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# Balthasar, Hell, and Heresy: An Exchange

*Alyssa Lyra Pitstick / Edward T. Oakes, S.J.*

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## Alyssa Lyra Pitstick

**H**ans Urs von Balthasar once keenly observed what makes someone an *ecclesial* theologian: "It is quite clear that anyone who practices theology as a member of the Church must profess the Church's Creed (and the theology implicit in it), both formally and materially. This profession is made formally, by positing the *ecclesial act* of faith; materially, by accepting the *ecclesial contents* of the faith."

In other words, what *ecclesial* theologians say should reflect the beliefs they hold and those beliefs are to be the ones held by the *ecclesial* community. In virtue of their common profession, the theologian bears a name in common with the preexisting community of faith. This *ecclesial* relation suggests why the community can correct and even censure members who reject its common doctrine. Both formal and material professions serve as a lamp to guide and correct the work of the *ecclesial* theologian with the light of faith—and to enlighten any adequate evaluation of that work. For Catholics (like Balthasar), the definitive profession is expressed in Scripture, tradition, and the Church's Magisterium as these are inseparably united.

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What then are we to think when Balthasar himself radically reinterprets a perennial doctrine of his *ecclesial* community, the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell? When he retains the form in its general expression but changes the content to the point of contradicting the original?

Balthasar is counted among the most influential theologians of the past century, being widely read and respected. Only his unexpected death, three days before the ceremony, prevented him from being made a cardinal by Pope John Paul II. By reputation, he is generally considered a conservative theologian. He wrote a book about how important it was to him to be Catholic. Of all people, one might reasonably expect Balthasar to qualify as an *ecclesial* theologian. But does he meet his own criteria?

It is a question asked reluctantly; however, the doctrine in question is by no means marginal to Christian faith: The mystery of Holy Saturday stands with Good Friday and Easter Sunday at the center of Christ's redemptive work. What one believes of Christ's descent into hell necessarily affects what one believes about Christ and salvation through him. The contrast between Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday and the traditional Catholic doctrine confronts us with the grave but necessary question whether the work of a theologian so reputedly Catholic is in fact compatible with the Catholic faith.

Traditionally, Christ's descent has been seen as the beginning of the manifestation of his triumph over death and the first application of the fruits of redemption. Gloriously descending to the souls of the holy men and women who had died before him, Christ



bestowed on them the glory of heaven and the fullness of freedom. He did not suffer in hell; rather, in virtue of his redemptive death on the cross, he opened to the holy souls the gates of heaven that had been closed due to sin. Notable for its ancient origin and the unusual consistency of its profession, this doctrine of a triumphal descent is part of the heritage of all Christians. It was held universally in both Christian East and West until the Protestant Reformation; the Catholic Church and the Orthodox have continued to profess it without interruption.

**B**althasar argues, however, that this doctrine does not do justice to the depths to which Christ went for man's redemption or, consequently, to his love. Rather, Christ must have suffered after death the full force of what would have awaited sinful mankind without a redeemer: complete rejection by the Father without hope of mercy or reconciliation. By descending into this utter abandonment, Christ bore the punishment humanity deserved, thereby manifesting the extreme extent of God's love. Balthasar agrees that Christ's descent should be called glorious, but in the sense that Christ's crucifixion, rather than his resurrection, is said to be his glory. Balthasar thus retains the form of the profession of faith but with a content other than the traditional one of his ecclesial community. Like the Catholic Church, Balthasar professes *Christ descended into hell*, but he means something radically different.

Balthasar had acknowledged the act of faith as normative in both its formal and material aspects. How then could he, a man of such Catholic repute and enormous intellectual gifts, have set forth the material content of the verbal profession so differently?

Certainly the definitive answer is known only by God, who sees the heart. But four possible explanations of a more general and accessible character suggest themselves: (1) Balthasar was ignorant of the content of the Church's profession, (2) he knew it but did not think it was normative, (3) he knew it was normative and saw his own as a development of it, or (4) he knew it was normative but nonetheless proposed something else in its place. We may legitimately ask which explanation is most fitting in order to consider whether Balthasar's doctrine is a product of ecclesial theology.

The first possibility is untenable: Balthasar's biographers compete for superlatives to describe his intelligence and extensive reading in literature and theology, and Balthasar himself discusses or alludes to the traditional Catholic doctrine in several places.

