

## Development of Doctrine, or Denial?

### Balthasar's Holy Saturday and Newman's *Essay*

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#### Abstract:

Edward Oakes generalized Newman's seven tests for doctrinal development as "internal logic" and "developmental consistency." Using this reduction, he claimed Newman's support for Balthasar's theology of Christ's descent into hell.

In fairness to Newman and for a more adequate evaluation of Balthasar, I let Newman speak for himself. His norms are applied to both the traditional doctrine and Balthasar's. Since Balthasar's lacks *all seven*, it follows it is not a development of doctrine, but a corruption.

Oakes' other arguments insufficiently counterbalance this deduction, while the traditional doctrine offers insights into the questions of pluralism and the salvation of the non-baptized.

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The ante has been upped in not one, but two areas of theological interest by the Rev. Edward T. Oakes' argument that Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday is a development of doctrine.<sup>1</sup> First, it is clearly an important step in the evaluation of Balthasar's controversial corpus. Oakes contends Balthasar's innovation is an inevitable product not only of Balthasar's own logic, but of the Gospel itself. He thus implicitly responds to those who think Balthasar's *descensus* theology is incompatible with Catholic tradition.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward T. Oakes, 'The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 9 (2007) 2, pp. 184-99.

<sup>2</sup> Oakes names only Alyssa Pitstick's dissertation, now published as *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007). Others have also observed the difference in doctrine, including Markwart Herzog, '*Descensus ad inferos*': Eine religionsphilosophische Untersuchung der Motive und Interpretationen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der monographischen Literatur

More generally, Oakes' argument provides a test case for the theology of doctrinal development. Balthasar's insistence on Christ's "total passivity in hell" differs from the universal ancient presentation of His sovereign activity.<sup>3</sup> Many similar contrasts can be found in Balthasar's corpus. But can an authentic development go beyond refining or supplementing a doctrine's earlier expression to contradicting it? If so, the theology of doctrinal development will prove more difficult than previously thought.

John Henry Cardinal Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* is among the foundational systematic treatments of that theology. Its insight, lasting influence, renown, and wide availability would make it a good choice for an evaluation of Balthasar's theology. Indeed, Oakes himself selects Newman's model as "the one best suited to judge [whether it] might someday be received by the church or not."<sup>4</sup>

However, Oakes does not apply the seven tests Newman describes in the *Essay*. Instead, Oakes generalizes them as "internal logic" and "developmental consistency."<sup>5</sup> This change drastically diminishes the scope of the evaluation. It is also not clear that Oakes' reduction accurately represents Newman's thought. For example, Newman emphasizes the logic of doctrines, whereas Oakes stresses Balthasar's logic as a thinker. These factors significantly weaken Oakes' argument on Balthasar's behalf, especially his claim to Newman's support.

Would Balthasar's theology pass Newman's tests? Given the question's importance and in fairness to Newman, it is critical that Newman's own criteria be employed. If Balthasar's theology fulfills them, a substantial obstacle will have been removed for the

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*seit dem 16. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurter Theologische Studien 53 (Frankfurt: Josef Knecht, 1997), pp. 242-44; Johannes Rothkranz, *Die Kardinalfehler des Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Durach: Anton Schmid, 1989), pp. 47-50, 379-81; David Berger, 'Woher kommen die Thesen Hans Urs von Balthasars zur Hölle? Oder: hatte „Theologisches“ doch recht?', *Theologisches Katholische Monatsschrift* 31 (2001) 5/6, pp. 267-68; Roch Kerezty, 'Response to Professor Scola', *Communio ICR* 18 (1991) 3, pp. 230-31; and David Edward Lauber, *Towards a Theology of Holy Saturday: Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Descensus ad inferna*. (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1999), pp. 17, 186, who notes John Saward and Fergus Kerr conclude similarly, pp. 258-59.

<sup>3</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 195.

<sup>5</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 195.



reception of his work, even if a difficulty for the theology of development may simultaneously be raised. The application of Newman's tests that follows and an examination of Oakes' other arguments result in two conclusions: 1) Balthasar's proposal fails to meet Newman's criteria; and 2) Oakes' supplemental arguments are insufficient to counterbalance the deduction that it is thus a corruption, not a development.

### ***Newman's Test for Doctrinal Development***

Newman describes seven characteristics, or "notes," that distinguish authentic development in doctrine from corruptions. The first is *preservation of type*:

**An idea then does not always bear about it the same external image; this circumstance, however, has no force to weaken the argument for its substantial identity, as drawn from its external sameness, when such sameness remains. On the contrary, for that very reason, *unity of type* becomes so much the surer guarantee of the healthiness and soundness of developments, when it is persistently preserved in spite of their number or importance.<sup>6</sup>**

From Newman's examples, it becomes clear that *type* means *essence*. Just as "young birds do not grow into fishes,"<sup>7</sup> so variation in proportion among something's parts does not alter its identity. Even modifications significant enough to present a very different image to the eye can preserve the type, as when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. If the type is preserved, a determinate essence remains untouched, no matter how great the changes. "To deviate from the type in any material point," however, is to corrupt it.<sup>8</sup> Newman describes how a judge, whose essential duty is to administer justice, abandons his calling by accepting bribes, even if he retains the title of his office.

