

DESCENSUS AD INFEROS,
DAWN OF HOPE. ASPECTS
OF THE THEOLOGY OF HOLY
SATURDAY IN THE TRILOGY OF
HANS URS VON BALTHASAR¹

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“Holy Saturday . . . is far from
being a rupture of the objective
meaning of being or of the creative
passion of human subjectivity. On
the contrary, it is the absolute
triumph of the redemption.”

Introduction

The twentieth century was marked by a special intervention of God, who is a Father “rich in mercy”—*Dives in Misericordia* (Eph 2:4).²

In a time characterized by orphanhood and meaninglessness, Pope John Paul II was an authentic and tireless witness of the infinite love

¹Dedicated to John Paul II.

²John Paul II, *Memoria e identità. Conversazione al cavallo dei millenni* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2005), 65. For an English translation, see *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (Rizzoli, 2005).

of God the Father who is “rich in mercy” and who gives himself in his “two hands” (Irenaeus): the Son, the Redemptor Hominis, whom the Father gives over for the life of the world (Jn 3:16) in the original act of *traditio*; and the Holy Spirit, Dominus et Vivificans, the Lord and Giver of Life. In the midst of a climate of nihilism, sometimes “bestial”³ and sometimes indifferent (as in the “gay nihilism” spoken of by Augusto Del Noce), John Paul II believed, and bore witness to, the omnipotent mercy of the Holy Trinity. This mercy was, in fact, the first and the last word of his pontificate.⁴

Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr were also called to bear witness to the Father’s mercy before the fragmented world in which we live. In this sense, an essential part of their theological task was the illumination of the mystery of the faith known as the *descensus ad inferos*—an article of the Creed that is generally forgotten, feared, or reduced to insignificance. The theological interpretation of Holy Saturday that the two authors propose seeks to show how Christ’s descent into hell is a mystery of the Father’s infinitely patient mercy. Holy Saturday, suspended between Holy Friday and Easter Sunday, is a day of silence, on which the Lord remains in the tomb, dead with the dead. On this holy day, the Father so to say finishes the act of *traditio* by which he hands over his Son. He does this by introducing the Son into communion with all who have died “so that, by the grace of God [the Father], he might taste death in place of all” [*pro omnibus*] (Heb 2:9b). Holy Saturday, *in nuce*, is the encounter between two things: the super-luminous mystery of the Father’s fontal liberty, who gives freedom to his creatures and tolerates the consequences of their fall; and of the darkness of the sinful world that rebels against this paternal mystery. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not mastered it” (Jn 1:5). The light of love penetrates into, and collides with, the darkness of sin and death. Because, however, this light is the light of infinite Love, this encounter serves to increase Love, to glorify it, and to save what is the final moment of man’s

³Cf. John Paul II, *Memoria e identità*, 26.

⁴It is significant that the last writing John Paul bequeathed to us, *Memory and Identity*, focuses on the same mystery of the Trinity to which he dedicated the first trilogy of encyclicals that opened his pontificate. In this joining of beginning and end, the mercy of God—a theme that embraces the whole of John Paul’s ministry as Pope—plays a particularly important role. It is no accident that he died on the vigil of Mercy Sunday, a feast that he himself had instituted.

destiny: “the point of hell is not to kill love. The point of hell is to establish the kingdom of love.”⁵ As a mystery of extreme mercy, Holy Saturday is also the mystery of the humility of divine love, which not only lowers itself into the good *humus* of creation, but also into the meaningless mud of sin. As C. S. Lewis puts it in *The Great Divorce*, “[o]nly the greatest can make himself small enough to enter hell. Because the higher a being is, the lower it can descend—a man can sympathize with a horse, but a horse cannot sympathize with a rat. Only One has descended into hell.”⁶ And it is precisely in the folly of his abasement that his divine being is most intensely revealed: “*Non coerceri maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est*” [not to be constrained by the greatest, and yet to be contained by the least, that is divine].

