing *inferna* and abandoning *inferos*. But there seems to have been a mnemonic association with the words of the original phrase, even as late as the 13th century. Thomas used *inferos* with *descensus* five times more often than he used *inferna* with *descensus*. Whenever Thomas used the phrase *descensus ad inferna* (or a declined variant of it), it was as a particular reference to the punishment of the damned. So, for example, arguing that Christ did not "set some of the damned free from hell," he wrote: *Ergo per descensum Christi ad inferos non sunt aliqui de inferno damnatorum liberati*. The Blackfriars translator renders this as "Christ's descent into hell, therefore, brought no release to anyone in the hell of the damned," blending both *inferos* and *inferno* into the one word "hell," even though there clearly was an intentional and consequential distinction made between the former *inferos*, the place where the ancients who had not heard the good waited with others for the proclamation of Christ, and *inferno*, the place of the damned, which is popularly called "hell."

<sup>20</sup> Blackfriars edition, 154–55.

Key was the summary that as the sacraments are for the living, so is the descent for the dead. Both sacraments and the descent are expressions of God's generosity and love in the present aspects and conditions of human life in community.

Earlier we saw the division of the person of Christ in the sermon of Chromatius on the descent. Perhaps the difficulty in expressing the meaning of the descent after the christological definitions of the fourth- and fifth-century councils also contributed to the eventual loss. Aquinas must have recognized that there were questions about the integrity of the person of Christ in the span between his death and the proclamation of his rising, for article 3 of the question "Was Christ wholly there in hell?" is meant to settle the testimony about the personal instrument of the salvific feat of the descent. Was the descent narrative effected by the divinity of Christ alone (suggested as early as the second-century text of pseudo-Hippolytus); did it involve the body of the dead Christ; or, if both flesh and divinity, how did this come about when the body would have been dead in the tomb? Were Christ's flesh and divinity divorced from one another for the descent (as in Chromatius's sermon)?

Two questions earlier, on the passion of Christ, Aquinas had written that "although when Christ died, his soul was separated from his body, neither soul nor body was separated from the person of the Son of God. . . . Hence, during the three days of Christ's death, we have to say that the whole Christ was in the tomb, because the whole person was there through the body that was united to it." Addressing the potential perplexity of how the whole Christ could have been both in the tomb and in the lower world, Aquinas cited a sermon of Augustine on Easter: "It is not according to times and places that we say that the whole Christ is everywhere, as if he were at one time whole in one place, at another time whole in another; he is whole always and everywhere."<sup>21</sup> The polemic taken up here is meant to address a christological enigma about the salvation wrought in the time between the death of Jesus on the cross and the proclamation of the Resurrection on Sunday morning: How was the person of Christ or, more particularly, how were the natures of Christ constituted in the three days in the tomb to effect the salvation of the dead at his coming? There were the Fathers who had separated the humanity and divinity in the descent, as, for example, did Chromatius, but Aquinas ameliorates the christological split by his use of the rhetoric of the "whole Christ," *Christus totus*, as the missionary to the lower world: "A complete human nature results from the union of soul and body; but not so the totality of the divine person. Hence, once the union of

<sup>21</sup> *Non per diversa tempora vel loca dicimus ubique Christum esse totum, ut modo ibi totus sit, et alio tempore alibi totus, sed ut semper ubique sit totus* (Sermon 160 de Pascha, as in PL 39.2061).

soul and body was dissolved by death, the whole Christ remained, although human nature did not remain in its totality." About the totality of Christ's human nature, Aquinas asserts that it was not there at the time of the descent. But the presence of Christ, the whole Christ, was not diminished: "The whole person of Christ was there." This was a nuanced resolution to the mystery of the person of Christ and the descent: the whole Christ was there rescuing, if not the whole of his human nature. Thus Aquinas resolved the earlier awkward attempts to describe the specifics of the personhood of Christ during his salvific deed for the dead.

In his eight-inquiry article on the descent, Aquinas also systematically rendered a compendium of sources toward the revelation of God's word in Christ to the dead.<sup>22</sup> As he did for innumerable topics about which there were conflicting positions before and in the 13th-century Church, Aquinas set the descent into the curriculum of faith by addressing those matters that had earlier impeded faith in Christ's descent.

