

**Karl Barth Society Annual Meeting 2007 (San Diego, CA)**  
**Panel on Light in Darkness**

***Introductory Remarks***  
**by Alyssa Pitstick**

It is, of course, not often that the first book of a newly minted doctor is the subject of discussion by an esteemed society such as your own. So it is with sincere appreciation of this honor that I thank your president, Dr. George Hunsinger, and your membership for your invitation. I also thank, in a particular way, Dr. Paul Molnar, who graciously corresponded with me on behalf of your society. Last, but not least, I sincerely thank our panelists, who have given such time and careful thought to my text. I think my undergraduate major in mathematics indelibly formed me “to show all my steps.” Such thoroughness was all the more advisable in this case, given Balthasar’s reputation, and the size and complexity of his corpus. Like many doctoral students, I learned too late, that the interconnection among doctrines can make it difficult to limit the boundaries of research in systematic theology. In no case is that more true than when considering Balthasar’s *descensus* proposal, which touches nearly every aspect of his theology. As a result, *Light in Darkness* is no doubt longer than it otherwise would have been, so I doubly appreciate the panelists’ thorough attention.

I wish at this time to make only two remarks. The first is a bit of personal history, not for curiosity’s sake, but because it is directly relevant to the evaluation of my book. I was introduced to Balthasar’s work by faculty such as Michael Waldstein, John Saward, and Nick Healy, Jr., and so in a context most favorable to Balthasar. Puzzled by some allusions he made to Christ’s descent into hell in the course of reading him on other topics, I proposed to investigate his *descensus* theology for my licentiate thesis, the license being something like a master’s degree in the pontifical system.

At that point and despite having attended Catholic schools all my life, I myself did not know what the Catholic doctrine of Christ’s descent was. So it seemed a good idea to begin my study of Balthasar by first researching the doctrine of the tradition in which he stood. Taking him at his word, as I did, that he was speaking out of that tradition, I figured I could not understand or evaluate him well without knowing it myself. The conclusion of my thesis thus was not foregone; my research was a real investigation. In that sense, I did not have a ‘thesis’ I set out to argue.

To my surprise, it turned out that there are some very serious discrepancies between Balthasar’s account and the historical Catholic expressions of the doctrine. I might simply have appealed to the authority of the historical doctrine as such to close my investigation. That kind of resolution was not wholly satisfactory to me, however; it appeared rather like a *deus ex machina*. Moreover, as a general methodology, it might not prove much of a resolution at all in the case of a dispute between two

doctrines, both of which invoke various kinds of theological authority such as Scripture. Thus I determined to take another doctrine, held with certainty to be true, as a criterion for judgement; I choose Christology. The ‘true’ doctrine of the descent, whichever it was, should be compatible with it, while any other would generate inconsistencies or contradictions—hence, my principle that changing one’s doctrine of the descent will change one’s doctrine of Christ.

I developed and expanded these expository and comparative tasks in my doctoral dissertation, now published by Eerdmans as the book under our consideration today. For those of you who have not read it, it is divided into three parts, the first being essentially an exposition of the traditional Catholic doctrine, the second an exposition of Balthasar’s theology of the descent, and the third a comparison of the two, with particular attention paid to Christological matters. I stand with the historians of ideas in summarizing the Catholic doctrine as follows: Christ descended in His soul, united to His divine person, to the souls of the holy men and women who had died before Him, and conferred upon them heaven’s beatitude. “This day,” Christ said to the good thief, “you shall be with Me in paradise.” The redemption having been accomplished in the blood of His cross, Christ suffers no more after His death, but descends in a glory like that to come in His resurrection (as suggested by the selection of Christian artwork from a variety of periods that appears in my book).

Balthasar holds, in contrast, that Christ’s suffering not only continues after His crucifixion, but intensifies as He suffers the punishment all mankind, taken cumulatively, would have undergone without a Redeemer. Indeed, He suffers worse: All the world’s sins must be brought “inside” the Trinitarian relations in order to be “consumed” there by the divine love (the terms here are Balthasar’s). This means that the Son, having taken all sins upon and into Himself, is, in His filial relation with the Father, the object of the divine wrath against sin. Despite the mutual abandonment that results, Father and Son remain united by their substantial love, the Holy Spirit. In this way, sin is both justly punished and encompassed by a greater love.