Holy Saturday, the middle day of the Triduum, is a mystery of unfathomable depth and darkness, a mystery of God’s love and human sin, from which light pours forth both on Holy Friday and on Easter Sunday, on the Lord’s earthly life and on the life of the world to come. Holy Saturday, then, is the sealed center of Revelation. Balthasar’s Trilogy, for its part, may be read as an attempt to display the form—the *Gestalt*—of this revelation from an aesthetic, dramatic, and logical point of view, all of which is then recapitulated in its unity in the *Epilogue*. Our task, then, will be to show briefly the centrality of Holy Saturday in the realization of the aesthetic, dramatic, and logical form as Balthasar conceives it and, by the same token, the centrality of this mystery in the Trilogy. We will then conclude with some remarks on the relationship between Holy Saturday and the universality of theological hope.

1. *Glory*

Everything begins with the originality *par excellence*, with what Balthasar, following Goethe, calls the *Urphänomen*: the “original phenomenon.” Corresponding to, and awakened by, the *Urphänomen* is an equally original decision—an *Urentscheidung*—to let the original phenomenon appear by and from itself. The original phenomenon, corresponded to in this way, is the beauty of being or, to put it in

⁵Adrienne von Speyr, *Kreuz und Hölle. II: Auftragshöllen* (Einsiedeln, 1972), 197.

⁶C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 121.

theological terms, the glory of God. Beauty–glory has to do with a radiant, intact form whose luminous and attractive wholeness contains both the promise of restoring form to a fragmented theology and a valid response to the nihilistic erasure of being and its transcendentals, the outcome of the logic of modernity.

The origin of Christianity, too, is rooted in the perception of a unique form and in the experience of being enraptured by it. Wonderment over this form is the origin of Christianity and of what is specifically Christian. The name of this unique form is, of course, Jesus Christ. He is the center, the one “*medium tenens in omnibus*,” who holds the center in all things, as Bonaventure felicitously puts it. I would like this claim to be understood radically: Christ really and truly occupies the center of all things: not only of the Trinity (as the middle person between Father and Spirit), not only of the economy of salvation (as the Head of the Church), *but also of the transcendentals themselves*. The incarnate Son upholds the world’s being from the inside, from its deepest center and source, even as he never abandons the Father’s “bosom,” but is always there, his gaze turned ever towards the paternal origin (*eis tòn kólpon tou patròs*: Jn 1:18). Christ, to put it another way, is the “concrete measure” between God and the creature,⁷ the “marvelous accord of man [and of all creation] and of God” in person.⁸

The form or figure of Christ is the universal center of things because he is simultaneously at the center of the Trinity, at the center of creation, and at the center of the redemption that saves creation. By the same token, the form of Christ is not just one more intra-worldly form among others. Rather, it embodies the divine freedom itself and therefore does something that no merely intra-worldly form can do by itself: overcome the opposition, the anti-form of sin, which threatens to undo the fabric of the world’s being:

The One, whose name is Jesus Christ, has to descend into the absolute contra-diction against the Lord’s sovereign majesty, into

⁷Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Merkmale des Christlichen,” in id., *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie.I* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960), 174. For an English translation, see *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1: *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

⁸This is the title of Georges de Schrijver’s dissertation, *Le merveilleux accord de l’homme et de Dieu: Étude de l’analogie de l’être chez Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Louvain: University Press, 1983).

the night of Godforsakenness and the amorphous chaos of sin. He must do this in order to set up and to be, beyond what man can imagine as form, *the* form that overcomes all futility, the intact and indivisible form that unites and reunites God and the world in the New and Eternal Covenant.⁹

It is important to underscore that, according to the *Glory of the Lord*, the *maior dissimilitudo* of the Christ-form retrieves form in general, albeit on a higher level. Form-in-general becomes the mystery of the union of God and man in the new and eternal covenant. At the same time, the perception of the form becomes the unity of seeing with “simple eyes” (Mt 6:22), with “the eyes of one’s heart enlightened” (Eph 1:18)—and of life, where “life” is understood as loving, docile, even child-like obedience to Jesus Christ. The *maior dissimilitudo* does not rupture analogy, but finds it from above *and* from below/within—in a catalogical movement characteristic of the God who is *Non-aliud*.

