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Article review

Response to Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*[1]

In her remarkably forceful and learned book, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell*, Alyssa Lyra Pitstick offers a comprehensive critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology of the descent into hell. Pitstick contributes to a sharpening of readings of Balthasar and forces one to make precise interpretative judgements. Clearly, she has produced a work with which anyone interested in Balthasar must engage, and the conversation and debate the book has started will, to be sure, continue for many years ahead. This said, I am afraid that Dr Pitstick's unrelenting and totalising prosecution of Balthasar's theology leads her to disallow any charitable reading and critical appropriation of Balthasar's creative and, at times, sublime theology. Although not necessarily the final evaluative word on Balthasar, or on the doctrine of the descent into hell, Pitstick's book provides a tremendous spark for those interested in Balthasar's theology and for much needed reflection on the significance of the church's confession that Jesus Christ descended into hell.

In these brief comments, I will focus on an overriding conviction held by Balthasar regarding the *pro nobis* characteristic of the Gospel, which he shares with Karl Barth. In a sermon on 1 Corinthians 6:20, Balthasar proclaims:

> 'Bought at a great price.' The first Christians were well aware of this when they put these two little words, '*pro nobis*,' at the heart of the Creed. It was 'for us' that the Son came down from heaven, 'for us' that he was crucified, died and was buried. And this means not only 'for our benefit' but also 'in our place,' taking over what was our due. If this is watered down, the fundamental tenet of the New Testament disappears and it looks as if God is always reconciled, sin is always forgiven and overcome, irrespective of Christ's self-surrender; then the Cross becomes merely a particularly eloquent symbol of God's unchanging kindness, only a symbol, indicating something but not effecting anything. There would no longer be a Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. No longer would God 'reconcile the world to himself,' as Paul explicitly says, 'through his Son.'[2]

[1] Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007)

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness: Radio Sermons*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), pp. 78–9.

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In other words, for Balthasar, and for Barth as well, the descent into hell is an essential component in our understanding of the extent of God's loving action in Christ for us and for our salvation. I am not suggesting that Pitstick has overlooked this element in Balthasar's theology of the descent, yet I contend that Balthasar's constructive theology provides more for us than Pitstick will allow. My concern is that, although many of Pitstick's criticisms are on the mark, she fails to see real possibilities in Balthasar's theology for understanding the heart of the Gospel. In short, I am concerned that Pitstick underestimates the extent to which God is for us and the length to which God has gone to save sinners and to reconcile his enemies to himself.

Perhaps the most significant related affirmation held in common by Barth and Balthasar is the conviction that Jesus Christ's atoning death is a complete and perfect work of salvation. This death is in need of nothing further to make it efficacious for human reconciliation and redemption. It is objectively finished apart from human subjective acceptance and reception. This is one aspect of Balthasar's soteriology that Pitstick finds troublesome, and which she describes as mechanical:

> According to [Balthasar's] theology, every man is redeemed because his sins have been physically removed from him, loaded on Christ on the cross, and 'burned' in the Trinitarian fire of love experienced by the Son in Sheol. It seems then that the change in the sinner's reality does not occur at the moment of repentance (or sacramental absolution) but at the point in time when Christ took these sins upon Himself on the cross and buried them with Himself in Sheol. As a consequence, all that stands between man and heaven is his acceptance of what has already been done.[3]

Although Pitstick is dissatisfied with and perplexed by this teaching, as it minimises personal and ecclesial cooperative action, it is fair to say that Balthasar's avoidance of soteriological gradualism has great promise for ecumenical consensus.[4]

Related to the affirmation of the perfect, complete and finished work of Christ is Balthasar's account of the descent into hell in terms of Christ's substitutionary work. Thomas Weinandy suggests that an accurate reading of Balthasar leads to the conclusion that in this regard, rather than departing from Catholic tradition, as Pitstick suggests, Balthasar actually retrieves the

[3] Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, p. 304.

[4] See George Hunsinger, 'Baptized into Christ's Death: Karl Barth and the Future of Roman Catholic Theology', in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 253–78.

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Catholic heritage. Balthasar, according to Weinandy, retrieves specifically the teaching of Thomas Aquinas regarding Christ's assumption of sinful humanity and, as a result, Christ's bearing the penalty meant for sin in order to liberate humanity.[5] Thomas affirms the fittingness of Christ's descent into hell as a part of his substitutionary work; Christ assumed our condemnation so that we might be saved from it. Thomas writes:

> It was fitting that Christ descend into hell. First, he came to bear our punishment and to free us from it; *he has borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows* (Isaiah 53:4). Man had merited by his sins not only the death of his body but also his own descent into hell. If then Christ died in order to free us from death, it was fitting that he descend into hell in order to deliver us from going down to hell. Hence it is said, *O death, I will be thy death; O hell, I will be thy bite* (Hosea 13:14).[6]

Of course Pitstick is entirely accurate in her assessment that Balthasar moves significantly beyond or away from Thomas in the details of the descent into hell, but I do wonder if there is a greater possibility for continuity and development from Thomas than Pitstick allows. In other words, does Thomas, in affirming Christ's uninterrupted enjoyment of the beatific vision in his triumphant descent to liberate the Old Testament patriarchs, back away from or even contradict his initial bold statement that Christ descended into hell in order to bear fully the punishment meant for sin.