The second possible explanation, that Balthasar did not think the material profession was normative, also seems unsustainable. Balthasar knew what the tradi-

tional doctrine was, while his biographers and those who knew him personally stress his lifelong concern to be an ecclesial thinker. An original thinker, yes, but a maverick or dissenter, no. His observation that the allegiance of faith pertains both to its form and its content was written in the final years of his life and does not appear to reflect a change in his consciousness of the theologian's responsibility.

**M**ight it be, then, that Balthasar knew that the Church's explication was normative but saw his own as a development of it? Surely it does the most justice to Balthasar as a noted scholar and a professed Catholic to examine his work based on this assumption. Let us look then at the doctrine and Balthasar's proposed development in more detail.

The traditional doctrine of Christ's descent into hell can be summarized by four points:

- The sinless human soul of Christ, united to his divine person, descended only to the realm of the dead reserved for the souls of holy individuals, called the limbo of the fathers. *Hell*, as any abode of the dead other than heaven, has progressively lost the breadth of meaning it once had, and much confusion about Christ's descent is due to this fact of linguistic history. Historically, *hell* could refer to any or all of the following: the hell of eternal punishment, purgatory, the limbo of the fathers, or the limbo of the children. (The limbo of the children—today just called limbo and the subject of some theological controversy—would be the eternal abode of those individuals who died without personal sin but also without the grace of justification; in contrast, those liberated from the limbo of the fathers had received that grace.) If, then, Catholics profess *Christ descended into hell*, we must ask which "hell" the Catholic Church intends. Catholic teaching has consistently and unambiguously held that Christ descended in soul only to the limbo of the fathers. For the sake of those who are squeamish of talking about separated souls being in places, we may say just as well that Christ's soul joined the company of other holy souls.

- He then liberated the just from the limbo of the fathers, conferring on them the glory of heaven. Having accomplished mankind's redemption in the blood of his cross, Christ distributed the first fruit of his sacrifice.

- In doing so, his power and authority were made known to all the dead, both good and evil, and to the demons.

- Because Christ descended in his sinless soul as the all-holy redeemer, his descent was glorious in a way similar to his resurrection, and he did not suffer in hell.



Although this traditional doctrine of Christ's descent has not been defined by an ecumenical council in resolution of controversy or proclaimed in an extraordinary manner by papal authority, it has consistently been held as an authentic and authoritative doctrine of Catholic faith. To doubt that would be to doubt not only the testimony of history but also the authority of tradition itself and of the Church's ordinary Magisterium. The doctrine is expressed in Scripture; in papal statements, conciliar documents, and other forms of magisterial teaching such as official catechisms; in the creeds; in the diverse eastern and western liturgies; in the consensus of the Church Fathers, the doctors of the Church, and the saints; and in the *sensus fidelium* expressed in sacred art. The elements of the doctrine go back to apostolic and patristic times, attain particular systematic integrity in the scholastic period, are reaffirmed as Catholic doctrine in response to the challenge of the new Protestant doctrines of the Reformation, and are reiterated in the present day in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Balthasar proposes notable changes to this doctrine. He rejects the idea of the limbo of the fathers, holding instead that Christ descended to the place (or state) of eternal punishment. Balthasar prefers to call this abode Sheol rather than hell, in part because he holds that Sheol is something worse than hell. There, Christ suffers the fate of unredeemed mankind: complete rejection by the Father. The Father's rejection is just, since Christ is "literally 'made sin'" in Sheol. Balthasar thinks that sin is something like a substantial reality due to the energy invested in it by the sinner. This idea has been criticized elsewhere for philosophical reasons, but merely to illustrate it here we might say that, by sinning, a person not only forfeits the good he might otherwise have become but also perverts that potentially positive part of his reality into something negative. Existing as a sort of immaterial reality, sins can be separated from sinners and actually transferred to Christ during his passion. Thus, he logically must suffer their full punishment if they are to be expiated.