The first part of the Trilogy, then, presents Christ’s descent into hell as the last step in the downward movement that is the culmination of the Incarnation: the *Verbum caro* sinks into the *caro peccati* (Rom 8:3). In his contemplation of this last stage in the Incarnation, Balthasar discerns three phases or dimensions, which he designates with the following terms: *Anprall*, roughly “impact”: *Kenose*, “kenosis,” a clear reference to Phil 2:6–11, and *Hölle*, “hell.” These three aspects form together a unity, inasmuch as they co-constitute what Balthasar calls the *Wucht des Kreuzes*, which might be translated as the “weighty impact of the Cross.”

Wucht is itself an aesthetic category corresponding to the *kabod* of the Old Testament. It is the “weight of glory” that accompanies and underscores the imposing presence of the self-revealing God. Now, faced with man’s sinful breaking of the covenant, this imposing presence takes the form—as it must in justice—of wrath: *Anprall*. In the New Covenant, the incarnate Son of God himself bears this weighty impact of God’s righteous anger within the even greater weight, the greater *kabod*-glory, of the Trinitarian love. It is this love that conceives of the Cross as a way of condemning the world’s sin once and for all, while at the same

⁹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herlichkeit*, III, 2, 2, 12. For an English translation, see *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 7: *Theology: The New Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

time saving the world with an embrace so to speak from “underneath” (in an act of what Balthasar calls “*unterfassen*”).

The whole weight of the world’s sin falls upon Christ, who made himself available to bear this weight in the attitude of kenotic obedience that prolongs in time his Sonly Yes to the trinitarian decision to save the world in just this way. Here we come to the second of our terms, *Kenose*, which, to repeat, Balthasar draws from the Letter to the Philippians. Following Paul, Balthasar interprets it as the distinctive characteristic of the Son’s love, inasmuch as the Son’s property is to let himself be generated by the Father and, again, to let this generation be translated into the expressive form of free human obedience. (Balthasar, who pioneered the revival of Maximus the Confessor studies in the twentieth century, held firmly to Maximian dyothelitism throughout his life.) This goal of the Son’s economic obedience is to carry and bear at once the world’s sin and the Father’s judgment on this sin. By bearing both things in obedience, he expresses his real, ever greater love as Son. His double act of bearing, then, occurs within the interchange of love between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. It is, in fact, a decision of love on the part of the triune God—a decision of which the Son is a free (super)passive/(super)active subject, just as the Father is a free (super)active/(super)passive subject.¹⁰

Now, the moment when the soldier pierces Jesus’ side and blood and water begin to flow from his wound represents the consummation of Jesus’ kenosis on the Cross. Everything has been given: the Spirit and, together with the Spirit, Jesus’ inmost substance, out of which the same Spirit will form the sacraments of the Church. From this moment, Jesus remains in the state of having given everything. The state of being dead. With this, we arrive at the third and last aspect: *Hölle*, hell, which Jesus undergoes on Holy Saturday.

¹⁰This account avoids two extremes. On the one hand, the Father does not damn or punish Jesus as if he himself were a sinner. On the other hand, the Cross is not a mere symbol of divine love, but expresses love precisely by including a real act of divine justice on sin, an act that objectively changes the situation of the sinner before God. Jesus shoulders and bears the whole weight of the world’s sin before the Father. In some sense, he makes himself responsible for that sin, but because he assumes this responsibility in loving obedience, and because he does so within the interchange between the divine persons, he is the personal “place” in which the whole Trinity swallows up sin in the victory of its ever-greater love.

