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Talk #9

*St. Paul on Christ's Resurrection (1 Cor. 15) and
His Descent to the Dead (Eph. 4:8-10)*



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9. *St. Paul on Christ's Resurrection (1 Cor. 15) and His Descent to the Dead (Eph. 4:8-10)*

In this talk we shall look at the events of Holy Saturday and Easter: Christ's descent to the dead, and His glorious Resurrection. Let us begin with the Resurrection, and then step back to consider the preceding mystery of Holy Saturday.

In the Jewish Passover seder, the significance of the event is introduced by four questions asked by the youngest child. The first question is: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The same question is still more appropriate in the celebration of Easter, and the Church's most solemn liturgy, the Easter Vigil: Why is this night different from all other nights? This is the question that stands at the root of all Christian faith.

This question is not posed in so many words in the Church's Easter liturgy. Nevertheless, the question is answered in the most beautiful hymn of the Easter liturgy (and perhaps of the entire liturgy of the Church), the "Exsultet," sung by the deacon at the beginning of the Easter vigil:

For Christ has ransomed us with his blood,
and paid for us the price of Adam's sin to our eternal
Father!

This is our passover feast,
when Christ, the true Lamb, is slain,
whose blood consecrates the homes of all believers.

This is the night
when first you saved our fathers:
you freed the people of Israel from their slavery
and led them dry-shod through the sea. . . .

This is the night
when Jesus Christ broke the chains of death
and rose triumphant from the grave.

What good would life have been to us,
had Christ not come as our Redeemer?
Father, how wonderful your care for us!
How boundless your merciful love!
To ransom a slave you gave away your Son.

O happy fault,
O necessary sin of Adam,
which gained for us so great a Redeemer!

Most blessed of all nights,
chosen by God to see Christ rising from the dead!

This night is different from all other nights—"most blessed of all nights"—because it was "chosen by God to see Christ rising from the dead!" Two unequal benefits were given on this night: Israel was freed from slavery in Egypt, and Christ conquered sin and death. The former,

although of great importance in itself, was ordered by God to be a figure of the latter.

The Apostolic Witness of Christ's Resurrection According to 1 Cor 15

The absolute centrality of the Resurrection of Christ to Christian faith is magnificently expressed by St. Paul in chapter 15 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he speaks of the Resurrection of Christ and the future Resurrection of the faithful.

His concern is to correct a heretical view present among some of the faithful in Corinth—influenced by a Platonic conception—according to which the promised Resurrection is a purely spiritual affair. They apparently did not dare directly question the physical Resurrection of Christ. Nevertheless, St. Paul felt that a doubt about the future physical general Resurrection of the faithful implied a corresponding unexpressed doubt about the historical physical Resurrection of Christ, who is the "first fruit of the dead," the victor over sin and death, which is the wages of sin.

To counter this doubt, St. Paul speaks with great force about the Resurrection of Christ, and its intrinsic connection with the resurrection of Christians at the Second Coming.

He begins by giving the testimony of the eyewitnesses of the Resurrection:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Cor 15:3-9)

The importance of the eyewitnesses of Christ's Resurrection cannot be overemphasized. The Resurrection of Christ stands at the center of the Christian faith, together with His Passion and death on Good Friday. For this reason St. Paul, when faced with an implicit doubt about the historical truth of the Resurrection, begins with the authority and credibility of the direct eyewitnesses of the event. Who are these witnesses? First of all, there is Peter (in the original Aramaic form of the name given to him by Jesus: Cephas, which means "rock"). It is significant that Peter is put in the first place. We know that Jesus did not

appear first to Peter, but to St. Mary Magdalene. Nevertheless, he omits her and puts Peter first because he is the Rock on which Jesus chose to build His Church, and the most authoritative witness.

After Peter come the other ten members of the original Twelve. As we see from the Gospels, they saw the Risen Christ both on Easter Sunday (with the exception of Thomas) and on the following Sunday, when the doubting Thomas put his finger in Christ's wounds.

After the Apostles, St. Paul gives five hundred witnesses who saw him together. This is of tremendous importance. Five hundred disciples would constitute most of the incipient Church—entirely Jewish—as it existed a few weeks after Easter Sunday. It seems that Jesus appeared to the entire core group of the faithful.