In authentic doctrinal development, the equivalent preservation of type permits shifts in emphasis among various aspects that were already present explicitly or—analogueous to the caterpillar's case—implicitly. Thus a previously underappreciated aspect may come to the fore, even to the point of dominating other elements. This possibility does not imply,

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<sup>6</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Longmans Green, 1909), p. 178, emphasis in original, as reproduced at [www.newmanreader.org/works/development/index.html](http://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/index.html).

<sup>7</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 172.

however, that a doctrine that remains constant in its emphasis is unsound; just the opposite. Its consistency is evidence of its trustworthiness.

Remarkable for the lack of substantial controversy in its pre-Reformation history, the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell primarily falls into this second case. As originally held in Christian East and West, it proclaimed that Christ did not suffer any of the punishments of hell. Instead, He 'opened the gates of heaven' that had been closed due to sin by conferring heaven's glory on the souls of the holy dead. This doctrine was universally held until the Protestant Reformation; the Catholic Church and the Orthodox have continued to profess it without interruption.

Balthasar thinks this traditional doctrine is ultimately the result of a "religious impatience" that transfers Christ's Easter triumph to His descent.<sup>9</sup> A psychological or spiritual immaturity is implied, like that of the child who simply cannot wait for Christmas and opens his presents early. While this immaturity may be appropriate at a certain age, one ought to grow beyond the things of children. The ancient doctrine nonetheless possesses a core truth within its childish garb: Christ's descent into hell is the moment of "supreme dramatic intensity"<sup>10</sup> in the work of salvation. Balthasar attempts to recover this centrality in two ways. First, he argues that Christ's suffering and love were supreme not on the cross, but only in His descent, when He undergoes the full agony of hell. Second, Balthasar reinterprets all areas of Christian belief in light of this shift.

The type to be preserved differs in the two doctrines. Notwithstanding the multiple Scriptural images used (e.g., light shining on those in darkness, the setting free of prisoners) and the various motifs in its artistic expressions (e.g., a warrior's victory, a proclamation), the traditional doctrine consistently taught Christ acted authoritatively in the realm of the dead with the result that God's faithful dead participate in the fullness of salvation. The type is Christ's application of the fruit of redemption. In contrast, for Balthasar the type is Christ's descent as the peak of "dramatic intensity," i.e., as the redemptive event itself. Thus, since Balthasar does not preserve the original type, it appears his theology of Holy Saturday lacks Newman's first note for authentic doctrinal development. Let us give him the benefit of the doubt, however, and apply the other six tests.

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), p. 179. See also Balthasar, *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles' Creed*, trans. David Kipp (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, pp. 179-80.



Newman remarks that “*the continuity or the alteration of the principles on which an idea has developed is a second mark of discrimination between a true development and a corruption.*”<sup>11</sup> Developments are guided by the same principles that guided a doctrine’s original expression. Newman uses mathematical figures as an example. The necessary principle of *any* circle is that every point on the figure is equidistant from the center. Euclid’s geometry provides an even clearer illustration, for he successively deduces more complex conclusions on the basis of simpler ones proven earlier, all of which ultimately depend on five postulates as principles.

In taking mathematical figures as an example, it goes without saying for Newman that conclusions are implicit in principles, that a science (such as theology) entails the drawing out of those conclusions, and that the change of only one principle in a set is sufficient to alter radically the possible conclusions (cf. non-Euclidean geometries, which change only one of Euclid’s postulates). The various heresies amply illustrate how changing one principle of belief has a ripple effect throughout the entire body of belief, e.g., it makes a difference to *all* doctrines whether the origin of matter is good or evil.

The principles from which the original doctrine of Christ’s descent follows include the following:

- (1) The redemption was completed at the moment of Christ’s death on the cross (“*Consummatum est*”). Thus Christ’s descent concerned an application of its fruits.
- (2) Christ’s death did not undo the Incarnation. Thus Christ’s descent was a descent of the divine Person of the Word by means of His human soul.
- (3) Christ could not suffer in His divine nature but only in His human one. Thus it would be possible for Christ to suffer after death only in His soul.
- (4) One suffers in hell in direct proportion to guilt for one’s personal sins; this guilt must be grave enough to have severed one’s filial friendship with God; and Christ was wholly sinless and guiltless. Thus Christ did not suffer in hell.

Balthasar’s theology of Christ’s descent overturns all four, substituting others:

- (1) Christ’s descent, not His crucifixion, is the moment of “supreme dramatic intensity.” Thus the redemption was accomplished in hell, not on the cross.
- (2) The Son’s entire incarnate existence is a gift of self to the Father, entailing the literal giving up of His natures. He relinquishes His divine attributes to become

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<sup>11</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 185, emphasis in original.

man.<sup>12</sup> Since His finite human nature is incapable of bearing the punishment for all sins, “the whole superstructure of the Incarnation” is removed in His descent.<sup>13</sup>

(3) The omnipotence of divine freedom enables Christ to choose to suffer in His divinity.<sup>14</sup> Thus, since the Incarnation is suspended in His descent, His redemptive suffering after death is a suffering as divine Son.

(4) Actual guilt may be transferred from human beings to Christ. This shift occurs as Jesus hangs on the cross. Thus, He justly suffers hell in proportion to the sins of all humanity: He cumulatively suffers what all of us would have suffered if there had been no Messiah.