Holy Saturday, as Adrienne von Speyr explains, is not an additional mystery added to the Cross, but rather the latter's "obverse." It is the "underside" of the Cross, when Jesus' experience of *giving* everything, which is distinctive of Good Friday, reaches its intrinsic fulfillment in the state of *having given* everything. This is a state in which Christ's act of dying is over and now, having died, he finds himself in the situation in which every man finds himself at the end of his earthly pilgrimage. In this sense, Holy Saturday completes the descending, "incarnatory" movement of the Word into the *caro peccati*. The Son has obeyed the Father's saving will to the end, and his obedience now takes the form of being dead with the dead. This being dead entails for the Son a real experience of separation from God, the "loss of glory" that without Christ would have been without exception the fate of the dead.¹¹ The *obedience of love* is what expresses here the permanence of the hypostatic union in the midst of the Son's extreme separation from the Father and under the crushing blow and incomprehensible weight of the world's sin. By doing this in absolute purity—and neither before nor after—the obedience of love overcomes the concentrated hatred of sin.

The originality of the contemplation of Holy Saturday in *The Glory of the Lord* (III, 2, 2: 211–217) is rooted in Balthasar's presentation of Jesus' experience in the realm of the dead—to the extent that this experience can be turned into words and images—thanks to the simultaneity of the two central aesthetic categories of perception or vision (*Wahr-nehmung*) and rapture that Balthasar develops in the first volume of the *Glory of the Lord*: being swept up ecstatically and lifted out of oneself (*Ent-rückung*—the word "*Ruck*" means a pull, a blow, a shaking, and so forth). Thanks to Nicholas of Cusa (who speaks of a *visio mortis* by means of a *via cognoscentiae*: a vision of [the second] death by means of an immediate experience) and, in particular, to the congenial insights gained through Adrienne von Speyr's theological experience (in the introduction to *Kreuz und Hölle*, for example, Balthasar says that this is one of the two central themes of Adrienne's theology), Balthasar contemplates how Christ in his

¹¹Thanks to the loving obedience of the Son, who remains as the hypostatic subject of this experience, we can say that what Jesus does here is not suffer damnation, as if he were being rejected by God for his sins—of which he has none—but overcome damnation from within, bearing up under the experience of loss reserved for sinful man out of love and as a form of filial gift to the Father.

descent “sees” the whole sin of the world, separated from the sinner, rejected, and condemned once for all. This vision is the fruit of the suffering of the Cross and therefore belongs uniquely to the Lord. This perception of sin as such is interpreted, using categories drawn from Irenaeus and Thomas, as an act that perceives the amorphous mass of sin and, in so doing, assumes it, takes possession of it, and conquers it. This perception is, at the same time, a being enraptured or swept away (one that, by reason of the kind of perception that is in play here, is as harsh and dramatic as possible): Christ, seeing the fruit of his passion, is drawn, “enrapt” through the horror of hell by and towards the Father, in a total, chaotic, and incomprehensible abandonment. Balthasar, basing himself on this second aesthetic aspect, always accentuates the passivity of this experience. He interprets the active verb “he went to preach to (*adveniens praedicavit*) the spirits that were in prison” (1 Pt 3:19) as a passive, but no less real preaching with his being, by means of his remaining dead with the dead. He finds support for this reading in 1 Peter 4:6, which employs a passive verb: “the Gospel was proclaimed to the dead” (*mortuis evangelizatum est*). Christ’s lacerating (subjectively: the horror of the experience; objectively: the tearing apart of the kingdom of death) passage through hell is a being placed in, and drawn through, it by the will of the Father, into whose hands he had entrusted himself without reserve.

