SJT 62(2): 211–216 (2009) Printed in the United Kingdom © 2009 Scottish Journal of Theology Ltd
doi:10.1017/S0036930609004700

Response to Webster and Lauber

Given the extent of agreement between Dr Webster and myself, his article suggests how this topic may promote ecumenical reappropriation of our common Christian heritage. Now if we can only get the Catholics to agree among themselves. . . Seriously, however, he has identified the fundamental questions of my book: what are our doctrinal commitments as Christians, and do we take them seriously enough to accept that not all positions are compatible with them? Are we consequently willing to set aside some propositions, or even adopt others?

Thus, ought we, with Dr Lauber, to look for a 'fruitful way forward' despite 'difficulties' in Balthasar's trinitarian theology? Or does pressing onward reveal a preferential option for a descent to suffering such that the descent defines God's perfection, instead of that perfection, in the incarnate Word, defining the descent? Conversely, if Calvin made the descent 'a gloss on Good Friday' to avoid compromising the cross's centrality, as Dr Webster suggests, would those with similar hesitations embrace anew that 'long Christian tradition of reflection on Christ's descent to the souls in prison' if, far from compromising that centrality, it effectively safeguards it?

But what is that tradition? Implicit in Dr Griffiths's question[1] is an equally urgent matter that must be addressed first. Why should we care whether something is or is not taught authoritatively, is or is not part of the deposit of faith, is or is not part of the Gospel? St Paul exhorts us, 'Stand firm and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter' (2 Thess. 2:15). If theology is not to be reduced to religious studies or even intellectual self-abuse, we must aim to embrace the Word of God as it has revealed itself and proclaim what we have first received (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:1–11).

This is why we care what tradition is. What has been handed down is the faith Jesus sent the apostles out to preach, that others – that we – might hear and believe. Believing Christ, they believed implicitly all that his Spirit would guide their successors in faith into knowing in the ages to come. There is

[1] Paul J. Griffiths, 'Is There a Doctrine of the Descent into Hell?', in *Pro Ecclesia*, 17/3 (Summer 2008), pp. 257–68, and presented in an earlier version at the Barth Society in San Diego, 2007, in conjunction with papers from Webster and Lauber. This article responds to all three papers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609004700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

then development of doctrine, but it is also always development of doctrine, of something believed, of something revealed. This, I take it, is what we as believing Christian theologians see as the context of our work.

In this light, let me respond to certain overarching issues my interlocutors raised. First, I concur about our duty to read with charity. I think they would likewise agree that charity requires speaking the truth – gently, of course, but also clearly, lest we lose sight of Christ or obscure him in others' eyes. Charity thus requires the accurate representation of an author's thought. So if Balthasar regards the traditional doctrine as mistaken, as indeed he does, it is not 'charitable' to soften that, but rather a misrepresentation and so an injustice. Reading with charity also includes interpreting an author in accord with his stated intentions. But since intentions alone do not accomplish deeds, there is no failure in charity to argue, upon evidence, that an author falls short of meeting them.

Having been introduced to Balthasar's work in a highly favourable context, I read him assuming he was building upon Catholic tradition. I began to question that continuity as my familiarity with the tradition grew. To take a pertinent example, I discovered multiple instances in which Balthasar uses a quotation from a theological authority in a sense other than, even contrary to, the author's manifest intention. Perhaps due to the gravity of such conclusions, what I intend as their straightforward presentation, with supporting arguments, is often mistaken as personal attack. I hope that the courtesy of accurate interpretation in accord with stated intentions will be accorded me.

Authors within the tradition likewise deserve no less: one badly misreads both St Thomas and the tradition to think Balthasar's use of him retrieves the tradition. Dr Lauber summarises the typical argument: St Thomas's 'bold statement' is 'at least mitigated or at most even contradicted by what follows' in his text. For both justice and charity's sake, we ought to assume St Thomas was consistent with himself until proven otherwise. We ought, then, to look for an interpretation – and I give one elsewhere – that is consistent with his other positions, rather than thinking he back-pedalled or out-and-out contradicted himself in the space of one question of the *Summa*. But assume he did: how are we to determine which statement to privilege? If he didn't know what he thought, how can we? Our choice then simply becomes *our* choice and lacks any claim to his authority, for he has, with equal authority, denied it. Finally, to the degree his statement is 'bold', it is not representative. But if it is not representative of the tradition, citing it can hardly be a 'retrieval' of the tradition.