Aquinas's contribution was short-lived, for the relative lack of Scripture testimony for the descent was highlighted when the leaders of Reformation in the 16th century sought scriptural support for questionable medieval theological traditions, challenging theologians to base their theological teaching on the canonical Scriptures. Some of the Reformers were themselves willing to sustain the descent in the tradition,<sup>23</sup> but its viability was weakened by this measure. Even though all four canonical Gospels describe the burial of the body of Jesus in the tomb for what would become the time span of the descent, the descent itself is not part of the narrative of what happened while Jesus was in the tomb in any of the four Gospels.

The historical-critical method of scriptural investigations of the 19th and 20th centuries would add to the suspicion cast on how the descent could be drawn from the testimony of the canonical New Testament. Historical reconstructions and searches for the historical Jesus of more recent times would surely not lend criteria by which the descent would survive. For other creedal elements a return to Scripture has strengthened the tradition

<sup>22</sup> Thomas cited Aristotle's *Physics*, the Bible (and glosses referring to the descent); Athanasius's letter to Epictetus, the Apostles' Creed from Rufinus, Jerome's commentary on Isaiah; Augustine's letter to Evodius (regularly and at length), his Easter sermon 160, and his *On Penance*; Gregory the Great's *Moralia*, John Damascene's *On Orthodox Faith*, and Peter Lombard's *Sentences*.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Jean-Daniel Causse, "Luther et l'angoisse de l'enfer," *Études théologiques et religieuses* 69 (1994) 515–28; Mary Rakow, "Christ's Descent into Hell: Calvin's Interpretation," *Religion in Life* 43 (1974) 218–26; Werner Brändle, "Hinabgestiegen in das Reich des Todes," *Kerygma und Dogma* 35 (1989) 54–68; Jerome Friedman, "Christ's Descent into Hell and Redemption through Evil: A Radical Reformation Perspective," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 14 (1985) 217–30.

greatly, but Christ's descent has suffered from the relative lack of scriptural testimony.

### THE DESCENT IN HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

In spite of the reasons proposed regarding why the descent has moved to a peripheral place, the descent received a significant boost in recent years in the paschal theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Perhaps single-handedly in the Latin tradition, he rekindled the Church's engagement with Christ's descent. In taking up what might at the time have seemed like an antiquarian topic, Balthasar brought the tenet back to the center of theological discourse and to contemporary Christology. While he addressed the descent in various places, his most thorough account is in *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*.<sup>24</sup>

While many have lamented the lack of testimony regarding the span between the death of Jesus and the Resurrection of Christ according to the Gospels, Balthasar expressed thanks for the silence of the tradition: "Death calls for this silence, not only by reason of the mourning of the survivors but, even more, because of what we know of the dwelling and condition of the dead. . . . [D]eath is not a partial event."<sup>25</sup> This stark confession of the silence of the tomb, Jesus' and our own, is welcome into the disciplines of Christology and Christian thanatology. Recognizing the silence of the tomb at the death of Jesus enables the community's appreciation of Christ's solidarity with the dead. Moreover, Balthasar recognizes that humanity tends to vivify the dead as a consolation for themselves, a piety against which the descent testifies: "When we ascribe to the dead forms of activity that are new and yet prolong those of earth, we are not simply expressing our perplexity. We are also defending ourselves against a stronger conviction which tells us that death is not a partial event."<sup>26</sup> The terrorizing stillness of the tomb speaks against a piety that longs to imagine the dead continuing their lives as before, but with less sorrow, less grief. The descent's proclamation of Christ's visit to the dead, and of God's care for the dead as dead, contradicts such piety and ascriptions: "In that same way that, upon earth, he was in solidarity with the living, so, in the tomb, he is in solidarity with the dead, . . . the solidarity of the dead Christ with those who have died, . . . the solidarity of the Crucified with all the human dead."<sup>27</sup>

Also fundamental to Balthasar's contribution is his emphasis on the descent not as the activity of the Son, but as "the final consequence of the

<sup>24</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. and intro. Aidan Nichols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 148–88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 148.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 148–49.

redemptive mission he has received from the Father.” The descent “gives the measure of the Father’s mission in all its amplitude.”<sup>28</sup> Balthasar’s insight reminds us of the wide embrace of God’s love and generosity as this is captured in the Son’s being with the dead. The descent is an activity of the Father; the Son is the instrument, the icon of God’s penchant for the liberation and salvation of humanity.