Historians of the doctrines of Christ’s descent readily agree that Balthasar’s proposal is radically different from the traditional, that is, the historical Catholic doctrine. As a result of the methodology I described, I go a step further than that in my book, to argue that it is incompatible with that doctrine, and also with fundamental Christological doctrines. My text then is not an intellectual history of Balthasar nor a history of descent doctrines, but an attempt to place Balthasar in the context of the doctrinal tradition of his profession. In consequence, I must defer to my copanelists and the members of your society on matters pertaining to the relationship between Balthasar and Karl Barth, Barth’s own doctrine of the descent, and other particularities of his theology.



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***Response to Panelists***

by Alyssa Pitstick

Given the extent of agreement between the Reformed tradition Dr. Webster characterizes and myself, his presentation suggests how this topic may promote ecumenical reappropriation of our common Christian heritage. Now if we can only get the Catholics to agree among themselves.... ☺

But, seriously, he has identified the fundamental question at the heart of my book: What are our doctrinal commitments as Christians, and how seriously do we take them? Do we take them seriously enough to accept their consequences, including acknowledging that not all propositions are compatible with those commitments? In consequence, are we willing to set aside some propositions, or even adopt others?

In the present case, ought we, with Dr. Lauber, to continue to look for a “fruitful way forward” despite the “difficulties” in Balthasar’s Trinitarian theology? Or, if that theology is as closely linked to the theology of Christ’s descent as Balthasar says it is, does pressing onward reveal a preferential option for a descent to suffering so that such a descent defines the perfection of God, instead of the perfection of God, in the Incarnate Word, defining the descent? Conversely, as Dr. Webster suggests, if Calvin made the descent “a gloss on Good Friday” to avoid compromising the centrality of the cross, would those with hesitations similar to Calvin’s be willing to consider embracing anew that “long Christian tradition of reflection on Christ’s descent to the souls in prison” if it can be shown that, far from compromising that centrality, it effectively emphasizes it?

But what is that tradition? Implicit in the question Dr. Griffiths puts so pointedly is a matter of equal urgency that must be addressed first: Why should we care whether something is or is not taught authoritatively, is or is not part of the deposit of faith, is or is not part of the gospel? I think of the words of St. Paul: “Take great care of all that has been entrusted to you” (1 Ti 6:20); “stand firm and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Th 2:15). If theology is not to be reduced to religious studies, or worse, a dangerous intellectual game, mustn’t our concern be just that: to embrace the Word of God in its fullness as IT has revealed itself and then proclaim what we have first received? (See Acts 20:24; 1Cor 11:23, 15:1; Phi 4:9; Col 2:6, 17; 2 Tim 1:14)

This then is why we care what the tradition is, what was handed down. Because it is the faith that Jesus planted in the hearts of the apostles and sent them out to preach, that others, that we, might hear and believe. Tradition is the fullness of what *they* believed. Believing Christ, they believed implicitly all that His Spirit of truth would guide their successors in faith into knowing in the ages to

come. There is then development of doctrine, but it is also always development OF doctrine, of something believed, of something revealed. In the case of Christ's descent into hell, which is so important a truth that it is part of the creed, it is difficult to imagine that the Church, in preaching what she first received, professed her faith in it for between 1500 and 2000 years without knowing what she was saying.

For if, as Dr. Griffiths said, "the proposition does not interpret itself," then neither does the proposition, "He descended into hell." We cannot limit its meaning off-the-bat to the definitions of the words strung together nor to what WE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century understand by those words. It is an irony of contemporary theology, given the dominance of the historico-critical methods, that "hell" in the profession is so often taken to specify eternal punishment in our modern sense. Whatever the profession meant, it did not specify that: The original words simply mean "those below." By usage, they referred to the abode or abodes of the dead, a term broad enough possibly to include the abode of the damned, but also too broad to specify it. Biblical ideas about "those below" exhibit a similar breadth and variety. The meaning of the profession must then be given by the context of the Church's usage. (By *Church*, I shall generally mean the universal Church prior to the Reformation and the Catholic Church afterward, since Balthasar said he intended to serve that tradition.) I offer an extensive argument in my book for what that meaning is; I have yet to see an argument that acknowledges that same evidence but concludes 1) the Church prior to the Reformation did not have a universal doctrine of the descent, binding in virtue of its universality or 2) the Church admitted the possibility that Christ may have suffered eternal punishment. Either will be a very hard historical case to make.

I only recall to mind here what I take it we as believing Christians see as the greater context of our common work here today, the context of Christian theology, and the corresponding importance of speaking from what we as a Church have first received, rather than "speaking from ourselves" (See Jn 7:18). In the context of these opening remarks, I wish now to respond to two or three of the most overarching issues raised by my interlocutors.