The full significance of this burden is apprehended in Sheol. In place of the *visio Dei*, Christ has a *visio mortis* as he contemplates the repulsive horror and self-isolation of sin's selfishness. Balthasar stresses that Sheol is not a place, however, but a condition and thus an intimate spiritual reality. Hence, just as a soul is united to God through the beatific vision (the *visio Dei*), so likewise Christ, in virtue of his *visio mortis*, does not merely "see" sin objectively outside himself but is subjectively united and conformed to it: He is "literally 'made sin.'" Or, what is the same, sin becomes embod-

ied (technically, *enhypostasized*) in the Son. The Father's rejection of *sin* thus takes the form of his abandonment of the Son in Sheol beneath the crushing weight of divine wrath against evil. Hence, Christ's agony does not cease after his death but rather increases as he suffers the pain of eternal punishment. Despite the limited time his body lay in the tomb, Christ experiences the Father's abandonment as eternal, both because such timelessness is essential to the punishment of unredeemed sin and because his suffering must embrace all time if it is to atone for the sins of all time.

As the Son of God, however, Jesus had a unique intimacy with the Father. Consequently, the Father's rejection is far worse for Christ than for other men. It is, Balthasar says, proportional to the divine love between the Father and the Son. Christ's agony in Sheol thus is immeasurably greater than the punishment of hell for any and all other sinners: Through the *visio mortis*, he is conformed to what is contrary to himself, the anti-divine reality of sin; he is rejected by the Father in proportion to his filial intimacy; and he undergoes this wrath on behalf of all sinners, suffering for each and every one of their sins.

Christ can undergo all this only because he is divine. As he is conformed to all sin, his human nature is "shattered" in Sheol by "a certain 'stretching apart' . . . which remains physiologically indescribable." Just as Balthasar thinks that, in order to become human, the Son actually left behind with the Father divine attributes such as omniscience, so even this attenuated humanity of Christ's will ultimately be stripped away. His descent thus is a conflict between the substantial love of God and the substantial selfishness of sin:

With the removal of the whole superstructure of the Incarnation, the eternal will of the Son within the Trinity to obedience is exposed . . . as the substructure that is the basis of the entire event of the Incarnation: and this is set face-to-face with the hidden substructure of sinful existence, exposed in Sheol. . . . Now it is precisely this face-to-face confrontation between the "naked" God and "naked" sin that shows that Jesus' solidarity even with the utter lostness of sinners presupposes the uniqueness of his condition [that is, his filial divinity].

In this way—and only in this way, Balthasar insists—is redemption possible: For sin is brought inside the Son when he is literally made sin in Sheol; thus it is brought into the relationship between the Son and the Father; and thus it is finally brought into



the love between them, the Holy Spirit. Despite the sin and wrath they experience, each divine person continues to give himself to the other two out of love. In this way, the trinitarian love engulfs sin, thereby destroying it. Christ's descent into hell is glorious because God's invincible (or "ever greater") love is revealed in the very conditions that present the greatest resistance to it.

Balthasar's doctrine differs so strikingly from the Catholic tradition's on so many essential points one wonders what elements are retained that might qualify it as a development. True, *Christ* descends to hell—though not exactly the Christ of Catholic tradition, for, according to Balthasar, Christ descends not so much in his human soul united to his divine person but ultimately in his divinity alone: Christ's humanity is "stretched" until "the whole superstructure of the Incarnation" is stripped away. The Son descends to *hell*—though not to the abode for holy souls, but rather to Balthasar's Sheol. The Son's descent is *glorious*—though not as the tradition has it, with Christ's sinless human soul manifesting itself in a glory like that of his imminent resurrection and conferring the beatific vision on the holy dead but rather with the "glory" of the divine love persisting despite its internal embrace of sin. Christ's *power and authority are manifested* in the realm of the dead and a way to heaven is made open—though not in the way these things were understood to have been done from the time of the early Church.

The disparity between the two doctrines is manifest also in their different soteriological roles. In Balthasar's theology, Christ's descent is expiatory rather than being the first application of the fruit of salvation. Also, the passivity of Christ's suffering in Sheol differs from the authoritative action traditionally ascribed to him. Moreover, the received Catholic theological tradition holds that Christ's death on the cross was satisfactory in virtue of the preeminent qualities of his person, that is, his divine excellence and his perfect charity. In contrast, Balthasar's soteriology of Christ's descent depends on quantitative penal substitution: In the place of all sinners, Christ suffers the punishment for all sins. Humanity is redeemed by Christ's cross insofar as the guilt of all sins is actually transferred to him there, but these sins remain to be expiated in Sheol through his suffering their punishment in place of the sinners who deserved it.