Other examples of such changes in principles could be given. Since only one is needed for a doctrine to fail the second mark, however, four are more than sufficient to see that Balthasar’s doctrine does not possess the necessary continuity of principles. The earlier failure to preserve type might logically have been expected, then, since principles and conclusions imply each other. Hence Newman points out that the notes are cumulative: “A development, to be faithful, must retain both the doctrine and the principle with which it started.”<sup>15</sup> An authentic development must bear all seven notes, not just any one or two.

It is worth mentioning Newman’s observation that loss of principle is often accompanied by the use of words in a peculiar sense.<sup>16</sup> Notice how Balthasar’s four principles become meaningless if *freedom*, *nature*, *suffering*, and *guilt* are understood in their classic historical senses, i.e., in the common senses of theological discourse. What is the Son,

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<sup>12</sup> See Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, vol. III, *Theo-Drama*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), p. 228; Balthasar, “Kenosis of the Church?” in *Spirit and Institution*, Explorations in Theology, vol. IV, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), p. 138; and Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, pp. 148-58.

<sup>13</sup> Balthasar, *The New Covenant*, vol. VII, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Brian McNeil, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984), p. 231. Balthasar is not speaking metaphorically; see Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, pp. 190-203.

<sup>14</sup> Balthasar, *The Final Act*, vol. V, *Theo-Drama*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998), pp. 221-22; *New Covenant*, p. 213; *The Action*, vol. IV, *Theo-Drama*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), p. 335. See also Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, pp. 131-33.

<sup>15</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 182.



for example, if His divine nature is not essential to Him, or if it can be divided and parts given away? Balthasar frequently retains common theological vocabulary while endowing it with meaning peculiar to his usage.

Newman's third mark is *power of assimilation*: “An eclectic, conservative, assimilating, healing, moulding process, a unitive power, is of the essence, and a third test, of a faithful development.”<sup>17</sup> Authentic developments both conserve the original doctrine and assimilate to it new elements, thus preserving identity and order. Note that this unitive power is not diminished when some do not regard the assimilation as adequate or true. For example, the authenticity of the developed traditional *descensus* doctrine is not impaired by the fact that the Protestant Reformers rejected it, especially as their rejection was only the logical consequence of other, more fundamentally divisive issues. Again, the break-off of the Nestorians and Monophysites need not imply a defect in the doctrine of Chalcedon; misunderstanding and even real disagreement were certainly involved and those are more reasonable explanations if one believes ecumenical councils teach universal truth infallibly in their definitions.

The assimilation described in the third mark is possible due to an inherent affinity between the old and the new: “That an idea more readily coalesces with these ideas than with those does not show that it has been unduly influenced, that is, corrupted by them, but that it has an antecedent affinity to them.”<sup>18</sup> As an example, Newman suggests that the similarity of one of St. Paul's moral exhortations (1 Cor 7:1) to other cultural views need not be the result of those views corrupting the truth St. Paul wanted to express. Such similarity, however, may provide the basis for their Christian employment in light of the Gospel. Contemporary theology speaks of the need for ‘precomprehension’ provided by antecedent cultural elements. A non-theological example is how numerous many biological forms similar in appearance originated from different causes.

Newman's example is particularly relevant in this context, for Balthasar rejects the traditional doctrine partly because he considers it a corruption of the Gospel by ancient mythology. He holds that pagan myths and Jewish apocrypha about journeys to the underworld influenced “the Christian apocalyptic,” which

developed a lively interest in this literary genre and produced those fantastic journeys into hell by Jesus that eventually led from [specific Christian

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<sup>17</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 186.

<sup>18</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 187.

apocrypha] to the corresponding patristic sermons, the medieval descent plays and culminat[ed] in Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>19</sup>

He then says, "All of this takes us far from the biblical message. . . ." <sup>20</sup> Balthasar consequently portrays his descent soteriology as having a more direct Scriptural foundation.

Difficulties result due to his selective use of Scripture and the fact that the cultural contamination to which he objects is ubiquitous throughout the bible.<sup>21</sup> What is important in the present context is that Balthasar is not concerned to preserve the original doctrine, but to found it anew. He is not trying to assimilate new insights to the ancient doctrine—although he may be developing the theologies of a descent to suffering first adopted by the Protestant traditions.

In contrast, the very assimilating power of the original doctrine that Balthasar finds objectionable testifies to its possession of Newman's third mark. That doctrine is, first and foremost, the fruit of Scripture and the apostolic teaching tradition of the first centuries. Later ages saw an expansion of homiletic, liturgical, and artistic expressions of the core doctrine, as well as systematic theological treatments. Certainly these developments incorporated symbols and used genres of the evangelized cultures, even as the spread of the Gospel introduced them to Scriptural ones. As Newman stressed, however, this borrowing did not generate the doctrine, but rather served it. For example, the setting of the sun was an ancient symbol for entrance into the underworld at death. This symbol had been widely appropriated by the fourth century in reference to Christ's own death and descent, with the emphasis that the sun is not extinguished when it sets.<sup>22</sup>

Behind Balthasar's objection, which many other critics share, lies a concern about the sometimes exaggerated artistic presentations of Christ's triumphal descent. The artistic necessity of expressing that invisible event in images permitted it to be fleshed out as a drama, with Scripture providing the motifs: The biblical image of the breaking of iron bars and doors to free God's chosen becomes portrayed as the physical smashing or explosion of the gates of the fortress Hell; the Scriptural adversary, the devil, becomes depicted as a bully or a fool; in accord with the prophecy that the Messiah's enemies would be put under his feet, Christ is

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<sup>19</sup> Balthasar, 'The Descent into Hell', in *Spirit and Institution*, p. 405.