This matter of accurate interpretation brings us to a necessary clarification regarding the glory manifested in Christ's descent, which will lead us back

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609004700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to the issue of tradition. In my discussion of the meanings of *glory*, I do not arbitrarily define *glory* and then claim only that use is legitimate. Nor do I say that the linguistic meaning of *glory* has doctrinal weight. Few words are defined dogmatically and doing so is rarely necessary. Instead, I look at how *glory* is in fact used, and identify three such ways. All are legitimate, but since they differ in meaning, they will apply to different situations. The question arises whether Balthasar and the Catholic tradition understand *glorious* in the same way when said of Christ's descent? I then give extensive evidence that the Catholic tradition understands the descent's glory similar to that of the resurrection. The tradition's silence in applying the cross's 'glory' to the descent is indeed significant: if Balthasar is going to *develop* the doctrine along those lines, there must be something there to begin with. And according to not just me, but historians of *descensus* doctrines, there is no such 'tradition' in that vein prior to the Reformation. Again, so long as one holds the principle of non-contradiction, one cannot simultaneously affirm a pair of contraries. Therefore, if the church affirms in her lived faith that Christ's descent was glorious like the resurrection, that affirmation is in itself a denial that it was glorious like the crucifixion. My book addresses glory in some detail *not* because I try to specify the descent's glory where the tradition does not, but because (1) my readers may not be aware of that tradition, just as I was not before my studies, and (2) doing so serves the accurate comparison of Balthasar and the tradition.

By affirming the descent as glorious, but understanding that glory differently from its historical characterisation, Balthasar reduces his continuity with the tradition on this point to the superficial. There are other terms he likewise retains, but invests with new meaning. For example, Dr Lauber commented how, for Balthasar, Christ's death 'is in need of nothing further to make it efficacious for human reconciliation and redemption', something I am said to find 'troublesome'. In contrast, Dr Webster described how I emphasise the importance of Christ's redemptive work being completed with his death. Why the opposite characterisations? Dr Lauber explains what Balthasar means by 'death': 'separation from God', 'Godforsakenness', even 'damnation'. These are not what I mean nor, I wager, what the greater Christian tradition, nor even ordinary people, mean by Christ's death. For those things are not death simply speaking, but death in a secondary sense. They are the 'second death', a death of the soul, not of the living person. What I find 'troublesome' is that, for Balthasar, the death 'efficacious' for redemption is Christ's *second* death. The cross then is insufficient, even unnecessary.

Similarly, I 'hesitate' only about certain senses of 'punishment and substitutionary language'. Balthasar's idea that Jesus subjectively experiences

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609004700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

his descent as punishment without it objectively being so, I would argue, makes a mockery of the redemption and this according to Balthasar's own principles: to redeem the world, Christ *must* undergo the second death. Is that second death a subjective feeling, or an objective state? If merely a feeling, Christ did not save us from a real state of alienation from God, but only from feeling really bad about ourselves. But if the second death is an objective state and Christ only subjectively 'felt it' without really undergoing it, then we are still dead in our sins. If the second death is a real state and Christ underwent it, however, then by Balthasar's own description, the Son was actually abandoned by the Father in the descent. Hence, the Trinity was really dissolved.

Rather than suggesting, with Dr Lauber, that Balthasar develops doctrine, Dr Griffiths takes the opposite approach, arguing I have overestimated the tradition's clarity. I was certainly surprised to see my summary of the church's doctrine taken as an attempted dogmatic definition. Contrary to accusations made elsewhere, I have no desire to assume to myself functions, ordinary or extraordinary, of the magisterium. I merely intended to summarise what 'Christ descended into hell' means as the church has understood it. The church did not profess those words for centuries without meaning something by them. They had a specific content, and it is our task to receive and hand that on. The dominance of the historico-critical methods makes it ironic that that 'hell' is so often taken in contemporary theology to specify eternal damnation; the original words are simply too broad to provide that specificity. Their meaning must then be given by context, i.e. the church's usage, and it will be hard indeed to argue the pre-Reformation church did not have a universal doctrine of the descent or that she admitted Christ may have suffered eternal punishment.