First, I heartily concur with my co-panelists about our important duty of reading with charity. I think they would likewise agree with me that charity requires speaking the truth—gently, it is true, but also clearly, lest we lose sight of Christ ourselves or obscure Him in the eyes of others. Charity thus requires that we read and represent an author's thought as accurately as possible. Thus, if Balthasar regards the traditional Catholic doctrine as mistaken, as indeed he does, it would not be "charitable" or "generous" of us to soften that; rather, it would be a misrepresentation and so an injustice. Naturally, reading with charity also includes interpreting an author in accord with his stated intentions. But since



intentions alone do not accomplish the deed, there is no injustice in arguing, upon evidence, that an author falls short of meeting those intentions.

The conclusions of my study are, admittedly, strong; I myself did not come to them lightly. Perhaps due to their gravity, what I intend as the straightforward presentation of those conclusions and the supporting arguments seem often to be mistaken as personal prejudiced attacks. Besides having approached Balthasar's work with the assumption that he was building upon the Catholic tradition, in my book I also frequently suggested possible interpretations that would align his descent theology more evidently to other elements of settled doctrine. In these and many other ways, I went out of my way to interpret him consistently with his intentions. I hope that my readers will attempt to interpret not only me as carefully, accurately, and in accord with stated intentions as I did Balthasar, but also other authors within the tradition itself.

For example, in my book I amply document several instances in which Balthasar quotes briefly from a theological authority, then goes on to use the passage in a sense other than, or even contrary, to the manifest intention of the author. Not having read the book Dr. Lauber mentions, I would like to give Fr. Weinandy the benefit of the doubt, but he badly misreads both St. Thomas and the tradition if he thinks Balthasar's use of St. Thomas retrieves the tradition. This may be shown on the basis of Dr. Lauber's description, which is representative of the typical argument. Weinandy, or these authors, suggest that that "bold statement" of St. Thomas is "at least mitigated or at most even contradicted by what follows" in his text. For both justice and charity's sake, it seems to me that we ought to assume St. Thomas was consistent with himself until proven otherwise. We ought, then, to look for an interpretation—and I give one in my book—that is consistent with the other things he says, rather than thinking he backpedaled or out-and-out contradicted himself in the space of one question of the *Summa*. But let's assume St. Thomas did contradict himself: how do we determine which statement of the contradictory pair we ought to follow? If he himself didn't know what he thought, how are we to? Our choice then simply becomes our choice and lacks any claim to his authority, for he has, with equal authority, denied it. Finally, if his statement is indeed "bold," it is not representative of the tradition. But if it is not representative, citing it can hardly be a "retrieval" of the tradition.

Introducing this matter of accurate interpretation sets the stage for addressing the kind of glory manifested in Christ's descent. I'd like to clarify what I do in my discussion of the meanings of *glory*. I do not arbitrarily define *glory* and then claim only that use is legitimate. Nor do I say that the linguistic meaning of *glory* has doctrinal weight. Few words are defined dogmatically and doing so is rarely necessary. What I do do is look at how *glory* is in fact used, and identify three such ways. All are legitimate, but since they differ in meaning, they will apply to different situations. I then ask the

question, “Both Balthasar and the Catholic tradition hold the descent to have been glorious; do they take *glorious* in the same way?” I then give evidence, over several chapters, that the Catholic tradition uses *glory* for the descent in a sense similar, not to the ‘glory’ of the cross, but to the glory of the resurrection. That is why the silence of the tradition in applying the ‘glory’ of the cross to the descent is significant: if Balthasar is going to develop the tradition, there must be something there to begin with. And according to not just me, but historians of *descensus* doctrines, there is no such ‘tradition’ to develop in that vein prior to the Reformation. Again, so long as one holds the principle of non-contradiction, one cannot simultaneously affirm a pair of contraries. Therefore, if the Church affirms in her lived faith that Christ’s descent was glorious like the resurrection, that affirmation is in itself a denial that it was glorious like the crucifixion. So the reason I ‘spend so much ink’ on the matter is NOT because I am ‘aware that the tradition fails to specify the glory of the descent,’ as Dr. Griffiths suggested, but because 1) I am aware that my readers may not be aware of that tradition, just as I was not before my studies, and 2) doing so serves the accurate exposition and comparison of Balthasar and the tradition.