<sup>20</sup> Balthasar, 'Descent', p. 405.

<sup>21</sup> See Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, pp. 317-28, 335-37.

<sup>22</sup> F.J. Dölger, *Sol Salutis*, 3. Auflage, Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen Heft 16/17 (Munster: Aschendorff, 1972), pp. 336-53.



imaged as a hero trampling the devil; etc. Since the descent was the first manifestation of Christ's victory, its artistic representation reasonably carried overtones of the whole drama of salvation, of the victory of good over evil. One may, of course, debate the merits of particular artistic expressions. However, any undue excess in the images is no argument against the doctrine itself.

The fourth note of an authentic doctrinal development is *logical sequence*: “A doctrine, then, professed in its mature years by a philosophy or religion, is likely to be a true development, not a corruption, in proportion as it seems to be the *logical issue* of its original teaching.”<sup>23</sup> This “logical sequence” is logic commonly so-called, i.e., the rules for valid thinking, for the systematization or “organization of thought,”<sup>24</sup> which test a proposition's relation to principles by the various means of proof. The successful articulation of proofs of intrinsic relation is essential for new authentic developments to become accepted in the community's faith. Illogic, then, is sufficient for rejection.

Part of this fourth test is that the growth also proceeds naturally and step-by-step from the original doctrine and its principles.<sup>25</sup> Because the rules of logic are fixed, conclusions are implicit in their principles. Thus Newman asserts “the holy Apostles would without words know all the truths concerning the high doctrines of theology,”<sup>26</sup> even if it took later ages to formulate them explicitly. Conversely, such developed formulations do not entail the “invention” of belief. The development process is an unfolding and blossoming of the ancient faith.

In some cases, “the gravity, distinctness, precision, and majesty of [the process's] advance, and the harmony of its proportions”<sup>27</sup> as seen in retrospect also testify to the fourth note. These features, especially the naturalness just mentioned, contrast with any acute self-consciousness that nervously tries to “reinvent the wheel” or brashly tries to direct the development toward a predetermined outcome.

If Newman's first and third marks correspond broadly to Fr. Oakes' “developmental consistency,” the second and fourth appear to be grouped in his “internal logic.” Oakes' application differs significantly from Newman's exposition, however: Oakes focuses on

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<sup>23</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 195, emphasis in original.

<sup>24</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 189.

<sup>25</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 191.

<sup>26</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 191.

<sup>27</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 191.

Balthasar's consistency as a thinker, whereas in the fourth note Newman compares a proposed development to the original doctrine. Now to say Balthasar is consistent with himself is to say nothing about whether his proposal is consistent with the original doctrine. On the contrary, we have seen several cases in which Balthasar's doctrine could not follow logically from the traditional one. In general, a thinker's self-consistency is insufficient for this note, because one can argue with perfect logic from erroneous or false premises. Thus the note of logical sequence is valid thinking on the basis of true principles, i.e., on the basis of doctrine previously held and acknowledged as true.

Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday also appears lacking in the required "natural" aspect. To connect his doctrine to the original, he invokes the vague and pliable concept of "dramatic intensity." At the same time, he shifts the locus of redemption and reconciliation from the crucifixion to the descent. He then reformulates all Christian doctrines to concur with his position. Meanwhile, to justify his shift, he tries to undermine the original doctrine by claiming it lacks foundation. It thus becomes difficult or impossible to see Balthasar's doctrine as a development in regard to logical sequence, for not only is it hardly implicit in the original doctrine, but he contradicts and rejects that doctrine explicitly.

Newman's fifth mark by which faithful doctrinal developments may be noted is ***anticipation of the future: "Another evidence ... of the faithfulness of an ultimate development is its definite anticipation at an early period in the history of the idea to which it belongs."***<sup>28</sup> This mark again highlights the natural logic between doctrine and development:

Developments are in great measure only aspects of the idea from which they proceed, and all of them are natural consequences of it...; and it is in no wise strange that here and there definite specimens of advanced teaching should very early occur, which in the historical course are not found till a late day.<sup>29</sup>

While the fourth mark, logical sequence, emphasizes the progression in thought, this fifth one highlights the appearance of elements of the doctrine before the logical connection among its parts has been exhaustively worked out.

The traditional doctrine manifests this characteristic. For example, its principal elements are clearly present c. 404, when Rufinus writes a Scriptural commentary on the creedal article. Note that he is not doing speculative theology: Rufinus intends to set forth the

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<sup>28</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 199.

<sup>29</sup> Newman, *Essay*, pp. 195-96.



faith as held by the orthodox Christian community. That means that the doctrine had already attained a significant degree of explicitness and was widely believed as authentic doctrine. The extant patristic writings from the centuries before Rufinus support this conclusion by their matter-of-fact way of mentioning the topic and by the doctrine's appearance in both eastern and western texts.<sup>30</sup> The patristic consensus is reiterated in an increasingly systematic way in the following centuries. Thorough reflection in the interim made manifest the logical relation of the doctrine's aspects to each other and to other beliefs. Alois Grillmeier has shown, for example, how development in precise expression of the doctrine simultaneously deepened Christology: that the Word descended to the dead in His human soul reaffirms the indissolubility of the Incarnation.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, the history of doctrines of a descent to suffering does not appear to reach further back than Nicholas of Cusa on the cusp of the Reformation.<sup>32</sup> In light of the logical connection among doctrines Newman highlights, this late appearance becomes doubly significant given that Nicholas' proposal was taken up not by the Catholics, but by the Reformers, whose doctrines of Christ, redemption, and grace differ markedly from the Catholic ones. Doctrines logically related to each other gravitate toward each other. While issues with other beliefs affected how the Reformers understood the descent, in Balthasar's theology the ripple effect runs the other way: He reinterprets other doctrines in accord with his idea that Christ suffers complete estrangement from the Father in His descent.<sup>33</sup>