Balthasar taught that the descent is not another attempt, after their physical deaths, to bring believers to conversion. Rather, the purpose of Christ’s descent is to announce God’s generosity. Salvation was already won in the death of Christ, but the proclamation of that salvation is not complete. Christ’s preaching to the dead is not the occasion of salvation since that was achieved in the cross, but it is the revelation of God’s grace to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death. It is not only for those who died before Christ’s coming into the world, but also for those who have lived after the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The dead to whom Christ proclaims God’s love, according to Balthasar, are not merely the physically dead but also those without hope, those in darkness and unable to find the light.

In spite of these key insights, Balthasar does not adequately distinguish how the narrative about Christ with the dead is different from Christ’s mission for the reconciliation of sinners. Steeped in the Fathers of the Church, Balthasar could not have been unaware of the different consequences of the vocabulary regarding “being with the dead” and “being in hell,” but he chose not to address the distinction explicitly in *Mysterium Paschale*.<sup>29</sup> At the word “hell’s” first appearance in the chapter, Balthasar merely indicated the alternatives by writing “*descensus ad infera* (or *inferna*)” and “*descensus ad inferos* (or *infernos*),”<sup>30</sup> as if to render them equivalent.

### AMERICAN CULTURE AND THE DENIAL OF DEATH

The proclamation of Christ’s descent to the dead had deep and ancient roots in the tradition and had a pastoral efficacy that today would reveal an

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 174, 175.

<sup>29</sup> The result of Balthasar’s not distinguishing “hell” from “the dead” is evident in Anne Hunt’s summary of the place of the descent in Balthasar’s theology, as in *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, New Theology Studies 5 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1997) 57–89. By Hunt’s assessment, “Finally and perhaps most importantly, this ‘reification’ of sin also allows Balthasar in effect to contrast the *infinity* of God’s love, the unimaginable excess of this love, with the *finitude* of sin.” This is no small result of the theology of the descent, but, again, it conflates the place of the dead as dead from the place of the dead as sinners, and thereby renders unattended the place of God with the dead.

<sup>30</sup> Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* 149.



otherwise missing aspect of God's generosity and grace in the mission of his Son. Without faith in the descent, Christians might live as if death were somehow escapable or as if death were indeed the price one pays for a life of sin, as if death were an existence apart from God's love and life. Yet none of these is true, for no Christian escapes death, and belief in Christ's descent to the dead reminds believers that God's life continues in death, that God's goodness and generosity continue after the individual's human life is finished.

Particularly in North American culture, the omission of the descent in the celebrations and preaching of communities of faith withdraws a measure of consolation and hope for those close to death and for those who care for them. There is a vested interest in ignoring this end of every human life, for a culture of acquisition and glamor is predicated on the ruse that we might not die. Too often ministers of the Church are similarly formed by the culture and, as a result, do not proclaim a truth that would indict the deceit of the culture. The avoidance of death is one of the lamentable results of consumerism, and the Christian churches have too readily been so inculturated, accepting the easy route by embracing capitalism's ruse uncritically.

It is the Church's vocation to keep faith communities sober and alert to both the ever-joyful and ever-grim realities of human life and to proclaim—in the life, death and Resurrection of Christ—how a life shaped in the communal realization of God's presence is lived. The gospel proclamation of the cross prompts us to recognize the deceit of a culture equating "American beauty" and God's beauty, a culture in which individuals think they have already arrived in the heavenly home if they are rich enough, pretty enough, comfortable and self-satisfied enough. The culture prompts Americans to ignore the stultifying reality that human bodies will eventually be "food for worms."<sup>31</sup> But to this the faith might be a counterwitness by proclaiming God's love revealed in Christ's descent to the dead.