Balthasar clearly indicates he does not accept the descent as glorious in the sense of the traditional Catholic characterization. He does not call similar attention to other terms from the tradition that he invests with new meaning. Note that by doing so, he effectively reduces his connection to the tradition to the merely superficial. An illustration may be drawn from Dr. Lauber’s presentation. He commented how for Barth and Balthasar, Christ’s death “is in need of nothing further to make it efficacious for human reconciliation and redemption.” He also asserted that I find this aspect of Balthasar’s soteriology “troublesome.” In contrast, Dr. Webster described how I emphasize the importance of Christ’s redemptive work being completed with His death. How shall we reconcile these opposite characterizations? As Dr. Lauber’s statement stands, I agree with it. However, Dr. Lauber goes on to characterize what Balthasar means by “death” here: “separation from God,” “Godforsakenness,” even “damnation.” These are not what I mean nor, I wager, what the greater Christian tradition or even ordinary people mean by Christ’s death. For these things are not death simply speaking, but death in a secondary sense. They are the “second death,” a death of the soul itself, not of the living person. What I find “troublesome”—among other things ☺—is that, for Balthasar, Christ must undergo the second death for the world’s redemption. For one, that agony can be suffered without crucifixion. The cross then is both insufficient for that reconciliation and unnecessary. In other words, it becomes a sadistic prelude to hell.

Again, Dr. Lauber says my ‘hesitancy to allow for punishment and substitutionary language may keep [me] from a balanced view of Balthasar.’ His portrayal obscures the fact that I am “hesitant”



only about certain senses of such language. I am indeed familiar with Balthasar's idea that Jesus subjectively experiences His descent as punishment without it objectively being so; I treat it in my book. This distinction, I would argue here, makes a mockery of the redemption: For Balthasar, Christ must undergo the second death for the world's redemption. Now is that second death a mere feeling, or is it a real state? If the second death is merely a feeling, Christ did not save us from a real state of alienation from God, but only from feeling really, really bad about ourselves. God is then "always reconciled," something that, for Balthasar, makes the cross into a mere symbol, as Dr. Lauber said. On the other hand, if the second death is a real state, yet Christ did not really undergo this our punishment but only "felt it," then we are still dead in our sins, according to Balthasar's principle that our punishment must be discharged. But if the second death is a real state and Christ underwent it, then according to Balthasar's own description of what that state is, the Son was truly abandoned by the Father, and hence the Trinity was really dissolved in the Descent.

These examples illustrate that it can be worthwhile to spend some ink on precise distinctions, for they serve the accurate representation of another's thought and so are necessary to engage it. I chose these examples, because all clarify both Balthasar's thought and my own critique of him.

I wish now to return to Dr. Griffiths' question and argument concerning authority. First, I had no idea that my summary of the Church's traditional doctrine would be taken as if I intended to write a dogmatic definition. ☺ Contrary to accusations made against me in the pages of *First Things*, I have no desire to assume to myself functions, ordinary or extraordinary, of the Magisterium. ☺ Hence it was not necessary for me to correlate my summary with those three levels. All I intended was to include as elements in my summary what is understood in the profession "Christ descended into hell" when that article is understood as the Church understands it. As I said before, the Church did not profess those words for centuries without meaning something by them. They had a specific content, and it is our task to receive and hand on that content.

So on what level would the meaning of that profession belong? Dr. Griffith has provided the answer, for the documents he cites identify creedal articles as belonging to the first level. That is not to say, however, that there is *de facto* magisterial weight to my summary. It is to say that what the Church means when she professes Christ's descent is *de fide credenda*.

For in treating development of doctrine, Vatican I solemnly condemned anyone who "says it can happen that sometimes, in line with the advance of knowledge, a meaning should be given to dogmas that have been proposed by the Church which is different from the meaning which the Church has understood and understands" (DS 3043/1818). For authentic development is "in the same dogma, the same meaning, and the same judgment" (DS 3020/1800). Vatican I makes clear that the formulae

taught by the Church on those three levels are not without content; they are not mere formulae. If then the truths of the creed are *de fide credenda*, it is not simply the words “He descended into hell” that are such, but the meaning of those words.

Very little of that meaning has been defined through what Dr. Griffiths calls “promulgation,” because it was unnecessary: Catholics knew what their belief was. The Magisterium is largely reactive in promulgating its documents and certainly in defining dogma. Where there is no controversy, as was largely the case in the history of the Catholic understanding of Christ’s descent, no definition is necessary.