The reversal Balthasar effects on the traditional doctrine is perhaps the clearest sign that his theology is not an authentic development of it. Newman ties the fifth mark, anticipation of its future, to the sixth, *conservative action upon its past*, in his clearest statement yet:

**As developments which are preceded by definite indications have a fair presumption in their favour, so those which do but contradict and reverse the**

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<sup>30</sup> An accessible catena of patristic texts is expected shortly from Jared Wicks, S.J., in *Pro Ecclesia*.

<sup>31</sup> Alois Grillmeier, 'Der Gottessohn im Totenreich: Soteriologische und christologische Motivierung der Descensuslehre in der älteren christlichen Überlieferung', *Mit ihm und in ihm: Christologische Forschungen und Perspektiven*, 2. Auflage (Freiburg: Herder, 1975), pp. 76-174.

<sup>32</sup> Herzog, *Descensus*, pp. 166, 169, 173, 340.

<sup>33</sup> See Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, pp. 126, 244-77.

course of doctrine which has been developed before them, and out of which they spring, are *certainly* corrupt; for a corruption is a development in that very stage in which it ceases to illustrate, and begins to disturb, the acquisitions gained in its previous history.<sup>34</sup>

As if that were not clear enough, he makes the criterion more explicit still:

A true development, then, may be described as one which is conservative of the course of antecedent developments being really those antecedents and something besides them: it is an addition which illustrates, not obscures, corroborates, not corrects, the body of thought from which it proceeds; and this is its characteristic as contrasted with a corruption.<sup>35</sup>

We have already seen that elements of the developed traditional doctrine appear early in its history, whereas Balthasar contests that entire history as unduly influenced and corrupted by excesses of Christian imagination. Thus he wants to correct and re-found the doctrine of Christ's descent. The sources he invokes for support are less helpful than he imagines<sup>36</sup>: Some are used out of context and against their original intention. Others have no necessary authority. Still others are too ambiguous to confirm Balthasar's suggestions, while the same ambiguity makes them open to being read in accord with the traditional doctrine. Others again post-date and incorporate the new theologies of a descent to suffering. Ultimately, it becomes clear that Balthasar's choice and use of sources aim at bolstering the allegedly mystical conclusions of Adrienne von Speyr: He states in one of his last works that *Mysterium Paschale*, his most extensive work on the descent, had been written "to prepare the way" to her ideas.<sup>37</sup>

The attraction of a descent to suffering increased after World War II, and indeed Balthasar's treatment of the topic began to flourish in that period. Catholic theologians before the war defend Christ's triumphal descent, but a number of the most prominent ones after it either reduce the doctrine to symbolic language, or seem unaware it exists and so try to come up with a doctrine from scratch. The pastoral exigencies that occasioned these approaches—philosophical and social alienation, the great wars, atheism—can only be adequately met,

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<sup>34</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 199, emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 200.

<sup>36</sup> Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, 332-33, makes the first three points that follow.

<sup>37</sup> Balthasar, *Wahrheit Gottes*, bd. II, *Theo-Logik* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1985), p. 315, n. 1.



however, with God's revealed truth, not by the molding of doctrine to human horror. Vatican II's exhortation in this regard is consistent with what we have seen in Newman's notes:

While adhering to the methods and requirements proper to theology, theologians are invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to the men of their times. For the deposit of faith or revealed truths are one thing; the manner in which they are formulated without violence to their meaning and significance is another.<sup>38</sup>

Newman's final note identifying authentic doctrinal developments is *chronic vigour*: **"While a corruption is distinguished from decay by its energetic action, it is distinguished from a development by its transitory character."**<sup>39</sup> Just as two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency, correspond to any natural virtue, Newman here distinguishes two characteristics contrary to the durability of authentic developments. In Newman's strict sense, *corruptions* are powerful suggestions that rapidly dissolve the body of belief by doing away with former traits and interrelations.<sup>40</sup> A single corruption quickly affects and changes other doctrines, propagating additional corruptions until the original unity and content of the body of belief are no more. Despite this actual destruction, the process of assimilation gives the appearance of unity and life. The results vary widely as first one principle, then another, is undone. Thus opposite heresies often share a common origin.<sup>41</sup>

The cancer of corruption eventually exhausts both itself and the original conservative principle of life. At that point, what is left of the faith either passes away completely or, more likely, settles into a state of decay. *Decay* essentially refers to cultural habits preserved by mere custom, devoid of the conviction (both rational and volitional) that brought them into being. Thus they tend to crumble or be easily given up when confronted with any strong external opposition.<sup>42</sup> Decay lacks the vigor of the seventh mark, while corruption lacks its conservative character.

As has been said, the initial proposal of a descent to suffering appears only as late as the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. In a homily of 1457, Nicholas of Cusa said Christ experienced the

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<sup>38</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* (Dec. 7, 1965), #62.

<sup>39</sup> Newman, *Essay*, p. 205, emphasis in original.