It may seem odd to lament the overshadowing of this rather enigmatic and sobering Christian narrative, but the proclamation of Christ's descent

<sup>31</sup> Phrase taken from the tomb of Benjamin Franklin, as marked in Philadelphia. The epitaph was written in 1728 by Franklin himself, 62 years before he died: "THE BODY / OF / BENJAMIN FRANKLIN / PRINTER / (LIKE THE COVER OF AN OLD BOOK, ITS CONTENTS TORN OUT AND STRIPT / OF ITS LETTERING AND GILDING), / LIES HERE, FOOD FOR WORMS, / BUT THE WORK SHALL NOT BE LOST, / FOR IT WILL (AS HE BELIEVED) APPEAR ONCE MORE / IN A NEW AND MORE ELEGANT EDITION, / REVISED AND CORRECTED / BY / THE AUTHOR." The burial site of this founding father and signer of the Declaration of Independence is at Christ Church, near 5th and Arch Streets, a few blocks north of Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. See <http://www.findagrave.com/pictures/364.364.html>. My thanks to Gerald Jacobitz, O.S.B., for this reference and to Columba Stewart, O.S.B., for the source.

is needed today for Christian health and faith. Belief in Christ's descent reverses the inclination to see death and sickness as consequences of sin. Each of us is a sinner and, by original sin, lives in a world of sin, but as the people of God and as the Body of Christ constituted by baptism, we are perfect and sinless. When knitted together by the power of the Holy Spirit as the Body of Christ, we are, by God's grace, able to be reconciled to one another and thereby come to experience the life of God in the Church and its sacraments. The descent teaches us that even though we live and die in sin, we are "freed from the corruption of sin and death." The descent is an expression of God's overwhelming generosity toward the dead that makes incorruptibility possible. The descent supports the belief that the dead have not failed in faith and that God in Christ is one with the dead. To use Balthasar's description, it is "the solidarity of the dead Christ with those who have died," "the solidarity of the Crucified with all the human dead."<sup>32</sup> And the "dead" include not only those who have died but those who, for whatever reason, have not been disposed to hear the proclamation of the good news. The descent is a "narrative of second chances" for those who were thought to have no hope, no chances left. Yet as God's grace and generosity were wide enough to bring Adam and Eve into the life of God, so too are there opportunities for second chances for all people. This is part of the original theology of the descent, as the tradition of icons of the descent clearly reveals.

The point of distinguishing the mission to the dead from the reconciliation of sinners is two-fold. First, while the Church is bold in its address to sinners and pastoral in restoring believers to the strength of God's baptismal grace by the sacrament of reconciliation, it has not been so bold in proclaiming the message about Christ's mission to the dead, about the "solidarity" of the dead Christ with the dead. This reluctance to proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes can prompt believers to avoid facing the inevitability of death, to avoid preparation for their own deaths as individuals and as communities of faith.

Second, a theology of works-righteousness is still quite alive in the Church today. The narrative of Christ's descent is a reminder that we are saved by God's grace, not by our own efforts. When rhetoric about the descent blends the reconciliation of sinners with Christ's solidarity with the dead, the latter can too readily be lost.

### **The Countercultural Theology of the Descent**

It is incumbent upon the Church to encourage believers to prepare for death. Although the faith has been ennobled in many ways by inculturation, in other ways, such as the aversion to sickness, dying, and death, it has

<sup>32</sup> Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* 160.



Yes the world is the best place of all  
   for a lot of things . . .

Yes  
     but then right in the middle of it  
   comes the smiling  
   mortician

Ferlinghetti saw that this world would indeed be a “beautiful place” but at the price of ignoring the surety of the visit of death, “the smiling mortician.” He prompts readers to see the reality of human life, which, as in first-century Palestine, is ever filled with the dying and starving, with sadnesses and poverty at every turn. The poet finds the price of exuberance to be dependent upon one’s ignorance of death.