In short, it is difficult to see Balthasar's theology of Christ's descent as a development of the traditional Catholic doctrine. He retains the formula *Christ gloriously descended into hell* but invests it with a radically different meaning, maintaining the formal profession while replacing the material profession. Thus, contrary

to all expectation, it seems we are left with no choice but the fourth possible: Balthasar knew the traditional material profession as normative but nonetheless proposed something else in its place.

In fact, examination of Balthasar's theology reveals that his doctrine is largely original to him. Although he generally attempts to present it as a rereading of historical sources, one finds he ignores or rejects the most widespread and authoritative of such. His selected pre-Reformation sources generally are ambiguous, open to readings consistent with the tradition, not authoritative, or used not only out of context but also against their context. The source with most telling influence on Balthasar is Adrienne von Speyr, a woman under his spiritual direction and a convert from Protestantism, while the seminal idea that Christ suffered in some way during his descent may be traced back to Nicholas of Cusa and the doctrinal heirs of his proposal, Martin Luther and especially John Calvin.

**T**he *unity of faith* and the *nexus mysteriorum* are just two ways to describe the fact that the mysteries of Christ's life, death, and resurrection are all knit together. The work of God in Christ is a seamless garment. To change the profession, formal or material, of one mystery will ultimately have a ripple effect through all. Balthasar's essentially new doctrine of Christ's descent raises the question whether one can still believe in the Christ professed by one's ecclesial community if one consciously rejects the descent it professes, just as the same question would be raised if one rejected Christ's resurrection, his incarnation, the Trinity, or any other article of the creed. In fact, we have seen that the Christ whom Balthasar proposes descended into Sheol is not the same Christ whom the pre-Reformation and Catholic tradition professes descended to the limbo of the fathers.

Also at issue is the authority of the tradition that specifies the material contents of the formal act of faith. This matter is brought to the fore in theologies of Christ's descent, because the descent occurred beyond the reach of any eye and hence can be approached only on the basis of faith and its submission to *revealed* truth. The most explicit scriptural testimony is obscure, however, while the invocation of other passages to clarify those texts is already dependent on a tradition of interpretation and belief. Hence, necessarily, either one relies on Christian tradition as a sure guide to God's revelation—or one rejects such tradition in whole or in part.

The consequences of rejection give pause. If tradition is necessary, then without it theology becomes subjected to fallen reason's fancy—and unaided reason ultimately cannot fail to err in a subject matter so



beyond its capabilities. Like all the mysteries of faith, Christ's descent into hell is an endlessly rich source for theological reflection. Nonetheless, its character as a mystery does not preclude certain things being affirmed as true and others being denied as false. Though the fullness of the mysteries of faith transcends human reasoning, God revealed these mysteries not to confound the human intellect but that we might know the truth about him in order to love and serve him as his holy people.

Then, too, as Balthasar had said, the ecclesial theologian adheres to the creed's implicit theology, that is, to the community's reasoned understanding of its belief as this consensus has been transmitted through history. The Church's tradition is implicit in her formal profession of faith; since tradition specifies what the words have meant to the believing community, it is the material content. If the verbal formula exists for the sake of conveying its content, then the words alone are insufficient for ecclesial communion. In other words, since words are significant for their meaning, to reject the material content of profession is identical to rejecting the belief the community has handed down, which is to reject the community formed by common belief and consequently to separate oneself from that community—even if, all the while, one retains the verbal formula.

Unfortunately, regardless of the openness with which one reads Balthasar's works or the sympathy one may have for him personally, it is undeniable that his theology of Christ's descent entails a *de facto*, and sometimes even conscious, rejection of Catholic tradition. Thus, Balthasar's work fails to adhere to an essential element of Catholic ecclesial theology and its standard of truth. Indeed, he contradicts it on a matter central to the gospel of redemption and to Christian faith. Confronted with this curious circumstance of an admired theologian whose work stands in opposition to the faith of his professed ecclesial community, even the most respectful inquiry would have to conclude, however reluctantly, that something went gravely awry in Balthasar's execution of the task of ecclesial theologian.