<sup>40</sup> See Newman, *Essay*, pp. 170-71, 203-4.

<sup>41</sup> See Newman, *Essay*, p. 204.

<sup>42</sup> Newman, *Essay*, pp. 204-5.

*poena sensus* of hell in His descent.<sup>43</sup> Note that Cusanus does not attribute the *poena damni* to Christ: He does not hold that Jesus experienced damnation, eternal abandonment by the Father, estrangement from God, or the like. Nicholas is circumspect compared to those who follow, including Luther and Calvin, both of whom knew Cusa's homily. Leaving aside possible differences in Melanchthon's thought, Luther's adaptation varies: While the traditional doctrine is occasionally considered useful as a metaphor for Christ's victory over sin, death, and the devil, His descent actually occurred *before* His death as a spiritual experience of despair, abandonment, and even God's wrath and damnation. Sometimes, however, a descent to hell as a realm is also suggested. Note the shifts in location, time, and character: from the abode of holy souls (the traditional doctrine) to hell proper (Nicholas) to either hell proper or this world (Luther); from after Christ's death (the traditional doctrine and Nicholas) to before it (Luther); from no pain (the traditional doctrine) to the *poena sensus* (Nicholas) to more spiritual agonies (Luther). This trajectory is fixed in Calvin, who rejects any idea of descent to a realm after death and strengthens the notion of Christ's suffering the pains of damnation. Without tracing the intervening permutations, we may leap forward to our theologian of interest: While returning the descent to the time after Christ's death, Balthasar goes beyond Luther and Calvin in the other respects to hold that the Son experiences God-abandonment in His divine relation to the Father. That is a far cry indeed from Nicholas of Cusa. Noteworthy here is the instability of this train of thought. Nicholas' proposal both radically changed the doctrine he inherited and is itself mutated by those who follow him. According to Newman's seventh mark, these facts indicate it (and so its descendents) are a corruption of doctrine, not a development.

In contrast, the ancient doctrine of a triumphal descent has been professed by the Catholic and Orthodox without interruption. Through the centuries, it has assimilated insights resulting from the reflection necessary to respond to objections. The specific historical phases of this development, although interesting, are not of concern here, since its vigorous survival testifies to its possession of the seventh mark.

### ***Response to Oakes***

Newman's criteria for authentic development are very precise. Although they require "internal logic" and "developmental consistency," Oakes' reduction of Newman's seven notes to those two does not preserve their breadth and specificity. The use of Newman's actual

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<sup>43</sup> See the Latin text in Herzog, *Descensus*, p. 170.



words to evaluate Balthasar's *descensus* theology reveals that his proposal fails to possess not just one mark—which is sufficient to identify a corruption—but all seven. Since Oakes regards Newman's theory as "the one best suited to judge" Balthasar's proposal, it is puzzling why he does not conclude his theology is a corruption of authentic Christian doctrine. In any case, an appeal to Newman cannot support his claim to development.

We must then examine the other arguments Oakes made in support of Balthasar. His overall goal was to argue that Balthasar's "innovation" is an authentic development.<sup>44</sup> He intended to do so by showing how it meets Newman's criteria and by referring to "all those elements" in Christian theological history that make a "radicalization" of the doctrine "inevitable."<sup>45</sup> I have argued he failed to do the first; what about the second?

The only theological issue Oakes explicitly argues points to the change Balthasar envisioned is the question of pluralism. He also implicitly argues that Balthasar's proposal is "more scriptural,"<sup>46</sup> but we may legitimately ask "Than what?" Oakes does not compare his brief catena to the extensive Scriptural foundation of the traditional doctrine, nor does his list as such prove anything, for other interpretations of the same verses are not only possible, but widespread. In themselves, the verses he cites show only Christ's universal lordship and a "preaching" to the dead. It remains for Oakes to show that either of these necessarily imply a *post mortem* extension of salvation to those who did not live a life consistent with the Gospel. The desire for an answer to the question of pluralism and one Scriptural interpretation among others possible hardly make "inevitable" any change in the doctrine, much less a "radicalization" of it.

Nor, for that matter, does Balthasar's claim to build upon St. Maximus the Confessor. A writer's work might provide inspiration for another's in many ways. None of them are necessary, and some might even contradict central convictions of the original author. Hence Balthasar's claim need not mean that St. Maximus would acknowledge Balthasar's work as a development consistent with his own writings. The opposite is possible, even likely: One of St. Maximus' important contributions to Christology was to make clear that a person acts in virtue of a nature. Thus Christ, having two natures, always had two acts, one appropriate to each nature, e.g., He suffered emotionally and physically while continuing to possess His divine beatitude and impassibility. Balthasar in effect rejects St. Maximus' contribution by

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<sup>44</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 185.

<sup>45</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 184.

<sup>46</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 189.

insisting 1) that the Word gives up His divine attributes and so His power to act according to them, and 2) that to redeem mankind, He must suffer in his divine filial relation.<sup>47</sup> Both suggestions would be reprehensible not only to St. Maximus, but to the Fathers in general, who insist that Christ suffered only “in the flesh.” The union in person of Christ’s natures does not result in the identification or mixing of those natures, nor in the transmutation of the divine one into the human. Thus the ‘claim’ validated in Christ’s resurrection cannot be that “the least human gesture enacts the most characteristic traits of the Son’s existence.”<sup>48</sup> If it were, the Incarnation could be no obstacle to accepting Jesus’ divinity. Again, if it were, we must ask how Jesus’ acts of man, such as sneezing, manifest His filiation. Yet again, would human nature as such (i.e., as not part of the hypostatic union, and so as it is in us) have any value, either in itself or in the redemption?