This is important, for implicit in Dr. Griffiths’ presentation is a distinction between the truths taught and the acts of teaching them. For example, “First ... are truths *de fide credenda*, explicitly marked as divinely revealed when defined and promulgated” (G2). There are certain truths God has revealed; there are others the Holy Spirit has, in accord with Christ’s promise, led the Church to know; and there are still others that aid our understanding of the first two. These truths are all true irrespective of the Church’s explicit teaching of them. There are also the acts of the Church, of varying degrees of authority, in which she defines or teaches authoritatively SOME of the aforementioned truths. The word “promulgate” may obscure this difference if taken to refer to a truth rather than to the release of a document discussing that truth. The difference is important, lest we think something becomes true because the Church teaches it. Rather the Church teaches what IS true and because we believe Christ preserves the Church with His Holy Spirit, her teaching it is sufficient grounds for our believing it. Thus, for example, John Paul II made clear that the Catholic Church does not ordain women, not as a matter of arbitrary decree, but because it is true that she does not have the authority to do so.

If this distinction between truth taught and act of teaching is correct, truths can ‘command assent’ even if not defined in a specific act of the Magisterium; to say we are only obliged to believe what is defined in the narrow sense of dogma seems to be something of a legalistic reduction. That our obligation is wider is clear from the fact that we believe the Church is the indefectible means of salvation instituted by Christ. Now the Church herself teaches this, but if we believe it BECAUSE she teaches it, a self-referential circularity becomes apparent. Our belief is CONFIRMED, because she teaches it, but we must believe it is true of her before we will accept any of her testimony as true.

So while I agree with Dr. Griffiths’ key premise that the “bounds of orthodoxy and so of traditional doctrine are coextensive with TRUTHS that belong” to those three categories, I disagree with how he uses that premise with respect to the promulgated acts of the Church. For Dr. Griffiths’ argument is that a TRUTH not specified by a promulgated ACT of the Church is not a matter of faith,



and therefore something wholly open to theological speculation. I disagree: Even if something is not defined or promulgated by the official teaching organs of the Church, if we are to proclaim what we have received, we must look closely to what has been received and profess, explain, defend, probe, and develop that. And it is indisputable that a specific doctrine of the descent has been articulated in the active faith of the Church, in all Christendom up till the Reformation, in the Catholic and Orthodox communities till the present day—and in the Anglican ones except for a short ‘blip’ in their history.

So how are we to know what the Church means in her profession? We must look to Sacred Tradition, which includes but is not limited to magisterial ACTS of teaching. Note that if only those acts are to be included, and particularly such definitive ones as those to which Dr. Griffiths restricts us, we will become enmeshed in an infinite regress: Suppose *glory* were defined somewhere. We must then look to where the words of the definition are themselves defined. It should be clear then that *glory* need not be dogmatically defined to be used in a sense that accurately represents the Church’s official faith, which is normative for her members.

Describing the content of Tradition, Vatican II taught, “Now what was handed on by the apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the people of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes” (DV 8; see also DV 7). Tradition then is wider than the truths enumerated in magisterial promulgations; hence also a traditional doctrine, one taught by and contained in Sacred Tradition itself, may belong to the deposit of faith without having been defined in every detail by such acts. Consequently I adduce, in several chapters, the evidence in the tradition that not only suggests, but specifies, the glory of the descent was like that of the resurrection.

Now Dr. Griffiths has said that “the fact that a particular interpretation of some doctrine has been widely taught by theologians, assumed by the faithful at worship, implied in the Church’s art and liturgy, and even itself given doctrinal weight by the Magisterium, suggests nothing about whether some additional specification of what the doctrine means....may in time come to be acceptable to the Church.” So long as developments must conserve what went before, as we see in the theology of development as taught by Vatican I and also argued for example, by Newman, all those things say a great deal about later proposals. Other magisterial teachings, of varying degrees of authority, confirm this. For example, regarding the liturgy, we have the famous *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the rule of prayer is the rule of faith, precisely because the liturgy is “a public profession of the faith of the Church,” as Pius XII wrote in his encyclical *Mediator Dei*. Icons serve the same end, as we read in the documents of Constantinople IV, “What speech conveys in words, pictures announce and bring out in colors.” The standard provided by the theological consensus of the Fathers is emphasized by the

Lateran Council of 649; to take a Christological example: “If anyone does not, according to the holy Fathers, confess truly and properly that the natural properties of the divinity of Christ and of his humanity are fully preserved in him, complete and undiminished, by which is truly confirmed the fact that the same is perfect God and perfect man by nature, *condemnatus sit*” (DS 509).

So I absolutely agree with Dr. Griffiths when he says that, since the Holy Spirit “constantly guides the Church into deeper, richer, and full understandings” of the meaning of doctrines, in the end the key question is whether a new theological proposal is “not contradictory of what has gone before.” I have argued, upon evidence, that Balthasar’s theology of Christ’s descent into hell is just so contradictory.