Curiously, this appearance is not mentioned directly in the Gospels. However, I think that it is alluded to in the words of Christ to St. Mary Magdalene (and the “other Mary”): “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me” (Mt 28:10).¹ Matthew tells us that the Eleven Apostles saw Him on a mountain in Galilee. It may well have been on that occasion that He was seen also by more than five hundred faithful, as reported by St. Paul.

The commission given to Mary Magdalene to tell the brethren to return to Galilee was clearly not meant only for the Apostles, who were to see Christ that very day in Jerusalem in the Upper Room, but for all the brethren, who were to see Christ only in Galilee.

Furthermore, it makes sense that Christ appeared to the five hundred brethren in Galilee, for the majority of the disciples were Galileans. Acts 1:15 tells us that the number of disciples in Jerusalem in these days was only about 120 (present in the upper room after the Ascension). More disciples would have been able to be present in Galilee.

St. Paul then lists three other appearances: one to James (presumably the “brother” of the Lord and later bishop of Jerusalem, referred to by Paul as one of the three “columns” of the Church), to the Apostles together (probably on the day of the Ascension), and then last of all to Paul on the road to Damascus.

Clearly, St. Paul did not intend to give an exhaustive list of Resurrection appearances, but only the most important ones from the point of view of authority and apologetics.² He left out (but by no means excludes) appearances to Mary Magdalene, the disciples at Emmaus, and the appearance to the Apostles when they were fishing on the Lake of Galilee, as given in John 21.

All of the witnesses of Christ's Resurrection were Jews. All except Paul had first known Him during His earthly life. St. Peter tells us also that he and the other witnesses of the Resurrection “ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead” (Acts 10:41). St. Paul then says that most of these witnesses were still alive at the writing of the first Letter to the Corinthians, some twenty years later, and could be consulted by anyone who wished to do so.

This is of tremendous importance for Apologetics. The Apostolic witness of the Resurrection of Christ was not a legend or myth, told long after the death of all witnesses. Quite the contrary! It was a proclamation given by eyewitnesses, whose testimony could be corroborated by hundreds of other eyewitnesses who were still living. It was a witness proclaimed well within living memory of the events.

Scholars say that the formation of a legend can only properly occur after the death of all the original witnesses. The period in which eyewitnesses are still alive and can be consulted is called the period of “living memory.”

A good example of living memory is given today by the Holocaust. Some 65 years after the event, some people today abominably try to deny its historicity. Fortunately, the claim is seen by almost all reasonable people to be ludicrous, because we are still within the period of living memory. Not a few of us have relatives and acquaintances who themselves were eyewitnesses of some part of that incomparable tragedy, and we cannot tolerate a falsification of that historical memory.

Something similar was the case in Paul's proclamation of the Resurrection of Christ to the Corinthians (and the other communities he evangelized). Paul himself was an eyewitness, and he was intimately acquainted with numerous other eyewitnesses of the event which utterly changed, shattered, and transformed their lives and the world until the end of time.

Christ's Resurrection and the General Resurrection

After giving the historical testimony of the witnesses of Christ's Resurrection, St. Paul goes on to address and refute the heretical interpretation of the Corinthians, showing its extraordinary gravity:

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have

¹ The angel had previously already given them the same commission, as reported in Mt 28:7, and Mk 16:7.

² See St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on 1 Cor 15:9.

fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. . . . (1 Cor 15:12-23)

Christ's Resurrection and the general resurrection of the just are so intimately connected that denial of one implies a denial of the other. For everything worked by Christ is for the sake of His Mystical Body, the Church. Christ's Resurrection makes no sense if His Church is not to share in His bodily glory. Christ's Resurrection is the exemplar, figure, and cause of our future resurrection.

Precisely for this reason Christ's Resurrection had to precede the general resurrection. His Resurrection is the first fruit, harbinger, pledge, and seed of the future general resurrection. It is the foundation on which the entire faith and hope of the Church is built.