If we take seriously Oakes’ intention to treat “all” the relevant forces in theological history, we are left to conclude there are very few. That “all” then becomes an example of what I call the *Balthasarian “only,”* i.e., the assertion that the reality of God’s work in Christ is necessarily as Balthasar describes it. Manifested as indications of universality such as *must, no, all, inevitable,* etc., this “only” is frequently used by Balthasar and his followers.<sup>49</sup> In the history of doctrines, it is an unusual assertion of authority: Aside from the issue of heresy, flexibility in theories was tolerated among the schools, which did not so much merely insist upon the necessity of their own views as argue for the greater reasonableness of their position and against perceived difficulties in others’. Too frequent claims of necessity suggest wishful thinking.

They also suggest cursory acquaintance with evidence that supports non-Balthasarian positions. Thus the Balthasarian “only” is often coupled with dismissive and reductive remarks about others’ ideas, e.g., that the Church in both East and West “simply assumed Christ was active in hell”<sup>50</sup> or, in contrast to acknowledgements of such universality, that the

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<sup>47</sup> Balthasar ‘resolves’ the contradiction between these two through his Christology, but that is beyond our present scope.

<sup>48</sup> Mark McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), p. 41, quoted in Oakes, ‘Internal Logic’, p. 198.

<sup>49</sup> In Oakes, ‘Internal Logic’, see, e.g., pp. 184, 191-92.

<sup>50</sup> Oakes, ‘Internal Logic’, p. 192.



traditional doctrine is found “sometimes...in certain theological works.”<sup>51</sup> Again, if “the first thing” noticed about the reception of the traditional doctrine is “how puzzled and nonplussed the church seems to be,”<sup>52</sup> one’s study has likely been confined to the discussion of the past fifty years or unduly influenced by it; earlier, Catholic theologians were just as clear as the Magisterium about the authenticity and truth of the ancient doctrine. Though St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas questioned the relevance of *1 Peter* to the doctrine, they had no doubts about the teaching itself or its reasonableness, as one can readily see from a quick read of St. Augustine’s commentaries on the creed and St. Thomas’ *Summa theologiae*, IIIa, q. 52.

Claims of necessity also make weak arguments, for if only one element is proven false, the whole structure will tumble. Balthasar’s consistency with himself then becomes doubly crucial: If he once reasons invalidly or changes his own premises, he undoes himself—as does any follower of his who modifies his positions. Shadows of such inconsistencies become apparent even in a secondary work like Oakes’ article. On Balthasar’s part, the *Gestalt* of “Claim—Crucifixion—Resurrection” that entails rejection by humanity but validation by God morphs into a descent in which the Son undergoes “divine reprobation.”<sup>53</sup> For his part, Oakes softens Balthasar’s avowal that redemption is only achieved if Christ suffers that reprobation in His filial, i.e., divine relation to the Father<sup>54</sup>; Oakes refers instead to Christ’s experience of that forsakenness in His human soul.<sup>55</sup>

It is not the case, then, that the ancient tradition on the descent or St. Maximus’s Christology develop into Balthasar’s theology. Nor is it necessitated by the question of the salvation of those outside the tangible confines of the Church. That concern is not unique to contemporary theologians. Indeed, the ancient doctrine of Christ’s descent made clear that those who had faith and lived upright lives prior to sacramental baptism are among the saved. The doctrine thus implies the concept of prevenient grace: God’s life of grace was available to all and operative in many prior to the life of Jesus, although always in virtue of Him who was to come.

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<sup>51</sup> Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, pp. 148-49, quoted in Oakes, ‘Internal Logic’, p. 192.

<sup>52</sup> Oakes, ‘Internal Logic’, pp. 195-96.

<sup>53</sup> Oakes, ‘Internal Logic’, pp. 191-92.

<sup>54</sup> Balthasar, *New Covenant*, pp. 205-6, 231; ‘Descent’, pp. 411-12; *Action*, p. 495; and *Final Act*, p. 277. See also Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, pp. 117-22, 190-203, 235-39, 288, and 302-8.

<sup>55</sup> Oakes, ‘Internal Logic’, pp. 193, 196.

The corollary for the non-baptized after Christ's institution of that sacrament would be that, where sacramental baptism is unknown, faith and a holy life are still the minimum necessary for salvation: "In every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35). These two, belief and acting upon it, evidently are akin to an implicit baptism of desire. They thus would also be required of those who know of sacramental baptism, but for whatever reason have not yet been baptized. The possibility of consciences being ill-formed or clouded with fear, the sin of sloth, etc., are questions of the heart God alone can judge definitively after someone's death. The implication is that no 'policy' can be identified or judgement made by us, except that we know faith and a holy life are universally required.<sup>56</sup> From experience, however, we know these are not always easily lived. Thus Christ provided means of support for our weakness in His Church, the Body through which He Himself acts. The visible teaching Church of the sacraments, then, is the "ordinary means of salvation."<sup>57</sup>