Now, the principle that underlies the two above-mentioned theological aesthetic categories and unites them in mutual interpenetration is the (Ignatian) obedience of (Johannine) love. In the unique “space-time” of the descent, in which “vision” and “rapture” coincide in the Son’s loving obedience, the majestic splendor of the Father’s love shines forth in its opposite, in the loveless night of the anti-divine. Here, in this simultaneity, the Son becomes the “author and finisher” of every creaturely aesthetic form and experience. The Son’s obedience of love offers the splendor of the Father’s love a right and adequate form from the heart of which it can irradiate precisely in and through the amorphous horror of hell—and so conquer it as a moment of the glory of the mutual love of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. And because this entire paternal-filial event becomes the glory of their mutual love as a circumincession of form and light in the midst of man’s second death and sin, the obscure limit that remained in the Old Testament and prevented its consummation falls away from within. There opens,

once and for all (*ephápax*), the New and Eternal Covenant between heaven and earth, God and the world.

This covenant, founded and realized in the person of the Son, is, as we saw at the beginning of this section, the aesthetic form *par excellence*. The Son, thanks to his obedience of love in the amorphous chaos of the world's sin, is and becomes the center of the analogy of the transcendentals that obtains between God (*glory*) and the creation (*pulchrum*): the middle that harmonizes and illumines all things, the *medium tenens in omnibus*. This victory, which takes all thought by surprise, sheds light back onto created aesthetic form. This light falls, in the first place, on the metaphysical form *par excellence*: the *distinctio realis*, which can now be perceived and respected as a holy "space" and "time," where the grace of the act of being in its fullness lights up and pours out on the totality of the real. Man, as an artist of being (who is both its son and its father) can perceive and be enrapt by all things, because in them being "recreates" itself as an image of the form and light of the Trinity. Created reality—in spite of the horror that often threatens existence—is worthy of being loved, welcomed with honor, coglorified: *pulchrum et esse convertuntur* [being and the beautiful are convertible].

2. *Theo-Drama*

In our discussion of the *Glory of the Lord*, we saw that Christ, by his obedience of love, is the aesthetic form *par excellence* that holds together in unity the terms of the analogy of the beautiful within the embrace of the New and Eternal Covenant. The same connection between obedience and love, the transcendentals and the covenant, is central in the *Theo-Drama*. The same convergence finds here the dramatic form, which animates the transcendental *bonum*, understood as "self-gift."

Christ is the covenant, the circumincession of infinite and finite freedom, in person. He is this covenant, however, not for himself, but *pro nobis et pro omnibus*. For the same reason, he is the covenant in the clash, in the dramatic conflict between his obedience of love and the "no" that fallen man sets in opposition to the reciprocity of divine and creaturely freedom in the covenant. In order to realize the covenant in his person, Christ must overcome this "no" without overwhelming, overburdening, or ignoring

human freedom. According to Balthasar and Adrienne, Christ does this by means of an act of what they call “*Unterfassung*,” an act in which he bears and embraces so to say “from below” the world’s No. Christ brings his obedience of love into or, better, in obedience to the Father, he lets himself be sent by him *underneath and within* the no of man’s freedom, in order to be able to open to it from within a way to a renewed assent. This “*Unterfassung*” reaches its climax on Holy Saturday, in the Son’s state of *having been* sacrificed:

Here it becomes evident that the New Covenant is a movement, a dramatic process, in which the light penetrates the darkness and, step by step, conquers a path inside of the night of death. This happens in the Passion, especially in the mysterious third state of suffering in which the Lord, having completed his sacrifice, is entirely the one who has been sacrificed [*der Geopferte*].¹²

Created out of nothing, we are subject to limits, limits imposed on us without any choice on our part. The limit of limits is death. Balthasar speaks of a “*Sterbenmüssen*,” a having to, or being forced to die, which is man’s lot.¹³ The Old Testament, seen as a whole, considers this “inevitable necessity of dying” to be a mysterious limit placed on man’s communion with God. The Psalms tell us that, when man descends into the underworld, he can no longer glorify God. In death, man is incapable of communing with God. But the Son comes into the world in order to “trans-value” death. And he does so precisely by his act of “*Unterfassung*.” “Snatching and appropriating to himself all the deaths of sinners in his self-gift unto death, he transmutes into his one death all these deaths, and with them, every life that runs to this death.”¹⁴ In this way, Jesus brings about in himself the covenant of divine and human love, the heart of the theo-drama.