Balthasar's treatment of the complete and perfect substitutionary suffering and death is marked by a central conviction regarding the distinctive, but interrelated, suffering on the cross and in the descent into hell. Balthasar, as Pitstick clearly explicates, offers a real distinction between the active obedience of the cross and the passive, even cadaver, obedience of the descent into hell. In my estimation, Pitstick moves a bit too quickly as she regards the distinction made by Balthasar as an indication of his rejection of the saving efficacy of the cross. Perhaps a more generous reading would be to say that Balthasar wants to give the fullest account of Christ's saving work in which on the cross and in the descent into hell he indeed tastes death for everyone (Heb. 2:8–9). This is seen more pointedly if we highlight a variant reading of Hebrews 2, 'apart from God he tasted death for us'. In short, Jesus could taste the full reality of death only if he experienced death in God-abandonment,

[5] Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), pp. 51–3, 64–70.

[6] *ST* IIIa 52 a 1.

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displayed both in the cry of dereliction on Good Friday and in being 'apart from God'[7] in the descent into hell of Holy Saturday.

Balthasar's accent on the descent into hell of Holy Saturday, in short, is a direct outworking of his emphasis on the vicarious nature of Christ's suffering and death, and his draining the chalice of God's wrath as a result of his complete identification with humanity to the point of bearing the world's sin. For Balthasar, if we are to interpret Christ's substitutionary death with the seriousness that scripture demands, then we must say a word about the gravity of his abandonment by the Father and the extreme distance of his separation from God. This word, therefore, must include the stark reality of Jesus Christ's death, which is followed by his descent into hell. His identification with humanity must include his descent into hell, for 'if Jesus has suffered on the cross the sin of the world to the very last truth of this sin – godforsakenness – then he must experience, in solidarity with the sinners who have gone to the underworld, their – ultimate hopeless – separation from God'.[8]

Pitstick has difficulty with a penal substitutionary view of the atonement. She questions whether a Catholic view of the death of Christ can include Balthasar's insistence that due to his identification with sinful humanity – his 'being made sin' – Christ 'draws the judgment of God upon Himself: Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, "experiences *in his own person* the . . . judgment of God *upon evil*"'.[9]

Although Balthasar interprets the suffering of Christ and his being plunged into the abyss of God-forsakenness with great seriousness and realism, what Pitsick occasionally overlooks is the way in which he also proceeds with caution. On the one hand, he wants to affirm that Christ's work in our place is not 'something removed from the darkness of sin', and that Christ 'does not bear the burden as something external: he in no way distances himself from those who by rights should have to bear it'.[10] On the other hand, he denies that there is an 'identification of the Crucified with the actual No of sin itself',[11] which would lead to an actual rift between the Father and the Son. Balthasar asserts that there is a distinction between Jesus' human experience of utter abandonment as our representative and the reality of the

[7] See Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 216.

[8] Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'The Descent into Hell', in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, *Spirit and Institution*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 408.

[9] Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, p. 176.

[10] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1994), pp. 336–7.

[11] Ibid., p. 336.

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relationship between the Father and the Son. Subjectively, Jesus experiences the full human depth of abandonment by God, through his taking on the world's sin, though, objectively, there is no actual severing of the communion between the Father and the Son.

Pitstick, furthermore, has a curious way of treating the question of the suffering of God. Although she is indeed justified in being circumspect regarding this difficult theological issue, her reticence in speaking about the suffering of God leads her potentially to underestimate the full implications of the incarnation – to minimise the extent of God's participation with us in the person of Jesus. At this point Pitstick acknowledges Balthasar's care in avoiding attributing suffering to God in a univocal manner, in favour of analogical attribution. Yet even this goes too far for Pitstick, as she argues that 'the Catholic Tradition not only has a problem with ascribing suffering to God as God univocally, but rejects attributing it to Him as God absolutely, whether univocally, equivocally, or analogically'.[12] Pitstick then insists that tradition allows only for the suffering of Christ *in the flesh*. She concludes, '[To] say Christ suffered for us is to attribute suffering to Christ in exactly the same way it is attributed to other human beings, i.e., it attributes suffering to Christ *in the flesh*. It does not attribute suffering to God *as God* at all. Moreover, suffering is ascribed to the Son (and only to the Son) *only* in virtue of the communication of idioms, that is, only because the flesh in which Christ suffered subsists in the Person of the Word.'[13]

