

He Descended Into Hell

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It's been twenty-five years and she is still not over it. How could she be? With the dark circles under the eyes and a smile that never quite brings back her once infectious laugh, she wears a sadness that is no longer worrisome but that has never faded with the passing of years. They are all reminders of that awful day when Sis's youngest son's body was pulled from the family swimming pool. The funeral years ago was a mixture, no—a mess, of wails and numbness, alternating currents of overpowering pain and overwhelming despair. When I asked her recently how she's been, she trusts me enough to tell the truth, "it's been hell!" The death of a child is just one of the many ways we get there.

Lent is a time when the Church gives us an opportunity to strip away our masks and put away the Pollyannaish platitudes that keep us functioning in the fast lane of life. Lent is the time when we get to tell the blunt truth about the pain and suffering we've experienced.

It is one thing for us to name the pain that is self-inflicted and take responsibility for the suffering that is self-imposed. It's tough enough to own our mistakes and to repent from their blow to our knuckle-headed pride. Tougher still is repenting the pain we didn't deserve, the misery we didn't see coming, and the madness for which we're not responsible. The guilt may be only as original as original sin, but it is deep enough for sleepless nights. We're not talking here about ordinary pain, though, but hell.

The drunk driver who careens out of control across the center median, the utility company that breaks the gas line where a young family once lived, the trader who steals our money and can't make restitution-- these are the evils we confront and the burdens we bear each and every day. They are not the sum total of our lives. Thankfully, they are often, but not always, at the edges of our otherwise contented and controlled lives. But, Lent reminds us that they are not rare, either. Every one of us will descend into hell, at some point. The doctor will come in with a diagnosis we didn't expect. A friend we loved will walk away. Our body will give out and memories will begin to fade. Colleagues will lie about us and the economy will turn sour. We'll try to keep these sad tones out of our repertoire for most of the year. But, Lent will bring us back to a sober truth we would like to avoid. Evil is real and the cross must be borne, even by the innocent.

There is one Catholic doctrine that gets to the heart of the matter and it is found in the Creed – "he descended into hell." It is the wonderful ancient doctrine, definitively taught at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) that teaches us that, at his death, Jesus went to the "abode of the dead" to continue the paschal ministry begun on Calvary.¹ It is the redemptive mystery we celebrate on Holy Saturday in the absolute quiet of a church with an empty tabernacle and stripped bare of all its natural adornment. The Catechism says starkly that Jesus "went into the depths of death" (no. 635). In our hurry to prepare for Easter, we easily, too easily, slide over the profundity of this ancient doctrine.

Recently, Alyssa Lyra Pitstick published her Angelicum dissertation, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Eerdmans, 2007). With marvelous theological finesse, she reviews the history of this ancient dogma and its resurgence in the thought of the masterful von Balthasar. She reveals two competing conceptions of what Christ was doing in the "abode of the dead" on Holy Saturday.

The first sees Christ's descent into hell as the beginning of his glorification. Christ arrives in hell as the victor; the first fruit and obedient Son come to rescue all those righteous ones who lived unredeemed before Him. As an ancient homily for Holy Saturday says:

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. . . "I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. . . I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead."²

The second conception, articulated most recently by von Balthasar, sees Christ's descent into hell as a terrifying continuation of His passion and death. The Lord went to the abode of the dead, not so much as Victor and King, but in the fullness of rejection and abandonment. He went, as the Catechism suggests, "into the depths of death" (635) and experienced the fullness of suffering's vengeance and injustice. He went into terror, to the profound solitude of hell, psychologically cut off from others and from God, stripped of the consoling presence of the Father. The One without sin enters the place of the absurd, by means of His absolute obedience. It is in this moment that Christ takes on the "sin of the world" as He "paces" the abode of the dead and awaits the "bolt of lightning" that will awaken Him to resurrection.

Together these "competing" conceptions provide us with a new consolation. Jesus descended and experienced the full terror of rejection and, with trembling arms, carried out those imprisoned in solitude's hell. By falling totally into the trembling silence and terrifying darkness of Sheol, by obedience and not by sin, He is able to carry out those tossed into chaos by the sin of the world. He is at that moment the coincidence of opposites, total Victim and absolute Victor. As always, doctrine is doxology.

Holy Saturday is, therefore, not a meaningless theological interlude between the twinned dramatic liturgies of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It is not just the day we need for decorating our Churches with tulips and lilies. It is the feast of all those who have descended into hell themselves, those who have ever been forced to pace the most stark, vulgar and abandoned corners of the human spirit. It reminds us that, even there, we are not alone. Jesus has walked there. Jesus has suffered there. Jesus has wailed and screamed the cry of abandonment there. And, every time in this life we descend into hell, He paces its halls and carries our lifeless spirit out of there, until that final day when He will be all in all and the fullness of His glory is revealed. That is the reason why the Eastern liturgy gloriously reminds us that "Adam exults and Eve rejoices!"³

¹ John Paul II, Homily, January 11, 1989.

² Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday: PG 43, 440A, 452C; *LH*, Holy Saturday, OR. 9cf. Catechism, 635).

³ The Troparia of the Resurrection, at Matins, http://www.goarch.org/chapel/liturgical_texts/ignatius_supp