¹²Adrienne von Speyr, *Johannes.I: Das Wort wird Fleisch* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1949), 66. Eng., *The Word Becomes Flesh: Meditations on John 1–5* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994).

¹³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik (=TD) IV: Das Endspiel* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1983), 296. Eng. tr., *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5: *The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 297.

Man, as he concretely exists, cannot experience his death as the prolongation or expression of his communion with God. Neither can he suppress or overcome this incapacity because, whether he will or no, he is “thrown” into an existence that is subject precisely to this inability. The Son, on the other hand, is not thrown into earthly existence, but rather allows himself to be sent into it by the Father from the platform of eternity. This is the root of the Son’s “*Unterfassung*.” The Son is his act of receiving himself from the Father in love. This act contains an infinite letting be and letting be done that make it possible for the Son both to be sent and, within this sending, to assume the total passivity of human existence from conception to death. By the same token, Christ’s incarnatory mission thus transforms the experience of the passivity of the human condition into an act of filial love, which he performs *pro nobis*. Because the Son, coming down from heaven, penetrates and remains within our death with his filial letting be, he can meet us in our death, and so enable us to do what we could not do on our own: live our death as a gift of self, as a communion with the God who gives himself away:

But in Jesus’ case, the event . . . of the hour [the final and decisive hour of death] is not a function of his “being thrown” from nothingness into existence, but of something mysterious that takes the places of this “throwness”: his self-dispossession of his divinity [kenosis], which, as such, is an act of obedience to his eternal Father (Phil 2:6). Here, obviously, the power of the cast, of the throw into the mission is more powerful than nothingness. This throw throws—beyond all throwness—into an end (*telos*: Jn 13:1) that is beyond all ends that are simply “thrown.” While the end of those who are thrown is a withdrawal of movement, the end of the One Sent to this end is always, and is here, too, an act within his being sent: the act of having abandoned himself. This is possible because in his (filial) self-donation there is a correspondence with the [paternal] act of the Sender, who in that action was and always has been the one who gives his most intimate life away. This double self-donation is the expression of absolute love.¹⁵

This text suggests two aspects that are necessary to complete our sketch of Holy Saturday in the theo-drama. The first is this:

¹⁵Ibid., 297.

man's incapacity to live death as communion with God is not due solely to his being "thrown" from nothingness, but also, in the concreteness of his historical existence, to his sin. The necessity of dying, as we experience it, is a punishment that falls upon man who, having refused to hand himself over to communion with God, finds himself thrown back upon his naked finitude and so bound to an inevitable death. And yet, as Adrienne explains in her book on death, this punishment also includes an aspect of mercy. By imposing death on us, God gives us the opportunity to surrender, haltingly, to him. But in order for this aspect of mercy to become a reality, the Son himself has to redeem death "from underneath" in an act of "*Unterfassung*." This embrace of our being from underneath (*interior intimo meo-superior summo meo*), must embrace, not only our death, but also the refusal, the "No," which concretely conditions and shapes our death. And not only that. Christ, embracing death from below, must also take upon himself the solitude of having been separated and cut off from God that is the result and essence of this "No." He must experience what Balthasar calls *Gottverlassenheit*, forsakenness by God in both the objective and subjective sense. This experience culminates in turn on Holy Saturday, when Christ is definitively dead together with the dead:

The Bible interprets his death, with its embrace from below, in two senses, and it is very important to see that both are inseparable. On the one hand, this death is the substitution for all the deaths of sin, and for this reason Christ gives himself over in dying into Godforsakenness, hence, into a powerlessness that embraces from below every possible Godforsakenness and powerlessness on the part of sinners.¹⁶