*E. E. Cummings*

Of the same inclination but much grimmer in many ways is the poetry of E. E. Cummings, a daunting figure not only because of the volume of his work, but because his corpus in general is not as bright and silly as the poems reprinted most frequently in anthologies of American literature. Quite to the contrary, in fact, is the overall collection of Cummings’s poetry, which generally serves as a dark and grim assembly of texts on death. One can hardly open the collection of his poems to a two-page spread without finding another bold assertion of death. Cummings unfailingly and eerily juxtaposes love and death, sex and death, beauty and death, almost anything at all and death:

  my girl’s tall  
 and taut, with thin legs just like a vine  
 that’s spent all of its life on a garden-wall,  
 and is going to die. When we grimly go to bed  
 with these legs she begins to heave and twine  
 about me, and to kiss my face and head.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Poem XVIII of “Sonnets—Realities,” from *&*, as in E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems 1913–1962* (San Diego: HBJ, 1980) 147. I am grateful to Joseph Murry and to the memory of John E. Giles for deepening my appreciation of E. E. Cummings’s poems on death. John’s sermon “What Happens to Us When We Die?” at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, Illinois, on May 26, 1995, brought Cummings’s contribution on death back into my view.

With humor and sobriety, he relates this reminiscence of a relative:

nobody loses all the time [. . .]

i remember we all cried like the Missouri  
 when my Uncle Sol's coffin lurched because  
 somebody pressed a button  
 (and down went  
 my Uncle  
 Sol

and started a worm farm)<sup>35</sup>

Cummings, whose name too often stirs up memories of skipping children clinging to brightly colored balloons, was relentless in announcing the inevitability of death that the culture ignores: "life's not a paragraph," he wrote, "And death i think is no parenthesis."<sup>36</sup>

#### Mark Doty

Last, Mark Doty, in the memoir of his relationship with his lover Wally, found in death the unexpected discovery of love. The images and conviction of his autobiographical *Heaven's Coast* prepare the reader for the advent of death in the book. In a prescient foreshadowing at the beginning, the author narrates a childhood experience that influenced him significantly and paved the way for his own understanding and acceptance of death.

In the museums we used to visit on family vacations when I was a kid, I used to love those rooms which displayed collections of minerals in a kind of closet or chamber which would, at the push of a button, darken. Then ultraviolet lights would begin to glow and the minerals would seem to come alive, new colors, new possibilities and architectures revealed. Plain stones became fantastic, "futuristic"—a strange word which suggests, accurately, that these colors had something of the world to come about them. Of course there wasn't any black light in the center of the earth, in the caves where they were quarried; how strange that these stones should have to be brought here, bathed with this unnatural light in order for their transcendent characters to emerge. Irradiation revealed a secret aspect of the world.

Imagine illness as that light: demanding, torturous, punitive, it nonetheless reveals more of what things are. A certain glow of being appears. I think this is what is meant when we speculate that death is what makes love possible. Not that things need to be able to die in order for us to love them, but that things need to die in order for us to know *what they are*. Could we really know anything that wasn't transient, not becoming more itself in the strange, unearthly light of dying? The button pushed, the stones shine, all mystery and beauty, implacable, fierce, austere.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> E. E. Cummings, Poem X of "Poem, or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal," as in *Complete Poems* 239.

<sup>36</sup> The end of Poem VII of *Four*, as in *Complete Poems* 290.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Doty, *Heaven's Coast* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) 4–5.

This use of metaphor communicates a truth about death that, like religious metaphors, might not be borne in another way. "Imagine illness as that light." "The stones shine, all mystery and beauty, implacable, fierce, austere." Doty has a gift for revealing the deepest truths in accessible prose and poetry. Bringing death to readers' attention with the stones from a museum of childhood makes the necessary point: "Death is what makes love possible."

### CONCLUSION

Though these authors do not address the narrative of the descent explicitly, their contributions stand, as might the narrative of the descent today, as a counter to the culture and as a witness to Christian ministers in the death-denying culture. Communities of faith are called to counter the imperious individualism of contemporary society that, though consonant with the competition of capitalism, risks human life and health. The theology of Christ's descent to the dead and of God's communion with the dying and the dead is a call for the renewal of the community gathered week after week. The Church is called to be, like the authors quoted above, a prophet of divine consolation wherever death is denied. Faith in the descent reveals that God is one with the dead. Restoring the once central tenet of Christ's descent to the dead would encourage communities of faith and individual believers to see that death is inevitable, that God's cares for the dead, and that death is not failure. In proclaiming Christ's descent to the dead, the tradition testifies to God as one with humanity even in death.



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