### Edward T. Oakes, S.J.

**H**ans Urs von Balthasar is a disturbing theologian. Even among some of his most vocal enthusiasts, he seems "not quite right." Nor has this diffidence been much assuaged by John Paul II's evident admiration for the theologian, shown most incontrovertibly when the pontiff named him a cardinal in 1988. Nor are the anxiously orthodox much allayed by Pope Benedict XVI's praise of him in Octo-

ber 2005, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of his birth. And surely the central reason for that uneasiness is—despite his self-proclaimed orthodoxy—Balthasar's claim that Christ descended into the depths of hell in order to rescue, at least potentially, *all* those "spirits in prison who disobeyed God long ago" (1 Pet. 3:20).

Alyssa Pitstick claims that this thesis directly contradicts the limpid and always consistent teaching of the Magisterium on the mystery of Holy Saturday, which perhaps finds its clearest and most univocal formulation in this sentence from the recently promulgated *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him."

To be sure, this version of the *Catechism* was published after Balthasar died, and so he cannot be blamed for dissenting from that particular sentence, at least as formally taught. But that is not much of a defense, for the sentence was evidently formulated with him in mind. We know this because Christoph Cardinal Schönborn (archbishop of Vienna and chairman of the drafting committee of the *Catechism*) said so: "The brief paragraph on Jesus' descent into hell keeps to what is the common property of the Church's exegetical tradition. Newer interpretations, such as that of Hans Urs von Balthasar (on the contemplation of Holy Saturday), however profound and helpful they may be, have not yet experienced that reception which would justify their inclusion in the *Catechism*."

Admittedly, Schönborn does provide here a certain amount of room for discussing Balthasar's apparently revolutionary theology of Holy Saturday, and he even leaves open the possibility that it might later become part of the Church's orthodox teaching. This is a prospect that the *Catechism* itself seems to point to, for it asserts that "the Church prays that no one should be lost. . . . If it is true that no one can save himself, it is also true that God 'desires all men to be saved' (1 Tim. 2:4) and that for God 'all things are possible' (Matt. 19:26)." With *that* passage, Balthasar would certainly agree, only adding that it is both a logical and a psychological impossibility to pray for something for which there is antecedently no hope—a hope that for him can be justified only in the love of Christ that is victorious even over hell.

I do not know if Pitstick holds with St. Augustine that hope for universal redemption is antecedently impossible, but she certainly insists that Balthasar's own way of providing theological grounds for that hope contradicts Church teaching. In her reading, the Church has recognized only a *glorious* entrance by Christ into hell, and since glory is antithetical to dark-



ness, Christ therefore did not—or rather could not—suffer in true hell, the place of the damned, where only darkness reigns. Thus Christ descended into hell solely to redeem those located in the so-called limbo of the fathers.

Frankly, I dispute her tendentious reading of the tradition. Back in his days as Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict wrote a book called *Eschatology*, where he faced this issue directly:

God himself suffered and died. . . . He himself entered into the distinctive freedom of sinners, but he went beyond it in that freedom of his own love which descended willingly into the Abyss. Here the real quality of evil and its consequences become quite palpable, provoking the question . . . whether in this event we are not in touch with a divine response able to draw freedom, precisely as freedom, to itself. The answer lies hidden in Jesus' descent into Sheol, in the night of the soul which he suffered, a night no one can observe except by entering this darkness in suffering faith. . . . It is a challenge to suffer in the dark night of faith, to experience communion with Christ in solidarity with his descent into the Night. One draws near to the Lord's radiance by sharing his darkness.

The parallels with Balthasar's theology here are more than obvious, which Ratzinger makes even more explicit in the afterword to the English edition, written in 1987 during his tenure as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In this afterword, he praises Balthasar's trilogy as a "great triptych" and singles out for special laudation the last volume of *Theo-Drama* (the one specifically devoted to this theme) for "its profound analysis of the essence of Christian hope, the pain of God, judgment and consummation." Indeed, he goes further and raises the large claim that this final volume "makes a foundational contribution to a deepening of the theme of eschatology."

I am not trying to give retroactive infallibility to these lines simply because they happen to have been written by a future pope. But they certainly do show that Balthasar's theology of Christ's descent into hell has entered into the thinking of the highest reaches of the Church's Magisterium. Pitstick, however, labors under the impression that Balthasar's views are so *outré* and bizarre that they even call into question the honesty of his professed desire to be regarded as an orthodox Catholic theologian.