This passage already contains the second aspect. The Son not only dies on Holy Saturday. On Holy Saturday, he completes his entrance into the flesh by being in the state of having died. This is not a mere physical fact. It is an event of substitution in which the Son assumes death as it is concretely burdened by sin: a death saturated with the sinner's "No"; a death, then, that means final separation from God, beyond any ability of ours to uproot. Now, because it is the Son who bears our concrete death as an extreme act of love, he can be dead with the dead and, at that very moment,

¹⁶Ibid., 297.

“transmute” death “from below.” And because he takes upon himself the burden of our Godforsakenness in an act of loving obedience, this transmutation happens insofar as he places his filial love at the very point where our “No” has made us completely incapable of any vital movement towards God. In this way, he breaks open from within our ownmost “No,” but without any heteronomy. His entrance into the immobility of death on Holy Saturday is the seal of his objective victory over sin, a victory that has already occurred subjectively on the Cross. Rising from death, he will show that, from now on, this love has become transparent to trinitarian love:

This is the first aspect, which made such an impression on Paul. But this *action* of God likewise contains the second aspect: the *doctrine* that this action is the proclamation of an absolute love, which reveals itself as such in God’s trinitarian essence.¹⁷

Balthasar, following Adrienne von Speyr, conceives of the Redemption as the consummated “separation of sin from the sinner.” This separation depends on the fact that “only One has descended into hell,” as C. S. Lewis puts it. In other words, Christ on the Cross has taken all sin upon himself, but without the guilt of having committed it, in order that our sin might receive its due condemnation, without our having to go to hell to pay for it. And it is only because Christ shoulders our guilt by his hard and real obedience of love (no insipid play of love with itself, as Hegel said), hence, in perfect innocence, he is not damned (in the sense of Luther’s merely formal interchange between *justus* and *peccator*), but rather *unterfasst* within the obedience of his mission the perdition that we have inflicted on ourselves, making it in all truth *his* perdition. In this sense, his obedience of love radically fulfills the justice owed to the Father, transforming it into an expression of ever-greater mercy.

“Do not be afraid! I am the first and the last (*eschatos*), and the living one, and I was dead, and behold I am alive for the ages of the ages, and I hold the keys of death and hell” (Rev 1:17–18). “For the suffering of death, we see Jesus crowned with honor and glory, so that, by the grace of God, he might taste death on behalf of all” (Heb 2:9). These passages of Scripture suggest a final topic. By his

¹⁷Ibid., 297.

obedience of love, the Son can experience our lostness, and yet, in the midst of this experience, continue to love—to let himself be generated by the Father. Because he makes a reality what, humanly speaking, is impossible, the definitive consummation of the covenant from both sides, the Son himself is the “ultimate.” “Christ, the Judge, is the ‘*eschatos*.’”¹⁸ He, not the destiny of sinful man, not Hades, is the last thing. He is the eschatological reality in person. An implication of this is that, at the moment of death, every man encounters Christ as his only and final judge. And because Christ’s own death has “transmuted” death and separated sin at its root from the sinner, this judgment is, at one and the same time, the severest possible condemnation of sin and the offer of an infinite mercy to the sinner. Thanks to the grace that flows from the action of the Holy Trinity in the Son’s *descensus ad inferos*, our appearance before our judge becomes the culmination of our *sequela Christi*:

And in this way, the judgment gathers together in concentrated form everything pertaining to man’s redemption, since the judgment is the encounter of the Father’s justice with the Son’s Cross in the love of the Spirit, an encounter that is at the same time the reunion or reunification of the Father and the Son.¹⁹

In his descent, Christ finds purgatory and hell in their specifically Christian sense. Purgatory is an aspect of each man’s eschatological encounter with Christ, his only judge. Thus, the state of death and the encounter with the God of justice, which without Christ would have been an eternal prison for everyone, now, with and in him, does not have to be for anyone:

Purgatory comes into being, in the strict sense, on Holy Saturday, when the Son, by means of his passage through “hell,” introduces the aspect of mercy into the state of those who had been justly condemned. . . . “purgatory arises or is ignited under the Lord’s footsteps [in his descent]. He brings consolation to this place of [pure] desolation, he brings warmth to this place of infernal cold.”²⁰

¹⁸Joseph Ratzinger, cited in *TD IV*, 329.