Now, as Dr Griffiths explains, the documents he cites identify three levels of doctrinal weight. They also specify that creedal articles belong to the most weighty level. Which is not to say there is *de facto* magisterial weight to my summary. It is to say that what the church means when she professes Christ's descent is *de fide credenda*: Vatican I makes clear that the meaning of dogma is given by how the church has understood and understands these propositions, and developments must conserve this meaning (*Dei Filius*, DS 3020, 3043). Since not everything belonging to the deposit of faith has been officially defined, it follows that development of doctrines not yet defined as dogma must do likewise, as indeed the theology of doctrinal development argues. If creedal truths are *de fide credenda*, it is then not simply the words 'He descended into hell' that are such, but the church's meaning in using them.

Very little of that meaning has been defined, because it was unnecessary: Catholics knew what their belief was. The magisterium is often reactive in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609004700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

promulgating documents and certainly in defining dogma. Where there is no controversy, as was largely the case regarding Christ's descent, no definition is necessary.

Dr Griffiths, however, argues that a *truth* not specified by a promulgated *act* is not a matter of faith, and therefore *wholly open* to speculation. Note the implicit (and real) distinction between truths and the acts of teaching them. 'Promulgate' obscures this difference if taken to refer to a truth rather than to the document discussing that truth. The difference is important, lest we think something *becomes* true because the church teaches it. Rather, the church teaches what *is* true and because we believe Christ preserves the church, her teaching is sufficient grounds for our belief. Truths are true irrespective of the church's explicit teaching of them. In acts with varying degrees of authority, some of those truths have been specified.

If this distinction between truth taught and act of teaching is correct, truths can command assent even if not defined in a specific magisterial act; to say we are only obliged to believe what is defined as dogma seems a legalistic reduction. That our obligation is wider is clear from the fact that we believe the church is the indefectible means of salvation instituted by Christ. The church herself teaches this, but we must believe it is true of her before we will accept her testimony.

Again, if the church's faith were limited to magisterial definitions, an infinite regress would ensue: suppose *glory* were defined somewhere; we must then look to where the words of the definition are themselves defined, and so. Thus *glory* need not be dogmatically defined to be used in a sense that accurately represents the church's official faith, which is normative for her members. As Vatican II taught, 'What was handed on by the apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the people of God; and so the Church, *in her teaching, life and worship*, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes' (*DV* 8; see also *DV* 7). Tradition thus includes, but is also wider than, the truths enumerated in magisterial promulgations; hence also a traditional doctrine, one taught by and contained in sacred tradition itself, may belong to the deposit of faith without having been defined in every detail by such acts. Thus, too, contrary to Dr Griffiths, so long as developments must conserve what went before, expressions of faith other than definitions (liturgy, art, the consensus of theologians, etc.) have a great deal to say about the orthodoxy of later proposals.

So while I agree with Dr Griffiths' key premise that the 'bounds of orthodoxy and so of traditional doctrine are coextensive with truths' of those three categories, I disagree with how he restricts that premise to promulgated acts. To the extent that what the church means in her profession of Christ's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609004700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

descent has not already been sufficiently defined, if we are to proclaim what we have received, we must look to sacred tradition and profess, examine, defend and develop what it reveals. It is indisputable that a doctrine of the descent was universally articulated in the active faith of the church in all Christendom up till the Reformation and, for the Catholic and Orthodox, beyond. The review of evidence attesting to that tradition in my book would have been unnecessary a mere sixty years ago, but the historical factors that coalesced in a disruption of theology and catechesis about it made it advisable.

The two issues I have discussed, accurate interpretation and the role of tradition, meet in any consideration of how to understand the church's profession that Christ descended into hell. Thus I absolutely agree with Dr Griffiths when he says that, since the Holy Spirit 'constantly guides the Church into deeper, richer, and full understandings' of doctrines, the key question is whether a new theological proposal is 'not contradictory of what has gone before'. And I have argued elsewhere, upon evidence, that Balthasar's theology of Christ's descent into hell is just so contradictory.

Alyssa Lyra Pitstick
Hope College, PO Box 9000, Holland, MI 49422-9000, USA
pitstick@hope.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930609004700 Published online by Cambridge University Press