Of course, his views are not right just because they have more theological warrant than Pitstick wants to

grant. Balthasar's theology is not without problems. When one of Ludwig Wittgenstein's graduate students allowed how much he regretted the Church's condemnation of Origen's doctrine that God would eventually abolish hell and redeem the whole world (including the devils), the philosopher shot back: "Of course it was rejected. It would make nonsense of everything else. If what we do now is to make no difference in the end, then all the seriousness of life is done away with." And in his book *A Rumor of Angels*, the sociologist and Lutheran writer Peter Berger insists that "the argument from damnation" points to a world beyond this one: We all feel, Berger argues, that certain crimes are so wanton that no punishment, not even execution or life in prison, could suffice for justice to be done. In other words, there can be no theodicy without hell, no genuinely transcendent justice without eternal damnation. If the drama of salvation is to be a divine comedy, and not just a hollow, sick, and empty existentialist joke, it has to include an inferno.

But such objections, worries, and demurrals are one thing; Alyssa Pitstick's full-bore attacks on Balthasar quite another. To start with, her reading of the tradition insists that Sheol (the vaguely conceived underworld of the Hebrew imagination) was pre-differentiated, so to speak, into various regions. Ancient views of the underworld, whether from the Old Testament, Homer, or other pre-Christian sources, were undoubtedly vague. But that vagueness for her was due to the darkness of minds that had not yet received the fullness of revelation.

That, however, is an epistemological point. The various regions had already been divided up into impermeable sections, however unbeknownst to pre-Christians. In her view, before the coming of Christ on earth, the underworld already consisted of (1) a hell of the damned, to which Christ did not go; and (2) a limbo of the just ones, where Christ went to free these antecedently just souls from their (presumably unjust?) captivity. Indeed, in her forthcoming book, though not in her article here, she actually goes so far as to identify this pre-Christian limbo with the Catholic concept of purgatory—a strange innovation on the tradition coming from such an *über*-traditionalist as herself. (With the exception of Cato the Younger, all the denizens of Dante's *Purgatorio* are baptized Christians, and even Cato is placed in what Dante called "ante-purgatory," from which he never ascends into purgatory proper.)

Because Pitstick's reading of the tradition is so monochromatic, she is forced to trace the provenance of Balthasar's apparently *recherché* views not to the Bible, and certainly not to tradition, but to such figures



as German cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Because she seems to regard that genealogy as probative merely by mentioning it, I gather she disapproves of Protestant influence on Catholic theologians—and we have already learned that a theologian's status as a cardinal clearly cuts no ice with her. But in response to her implied accusations of Lutheran and Calvinist influence, I will up the Protestant ante even further. In my reading, the strongest Protestant influence on Balthasar was not Luther or Calvin but Karl Barth, who gets no mention in either Pitstick's article or her new book.

In Balthasar's view, Barth was the first theologian in the history of Christian thought who found a way of reconciling St. Paul's theology of the atonement with Luther's and Calvin's (and Augustine's) theory of predestination. He did this by showing that the entirety of God's foreordained decree for the human race—whether to save or to damn—came to focus *first* and above all on his Son, who submitted himself to God's reprobation. And since reprobation is what brought hell into being in the first place, Barth is led to this conclusion:

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.

Pitstick would no doubt regard this passage as equally dubious—and certainly at least as much in conflict with previous Church tradition—as anything that Balthasar might have written. To which I think he would respond: If one is going to object to Barth here, one is not so much objecting to the Reformers as to St. Paul. As anyone who has read his influential book on Barth knows, Balthasar did not subscribe to Luther's notion of a merely forensic justification, whereby we gain access to heaven by faith alone, a faith which tells us we have been acquitted in God's courtroom, as it were, by a kind of legal fiction, even while we continue to stay stuck in the same mire of sin as before. But for Balthasar, even if the Reformers went awry here, at least they took St. Paul seriously, and ecumenical discussion will go nowhere in his view unless both sides return to a serious reexamination of Paul on his own terms.

In other words, the whole point of Balthasar's book on Barth was not to make Luther or Calvin canonical authorities for Catholic theology (nor, of course, to rule them out of bounds either, in the manner of Pitstick, just for being Protestant). Rather, he wanted to bring Paul's doctrine of atonement back into the center of Catholic debate, especially these verses: "For our sake God made him [Christ] to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21), and "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by being cursed in our stead" (Gal. 3:13).