My concern is whether Pitstick views the suffering of Jesus merely as human suffering, or whether she can see her way to affirming the suffering of Jesus as the human suffering of God. It seems more accurate to say that precisely because of the communication of attributes we can speak of the human suffering and death of God. Can Pitstick say with Cyril of Alexandria that 'the Word of God suffered in the flesh, was crucified in the flesh, and tasted death in the flesh, becoming the first born from the dead' (*Third Letter to Nestorius*)? Or as Thomas Weinandy states in reference to Cyril's christology, 'Because the incarnational "becoming" is *kath hypostasin*, according to the person, it can actually be said then that the person of the Son of God is truly born, grieves, suffers and dies, not as God, but as man for that is now the new manner in which the Son of God actually exists.'[14]

Pitstick also critiques Balthasar's claim regarding the glorious character of Christ's descent into hell. In doing so she insists on a narrow and precise use of the term glory. For Pitstick, the term 'glory' is properly used only 'when the

[12] Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, p. 132.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, p. 200.

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appearance and recognition of splendour or triumph coincide in reality'.[15] 'Glory' may be used in a secondary and analogous way when 'triumph is present without recognition'.[16] On the basis of this distinction, she insists that in calling the descent glorious, we must only speak of glory in the first or proper sense; therefore, we are not allowed to speak of Christ suffering in the descent as glorious. Here it appears that Pitstick makes things much too easy and convenient for herself, as she seemingly arbitrarily rules out any connection between God's glory and suffering in the descent. If, however, we consider God's glory in terms of God's saving action on behalf of his people, then it seems that Balthasar, as a theologian of the cross, is indeed justified in speaking of the suffering of the descent into hell as glorious, for it is precisely in this event that we see the powerful and triumphant self-giving love of God. After all, even in his innovative interpretation of the descent, which challenges traditional conceptions of triumph and liberation, Balthasar can speak of Christ's presence in hell as liberating and triumphant – Christ's descent is 'an action which plants within eternal death a manifesto of eternal life'.[17] Or, as we read in *The Church's Confession of Faith: A Catholic Catechism for Adults* – originally published by the German Bishops' Conference – 'The extreme passion, the extreme night of obedience, the ultimate solidarity of Jesus with the dead in their abandonment and loneliness, his entering into the entire hell of being human – all these are the *victory of God over death and over the powers of darkness and death*.'[18]

For Balthasar, the self-manifestation of God's glory and beauty in Jesus Christ displays the length to which God goes in enacting his love on behalf of his creatures, in order to establish saving fellowship and communion with them. The presence of God in the disfigured face and broken body of Jesus Christ crucified, dead and buried lays bare the richness of God's love, as expressed in John's Gospel by the affirmation that Jesus loved his own to the end (John 13:1).

We are indeed in Pitstick's debt for raising the question of Balthasar's theology of descent into hell and its relationship to the tradition of the church, and furthermore, for presenting her own clear and strong interpretation of the descent. However, we must not be too hasty in joining her push for a vote to revoke Balthasar's membership in the community of

[15] Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, p. 23.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), p. 180.
[18] *The Church's Confession of Faith: A Catholic Catechism for Adults*, ed. Mark Jordan, trans. Stephen Wentworth Arndt (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 162.

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faithful church theologians. Furthermore, we ought to think long and hard about the insistence, albeit in different ways and with different points of emphasis, of Barth and Balthasar that the descent into hell enhances our understanding of the salvific significance of Jesus Christ's passion as attested in scripture, for how it reveals and manifests the abundant and absolute love of the triune God for the ungodly, for sinners, for God's enemies.

We must continue to press the question raised by Balthasar and Barth regarding how the doctrine of the descent into hell informs our understanding of the gravity of sin, the reality of God's judgement against sin, and, more importantly God's being as *pro nobis*, the radical nature of God's love and the length to which God in Jesus Christ goes 'to seek out and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10). It seems fitting to give the final word to Barth, who insists, along with Balthasar, that the descent into hell is an essential element of the Gospel. In fact, it is Gospel:

> It is a serious matter to be threatened by hell, sentenced to hell, worthy of hell, and already on the road to hell. On the other hand, we must not minimize the fact that we actually know of only one certain triumph of hell – the handing-over of Jesus – and that this triumph of hell took place in order that it would never again be able to triumph over anyone. We must not deny that Jesus gave Himself up into the depths of hell not only with many others but on their behalf, in their place.[19]

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[19] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II, *The Doctrine of God*, part 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley *et al.* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), p. 496.

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