Contemporary Challenge to the Historicity of the Resurrection of Christ

It has become exceedingly common for Christian theologians in the last two centuries to adopt a view similar to that of the Corinthians, denying the historical and physical reality of the Resurrection of Christ, transforming it into a purely spiritual event in the minds and hearts of the disciples.

This view is often presented more or less as follows:

It seems that after the crucifixion the disciples returned to Galilee and Peter (perhaps while fishing) realized that he was sent forth by Jesus. This "having-found-faith after Good Friday" was externalized into stories of meetings with Jesus after his death. The message of the resurrection, interpreted in visual terms, gave rise to the empty tomb story.³

According to these theologians, the resurrection accounts are not meant to be historical narratives at all, but are said to be "*theologoumena*," by which they mean stories which attempt to convey a theological doctrine by means of a fictitious or artificial narrative.

Contemporary Catholic theologians are not generally as blunt as this. However, more "moderate" forms of the same view are frequently put forward.⁴ For example, the Jesuit theologian Gerald O'Collins, professor at the Gregorian

3 This is a summary of the views of Willi Marxsen, *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ* (Naperville, Ill.: A. R. Allenson, 1968), pp. 159, 161. This summary is given by Gerald O'Collins,

4 See Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (NY: Paulist Press, 1973).

University in Rome, speaks of the "phenomenon of over-belief, the tendency (at times blatantly fundamentalistic) to interpret literally all the physical details we find in the Easter narratives, especially those of Luke and John. . . ."

Such overbelief also entails holding that he quite literally took and ate a piece of broiled fish (1k 24:42f.), and that more or less gaping holes remained in the hands and side of his risen body. . . . It is easy to spot the weak and even comic side of such overinterpretations. If a resurrected man took a snack, what kind of digestive system did his body have? Can ordinary food be transformed into glorious (normally invisible?) matter or does it pass through without genuinely interacting with such a [p. 47] body? And how could five wounds . . . remain in this body? Several years ago I found myself—to my discredit—noisily demanding of an archbishop: "What kind of a risen body do you imagine Christ to have if it still has a gaping hole in its side?"

The best response to views such as these is given, it seems to me, by Christ's response in the Gospel to the Sadducees who doubted and ridiculed the general Resurrection: "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God" (Mt 22:29). If God can raise a body from the dead and free it from all power of material corruption, surely He can make it capable of eating and of appearing with the glorious wounds of our Redemption (no longer a source of pain but of glory), or of being alternately unrecognizable and recognizable? If God can do the greater, can He not do the lesser? Just as grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it, so too glory does not destroy nature, but wonderfully elevates it. If a glorious body can triumph over death and come to share in God's eternity, surely it can triumph over some food and wounds, and be capable of being touched, seen, and recognized!⁵

It is astounding that theologians should propose something that St. Paul so directly condemns in 1 Cor 15:

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. . . . What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for

5 See 1 Cor 15:42-44: "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." The fact that the glorious body is said to be "spiritual" does not mean that it is not physical and tangible, but that its condition is entirely under the dominion of the Spirit of God.

tomorrow we die.” (1 Cor 15:14-19, 32)

All Christian hope is at stake in the denial of Christ's physical Resurrection, for our hope in our future resurrection has its foundation and pledge in the historical reality of Christ's Resurrection.

Christ's Resurrection as Motive of Credibility

Of all the miracles worked by Jesus, the Resurrection has an absolutely central importance in confirming His claim. This fundamental importance can be seen in all the Apostolic preaching recorded for us in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the letters of Paul, particularly 1 Cor 15. The Resurrection is the divine response to the Passion of Christ: God's vindication of Christ's claim. It is the ultimate demonstration that “the stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner” (Ps 118:22).

Another reason for this central importance of the Resurrection is the fact that Christ's miracles are not only signs of the divine power in general, but are also confirmations of His teachings, and physical signs of spiritual gifts that He has come to give us. The Resurrection is the most stupendous confirmation of what Christ came to bring us: (a) restoration of all that was lost through original sin, (b) *glory* in body and soul, and (c) life in God in perfect beatitude. The Resurrection shows us the glory to be received by the blessed in the body, thereby giving us a sign of the immeasurably greater glory to be received by the blessed in the soul.