I think I can explain Balthasar's interpretation of these passages by citing a remark from St. Anselm, the medieval Benedictine who became the archbishop of Canterbury in the twelfth century. He shocked his fellow monks at a colloquy one day when he told them that he would rather God condemn him to hell, even if he had committed no sins, than that he be allowed into heaven with the soil of sin still staining his soul. No doubt Anselm was speaking here, as was his wont, of what God "has to be" by definition: that is, the All-Holy, who by nature cannot admit sin into his presence. But, however unawares, he was also making a christological point. For could the persons of the Trinity be less willing to follow such a logic than was a medieval monk? Has not Anselm inadvertently expressed the Trinity's own reasons for the incarnation? Do we not now see why a merely forensic view of justification will ultimately break down logically?

In the face of this logic, and above all in her studied refusal to come to terms with Paul's theology (even quite independently of Reformation theology), Pitstick has only one option left, and she takes it: In her book, she says quite openly that "tradition" (meaning of course *her* tradition) trumps all of Scripture, and not just St. Paul:

Although little attention has been paid to ascertaining the original intentions of the human authors [of the Bible], and developments in theological precision have not been discussed, as [is] typical in contemporary Scriptural exegesis, the premise for this procedure is simple: All the authors considered desired to speak the truth God has revealed and confided to His Church. They themselves would have been the first to desire their words be used and interpreted in accord with the faith of the Church, especially in those cases where they did not see the truth as fully or clearly as those who followed them. This having been said, the texts employed for this chapter were selected for their clarity and orthodoxy.



This procedure is an example, I believe, of what is called the argument from desperation. For one thing, it contradicts Church teaching. Vatican II's decree on revelation, *Dei Verbum*, explicitly asserts that the "teaching office of the Church is not above the word of God, but serves it," and Pius XII solemnly taught that the inspired meaning of the sacred text is located in the *original* intent of each author, which can be determined only by looking at each author's unique historical context.

One is left to wonder if Pitstick has preselected her passages because she suspects other passages of their unorthodoxy. Granted, some passages in the Bible might lack clarity—but orthodoxy too? She avoids Paul's Letter to the Romans as if it were radioactive—and no wonder, because nearly every line of that epistle can be brought in to refute her thesis of a pre-Christian purgatory. For it is precisely Paul's point in Romans that *no one is just in the sight of God after the first sin of Adam*.

Presumably the denizens of the Pitstickian purgatory would be Jews who obeyed the Mosaic law or pagans who kept the natural law—or, if they failed in their legal duties, somehow managed to repent before death, though they would had to have done so without benefit of knowing the cross of Christ by which those sins would have been known as sins. But for Paul, obedience to either law is irrelevant, since Jew and pagan are equally guilty, and precisely because their knowledge of obeying the law brings knowledge of their true sinfulness: "All men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin. . . . For no human being will be justified in God's sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:9b, 20).

As to Pitstick's odd notion of a pre-Christian purgatory, one must recall Thomas Aquinas' insistence that mortal and venial sins are not two different species of the genus "sin" the way birch and beech trees are equally trees. For St. Thomas, only mortal sin is sin in

the true sense. This means that if Christ went down solely to purgatory (where only venial sins are purged, along with the lingering effects of forgiven mortal sins), then his atonement for sin—*real* sin—has been "emptied of its power" (1 Cor. 1:17). If I might put the matter in John Milton's mythological terms, what could prove more pleasing to Satan than to hear reports of a newfangled theology that claims his realm has been left intact, not invaded or broken into by the ruler of the universe? As Lucifer says of his new abode in the dungeons of Tartarus in book 1 of *Paradise Lost*:

*Here at least*

*We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built*

*Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:*

*Here we may reign secure; and in my choice*

*To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:*

*Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.*

My chief worry about Pitstick's position is not her totalizing attack on Balthasar. We are, after all, dealing with Christian theology's most crucial issue: God's intentions for the world. What worries me instead is that she seems to have an *alternative* vision of the gospel that would, in time, turn Good News into bad, hope into despair, trust into anxiety, and love into fear—and this despite John's admonition that "there is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).

The Beloved Disciple is obviously not encouraging sentimentality or moral laxity here, for two chapters earlier (at 2:1–2) he grounds that fear-expelling love not in wishy-washy liberalism or an avuncular indulgence of sin but in the entirely objective fact of universal redemption: "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you do not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Just One. He is the expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world." FT