On the basis of what the traditional *descensus* doctrine suggests about the salvation of the non-(sacramentally-)baptized, it is not difficult to answer Oakes' conundrum, "How can a specifically Christian grace be said to operate among adherents of other religions *before* death?"<sup>58</sup> All grace is Christian, but not all religions are means of grace. Since God works in the hearts of all men, calling them to Himself, He works also in the hearts of the non-baptized—not insofar as they are "adherents of other religions," but insofar as they are His own, created and called by Him. He Himself makes possible the response of faith and holy life necessary for salvation. And yet this universal generosity must never be severed from its counterbalance: Christ didn't found the Church for nothing. We very easily turn toward the darkness of various 'idols' and rationalize egregious sins as amoral or laudable acts. The Fathers insisted on the light and strength Christ brings to those united to Him. If despite the means of support Christ left us within the Church we who have access to them often fail, how much more difficult must it be without them? Thus the availability of grace to the non-baptized through God's direct action does not lead to pluralism. Pluralism would be the case only if there were such a thing as non-Christian grace and if non-Christian religions were, in themselves, instrumental sources of grace.

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<sup>56</sup> The propositions sufficient to express that faith cannot be treated here.

<sup>57</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* (Dec. 7, 1990), #55.

<sup>58</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 188, emphasis in original.



Oakes described the inclusivist position as one which does not regard baptism as mapping directly onto salvation, nor lack of it as necessarily corresponding to damnation.<sup>59</sup> The portrayal just above would meet this description with the nuance that some form of baptism is necessary for salvation, but not sufficient. As St. Augustine reminds us, not all who celebrate the Eucharist in this life will sit down to the messianic banquet in heaven. Conversely, there are sheep in other flocks that will ultimately enter Christ's fold (Jn 10:16). Each person's interior life of grace, or lack thereof, will be *manifested* eschatologically, but the reality of conversion in Christ thus revealed was *already present in this life*.

In contrast, Balthasar's position entails an eschatological *resolution*. Oakes said that inclusivism resolves the relation of baptism to salvation by reference to the Last Things.<sup>60</sup> These are heaven, hell, death, and judgement. As an event in the life of Christ, His descent is not among these. Balthasar makes it a "last thing" by proposing the eternal suffering of Christ. Because Christ experiences hell, which is eternal, He is allegedly present to all who descend there, whenever that may be.<sup>61</sup> Balthasar's eschatological resolution is that this encounter with Christ after death may lead to conversion. (If this *post mortem* encounter in hell is salvific without entailing such conversion, salvation has no connection to one's actual justification in Christ.)

Christ's descent is indeed relevant for people of all time, but not in the way Balthasar suggests: Understood traditionally, it meant the entrance of the just of the past into salvation; for the just of present and future, it means the gates of heaven are open to them after death. It prefigures for the faithful now their ultimate encounter with Christ at the moment of death. The traditional doctrine is also consistent with Christ's presentation of His judgement as a separation of sheep from goats, i.e., an acknowledgement of a real difference, founded on the basis of their earthly life, in those who come before Him. In contrast, if the descent is an eternal Last Thing and Christ can give salvation as He wants in virtue of it ("Christ, by means of his descent into hell, can bestow grace eschatologically on whom he will."<sup>62</sup>), salvation becomes wholly arbitrary. Shades of the apocryphal story in which the child Jesus makes

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<sup>59</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 186.

<sup>60</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 188.

<sup>61</sup> See Oakes, 'Internal Logic', pp. 191-92, and Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*, pp. 263-74, with references.

<sup>62</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 188. See also p. 189.

lumps of clay into living birds, Balthasar's proposal would have Christ forever whimsically turning dead goats into living sheep.

### **Conclusion**

Balthasar's proposal does not "radicalize" the Tradition, but contradicts it. *Radicalization* suggests a stronger affirmation of the *same* principles. Despite acknowledging the traditional doctrine's existence, Balthasar rejects many of its principles, elements, and conclusions: Christ descends not so much in his human soul united to his divine person but ultimately in his divinity alone. The Son descends not to the abode of the just souls, but to the state of eternal punishment. Rather than conferring the light of heaven on the souls of the holy dead, He passively suffers divine reprobation. Instead of being the first application of the fruit of salvation, His descent is expiatory. There is no "shift in the traditional understanding"<sup>63</sup> here; there is only a shift *from* it. Similarly, there is no development of the Christology of St. Maximus or Chalcedon: Development requires preservation of type, and both St. Maximus and Chalcedon insist upon the abiding perfection of both natures in Christ.

We can ask, then, whether Balthasar's theology has "developmental consistency" and logic only internally? Although Oakes says "the burden of [his] article [was] to highlight...the inner dynamism of Christian doctrine, the vectors of which led Balthasar to his remarkable theology,"<sup>64</sup> he fails to show how Christian doctrine itself (as opposed to the question of pluralism or Balthasar's private reading of St. Maximus) leads to Balthasar's theology.<sup>65</sup> Thus he appropriately ends with the more modest statement, "All I have tried to show is that, provided one first understands the issues as Balthasar sees them....one will come to appreciate his theology for the remarkable achievement it is."<sup>66</sup> The present article has shown, however, how Balthasar's theology lacks the notes of authentic development identified by Newman. Thus, while the theology of doctrinal development is as strong as it ever was, it is doubtful whether those who understand Balthasar's theology in its light will appreciate his work in the way Oakes hopes.

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<sup>63</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 193.

<sup>64</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 199.

<sup>65</sup> This goal is stated in Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 199.

<sup>66</sup> Oakes, 'Internal Logic', p. 199.