Christ's Resurrection is at once the most stupendous miracle, serving as a key motive of credibility of Christ's claim, and at the same time it is a mystery of faith which God purposely manifested only to selected witnesses.

We may ask why God chose to manifest Christ's resurrection only to the disciples and not also to the entire nation. The fundamental reason has to do with God's way of communicating graces to mankind, which follows a hierarchical order. Natural gifts are given to all. Supernatural gifts come to us through the *mediation* of those who have been elevated and prepared for that mission.⁶ In this way God manifested Himself to Moses and the prophets in the Old Testament, and through them to the rest of the Israelites, and through Israel to the world.

The manifestation of Christ was precisely the mission of the Apostles and the Church. Thus it was fitting that the Resurrection be revealed directly to the Apostles and the whole Church—entirely Jewish—as it then existed before Pentecost, and through them to the rest of humanity.

A second reason is so that we who did not see the risen Christ could have the opportunity of exercising the virtue of faith through believing trustworthy eyewitnesses. This exercise of faith is supremely meritorious and gives glory to God, as Christ shows in His words to the doubting

Thomas after he was given the chance to touch Christ's wounds: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (Jn 20:29).

Our faith in the Resurrection, although meritorious, is also eminently reasonable. This is because the Resurrection was witnessed by numerous trustworthy witnesses who gave their lives for their witness, and whose lives were completely transformed and sanctified precisely by the event to which they gave witness. Furthermore, they in their turn worked numerous miracles to corroborate their testimony to the resurrection and divinity of Christ, as we can see in the Acts of the Apostles. And if someone doubts the testimony of the Acts of the Apostles, the miracles worked by the Apostles can be indirectly seen in the simple fact that the world believed the preaching of the Apostles. For example, St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor 2: 3-5): “And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but *in demonstration of the Spirit and of power*, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” The reference to a “demonstration of Spirit and power” evidently refers to miracles worked by him.

St. Augustine has a marvelous text on the credibility of the Resurrection of Christ based on the success of the apostolic preaching and the conversion of so much of the world to the Church:

And now we have three incredible things, all of which have come to pass. *It is incredible that Jesus Christ should have risen in the flesh and ascended with flesh into heaven; it is incredible that the world should have believed so incredible a thing; it is incredible that a very few men, of mean birth and the lowest rank, and no education, should have been able so effectually to persuade the world, and even its learned men, of so incredible a thing.* Of these three incredible things, the parties with whom we are debating refuse to believe the first; they cannot refuse to see the second, which they are unable to account for if they do not believe the third.⁷

Interestingly, the argument given here by St. Augustine, is accepted by an Orthodox Jew, Pinchas Lapide, who defends the historicity of the Resurrection of Christ against many contemporary Christian scholars! He writes:

I am completely convinced that the Twelve from Galilee, who were all farmers shepherds, and fishermen—there was not a single theology professor to be found among them—were totally unimpressed by scholarly theologoumena, as a Karl Rahner or Rudolf Bultmann write them. If they, through such a concrete

⁷ *City of God*, bk. 22, chap. 5, transl. by Marcus Dods (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890); available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.XXII.5.html>.

⁶ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa of Theology*, III, q. 55, a. 1.

historical event as the crucifixion, were so totally in despair and crushed, as all the four evangelists report to us, then no less concrete a historical event was needed in order to bring them out of the deep valley of their despair and within a short time to transform them into a community of salvation rejoicing to the high heavens.⁸

And again:

Thus, according to my opinion, the resurrection belongs to the category of the truly real and effective occurrences, *for without a fact of history there is no act of true faith*. A fact which indeed is withheld from objective science, photography . . . but not from the believing scrutiny of history. . . . In other words: *Without the Sinai experience—no Judaism; without the Easter experience—no Christianity*. Both were Jewish faith experiences whose radiating power, in a different way, was meant for the world of nations. For inscrutable reasons the resurrection faith of Golgotha was necessary in order to carry the message of Sinai into the world.⁹

This Jewish scholar finds the doubts of so many Christian theologians in the historicity of the Resurrection to be incoherent and scandalous:

I cannot rid myself of the impression that some modern Christian theologians are ashamed of the material facticity of the resurrection. Their varying attempts at dehistoricizing the Easter experience which give the lie to all four evangelists are simply not understandable to me in any other way. . . . For all these Christians who believe in the incarnation (something which I am unable to do) but have difficulty with the historically understood resurrection, the word of Jesus of the “blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel” (Mt 23:24) probably applies. . . .

“Or have I no power to deliver?” (Is 50:2), asks the Lord of those who are hard of believing.¹⁰

Part 2. The Harrowing of Hell

What did Christ do on Holy Saturday before the Resurrection? We know that His body stayed in the tomb, but what about His soul? When Christ died on the cross, He truly died. This means that His human soul separated from His body. Was His body still that of God as it lay in the tomb? Yes, indeed. The humanity assumed by the Son of God in the Annunciation in the womb of the Blessed Virgin is forever His. The hypostatic union was not disrupted by death. This means that the dead Body in the tomb was that of God, and the separated soul was likewise joined to the

divinity. What happened to the soul of Christ as the Body lay in the tomb?

In the Creed we profess that Christ “descended into hell,” or “descended to the dead.” What does this mean?

The Scriptural basis for the doctrine of the descent is given by St. Paul and St. Peter. In Eph 4:8-10, St. Paul comments on an enigmatic verse from Ps 68:18: “Thou didst ascend the high mount, leading captives in thy train, and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious.” St. Paul interprets the reference to ascending the high mount to refer to Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension, which, he says, was preceded by a descent into the “lower parts of the earth”:

Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)¹¹

The descent to the “lower parts of the earth” is thus followed by a glorious Ascent in which Christ led a “host of captives.” The “giving of gifts to men” concerns the subsequent mystery of the sending of the Spirit on Pentecost. St. Paul thus connects five distinct aspects of the one Paschal mystery: death, descent to underworld and the liberation of captives, Resurrection, Ascension, and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Who are comprised in this “host of captives” who are brought up to heaven by Christ? The Catholic tradition understands them to be the just of the Old Covenant and the entire history of mankind, who were in Sheol awaiting their Redeemer.

Another reference to this mystery is in 1 Pt 3:18-22

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

The “spirits in prison” spoken of by St. Peter must correspond with the “host of captives” mentioned by St. Paul. They would be all those who died with repentance in the grace of God. St. Peter thus specifies that their number also includes souls who died in the Flood. Before rising from the dead on Easter Sunday, Christ went to this innumerable crowd of souls in Sheol and revealed to them His glory. This is often referred to as the “harrowing of hell” and is proclaimed in the Creed with the words: “descended into hell.”

⁸ Pinchas Lapide and Jürgen Moltmann, *Jewish Montheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine: A Dialogue*, trans. Leonard Swidler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 60.

⁹ *The Resurrection of Jesus: a Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1983), p. 92 (my italics).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

¹¹ See also Rom 10:7.

First of all, we have to understand the terminology. “Hell” in Tradition and in the language of the Magisterium of the Church does not only refer to the state of eternal condemnation of the damned. It has a wider significance. In this it corresponds with the Old Testament equivalent: *sheol*. All the deceased in the Old Testament went to *sheol*, including the souls of the just.¹² In Latin, this is translated as *infernus*, and *hades* in Greek. The word hell, taken in this broad sense, signifies a punishment of the soul after death in which the soul does not yet see God, and thus is deprived of our supernatural final end. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* stated: “The word ‘hell’ as used here therefore means those invisible dwelling-places in which the souls are detained that have not yet been admitted to the place of heavenly happiness. In this sense the word is frequently used in Scripture.”¹³

This punishment is the consequence of original sin, and was binding on all men until our Redemption was wrought in Christ’s Passion. The New Testament therefore no longer speaks of all men going down to hell, as did the Old Testament, but only of the reprobate.

This state of *sheol*, however, had different forms, according to the state of the soul at death. We can see from the parable of Lazarus and the rich man that the souls of the just of the Old Testament were not in a place of suffering, as were the souls of the unrepentant. On the contrary, they were said to be in the “bosom of Abraham,” a condition greatly envied by the rich man in torment. This state was also known as the “limbo of the just.” The word “limbo” refers to the threshold, indicating the threshold of heaven or hell.

Two other distinct states should be noted: purgatory and the limbo of the children dying in original sin, but without personal sin. The doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell concerns exclusively the bosom of Abraham, the *sheol* in which were the souls of the just who died before Good Friday.¹⁴

What did Christ’s soul do there? St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Catechesis on the Apostle’s Creed* gives a beautiful explanation of this mystery of Holy Saturday. He states that Christ descended to “hell” for three reasons. First of all, He went to *sheol* in solidarity with all those who had preceded Him, paying the penalty of Adam. Christ assumed this human reality in order to redeem it.

12 See, for ex., Gen 37:35, in which Isaac says that his soul will go down into hell in sorrow, after learning of the supposed death of his son Joseph.

13 Part I, art. 5; *The Roman Catechism*, p. 65.

14 Ibid.: “Lastly, the third kind of place is that into which the souls of the just who died before Christ were received. Here they enjoyed a peaceful rest without experiencing any sort of pain and supported by the blessed hope of the redemption. Christ the Lord descended into this ‘hell’ to liberate these souls, who, in the bosom of Abraham, were waiting for their Savior.”

Secondly, He went there on a mission of charity, for the souls of the just are His intimate friends. He went there to be with those whom He loved. St. Thomas says: “For He had His friends not only in the world but also in hell, since one is Christ’s friend by having charity and in hell there were many who had died in charity and faith in Christ to come, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and other righteous and perfect men. And since Christ had visited His friends in the world and had succored them by His death, He wished to visit his friends who were in hell and succor them by coming to them.”¹⁵

Thirdly, He went to hell (Abraham’s bosom) to completely overcome the devil, whose kingdom He overthrew on the Cross. In Mt 12:29, Christ said: “Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.” This verse was applied to the harrowing of hell already in the second century in a homily by Melito of Sardis (died c. 190) who has Jesus say: “I am the one who trampled hell, bound the strong one, and snatched away people and took them up to heaven on high.”¹⁶ Christ bound the strong man in dying on the Cross. Now came His time to plunder his house. Hence the “harrowing of hell.” St. Thomas says: “For this reason He descended into hell, deprived the Devil of his own, bound him, and carried off his spoils.”¹⁷

The “spoils of the devil” are the “captives” spoken of by St. Paul in Eph 4:8-10, whom Christ freed from the power of the devil, by bringing them the greatest of all gifts: the vision of God. Hence St. Paul speaks of liberating a host of captives and leading them on high, and of giving gifts to men.

This despoiling of the devil consisted in the deliverance of the just who were awaiting Him. Christ did not despoil the devil of all that were his, but only those who did not die in mortal sin but in the grace and friendship of God. St. Thomas writes: “For just as Christ wished to suffer death that He might deliver the living from death, so did He wish to descend into hell in order to deliver those that were there. . . . For although Christ destroyed death altogether, he did not altogether destroy hell, but took a piece out of it, as it were, in that He did not deliver all who were there, but only those who were free from mortal sin as well as Original Sin.”¹⁸

If we ask whether the descent of Christ into hell belongs more to the abasement of Christ or if it is the beginning of the glorification of Christ, we would have to say the latter. Christ goes to the souls of the just as the Victor over death,

15 *The Aquinas Catechism*, p. 48.

16 Melito of Sardis, *On the Pasch* 102, in the Liturgy of Hours, Office of Readings for Holy Saturday.

17 *The Aquinas Catechism*, pp. 48-49

18 Ibid., p. 49.

the despoiler of the devil. All has been consummated,” as He said in expiring.

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* sums up the mystery thus:

With his soul united to his divine Person Jesus went down to the just in hell who were awaiting their Redeemer so they could enter at last into the vision of God. When he had conquered by his death both death and the devil ‘who has the power of death’ (Hb 2:14), he freed the just who looked forward to the Redeemer and opened for them the gates of heaven. (no. 125)

This mystery of the harrowing of hell has been most beautifully described in an ancient homily for Holy Saturday that is read in the Office of Readings of the Divine Office for Holy Saturday (also included in the CCC 635):

Today a great silence reigns on earth, a great silence and a great stillness. A great silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. . . . He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow Adam in his bonds and Eve, captive with him—He who is both their God and the son of Eve.

The Lord goes in to them holding his victorious weapon, his cross. When Adam, the first created man, sees him, he strikes his breast in terror and calls out to all: “My Lord be with you all.” And Christ in reply says to Adam: “And with your spirit.” And grasping his hand he raises him up, saying: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light. I am your God, who for your sake have become your son, who for you and your descendants now speak and command with authority those in prison: Come forth, and those in darkness: Have light, and those who sleep: Rise.

“I command you: Awake, sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld. Arise from the dead; I am the life of the dead. Arise, O man, work of my hands, arise, you who were fashioned in my image. Rise, let us go hence. . . . For you, I your God became your son; for you, I the Master took on your form; that of slave; for you, I who am above the heavens came on earth and under the earth; for you, man, I became as a man without help, free among the dead; for you, who left a garden, I was handed over to Jews from a garden and crucified in a garden.

“Look at the spittle on my face, which I received because of you, in order to restore you to that first divine inbreathing at creation. See the blows on my cheeks, which I accepted in order to refashion your distorted form to my own image. See the scourging of my back, which I accepted in order to disperse the load

of your sins which was laid upon your back. See my hands nailed to the tree for a good purpose, for you, who stretched out your hand to the tree for an evil one.

“I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side, for you, who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side healed the pain of your side; my sleep will release you from your sleep in Hades; my sword has checked the sword which was turned against you. But arise, let us go hence. The enemy brought you out of the land of paradise; I will reinstate you, no longer in paradise, but on the throne of heaven. I denied you the tree of life, which was a figure, but now I myself am united to you, I who am life.”

This mystery of the Harrowing of hell is portrayed in many masterpieces of Renaissance art and countless Russian Orthodox icons. Prominently featured are generally Adam, John the Baptist, Moses, David, Abel, etc. St. Joseph would have been there as well.

This mystery was denied by many of the first Protestants as a “fable.” Martin Luther, followed by Calvin,¹⁹ gave it a new interpretation, radically changing the sense. He interpreted Christ’s descent to hell as a substitutionary punishment, by which *Christ suffered the pains of hell in our place*. In particular he held that Christ suffered the unspeakable spiritual torment of a terrorized conscience before the Just Judge.

This is not the Catholic tradition! Christ did not go to hell to suffer the pains of hell in our place for the space of time in which His body lay in the tomb! He went rather to empty the part of hell containing the souls of those who died in grace: the just who died with contrition and charity before Christ’s Atonement. He went to finish His messianic mission of bringing the Gospel to all men. At that moment He brought it to all those who were awaiting a Savior in the realm of the dead. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 634-635) says this beautifully:

This is the last phase of Jesus’ messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ’s redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption. Christ went down into the depths of death so that “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn 5:25). Jesus, “the Author of life,” by dying destroyed “him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and [delivered] all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (Hb

19 Calvin seems to have understood the descent to hell to refer to the agony and abandonment of His soul on Calvary, in which he suffered “in his soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2, 16, 10, vol. I, 515-516, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), online at http://www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/documents/Christ_in_hell/index.html).

2:14-15). Henceforth the risen Christ holds “the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev 1:18), so that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil 2:10).

This mystery was given a new interpretation in the 20th century by Hans Urs von Balthasar,²⁰ which was recently challenged by Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, who has charged it with deviating significantly from the Catholic Tradition.²¹ Some of you may have seen reference to this in the magazine *First Things*, which featured a debate between Alyssa Pitstick and Fr. Edward Oakes, S.J. on this subject. Let me just state that it seems that von Balthasar’s interpretation leans toward that of Luther on this point, and deviates from the Catholic tradition, so beautifully manifested in the liturgy of Holy Saturday in the Office of Readings, the Catechism of the Council of Trent, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas.

²⁰ *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), chapter 4, pp. 148-188.

²¹ *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007).