¹⁹Adrienne von Speyr, *Apokalypse. Betrachtungen über die geheime Offenbarung* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1950), 681.

²⁰*TD IV*, 331; the citation is from Adrienne von Speyr, *Johannes IV*, 173. Eng., *John*, vol. 4: *The Birth of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991).

On the Cross, Christ becomes a holocaust, a burnt offering totally consumed. Burned, because he himself offers himself in our place to the consuming fire of God, whose sanctity cannot tolerate the slightest evil: “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29; cf. Dt 4:24). At the same time, because he has experienced the full impact of this fire—its *Anprall* in aesthetic terms—he becomes the Lord of the eschatological fire of judgment. He thus has the right to apply it to us, not in order to destroy us, but to purify us instead. The fire that burns Christ as our holocaust is transformed into the purifying fire of purgatory as our hope.

The beginning of the process of purification in purgatory is rooted in a mysterious “abandonment of my vision into his vision.”²¹ Balthasar and Adrienne conceive of judgment and purgatory in terms of an analogy (and not a dialectic or a univocity) with confession. There is, as in all analogies, a fundamental dissimilarity: in purgatory, man does not actively confess to Christ—his life is already finished, there is no longer room for any free decision on his part; rather it is his whole life, already lived, that now comes to light. Better, man finds himself passively before the eyes of the judge, which are like “fire,” and so is *confessed* by Christ himself. What man “does” is to let be, to allow this divine fire to burn up everything that does not reflect its love. This process “lasts” until the sinner, “preferring nothing to the love of Christ” in this final vis-à-vis of his personal judgment—recognizes his total lovelessness, acknowledges that he deserves an even greater punishment than what he is receiving, and is ready to pay any price for it . . . until he finally cries out for this “more.”²² At this moment, the fire of God’s holiness begins to burn in us in a different sense. The center of our attention shifts—once and for all—from ourselves, from our own suffering, from our own anguish, towards the Lord’s suffering and anguish, which is not the anguish of the sinner, but of the Good Shepherd in search of his lost sheep. The cry for “more” now becomes an expression of an offering that forgets itself and mysteriously remains with the Lord in expiation for everything that causes him anguish; and that everything is not only his, the sinner’s, personal sin, but also the sin of the

²¹*TD IV*, 333.

²²*Ibid.*, 336.

world, every offense that ceaselessly rises from the world.²³ This request for “more” is the beginning of God’s shining ever more in our state of eschatological confession, in the justice of the final personal and universal judgment. And because it is only in this moment that love begins to burn in the sinner, it is also at this moment that the gates of heaven open for him.

The consideration of the role of Holy Saturday in the *Theo-Drama* and of the connection between Holy Saturday, judgment, and purgatory bring us to the same point in which our consideration of the *Glory of the Lord* culminated: Jesus’ obedience of love is the foundation of his being *the* form of Revelation. Transforming our death into the economic enactment of his eternal generation, this obedience can transmute the limit of death into an act of love within the limitless mutual self-gift of God and man.

In this way, Christ realizes, and is in his own person, the dramatic form *par excellence*, the form that now becomes and is (in the *convertuntur* of *esse* and *agere*) the new and eternal covenant and the foundation of all creaturely form. Christ can be and do this because he *is* the Father’s self-gift in the midst of its opposite, of the mortal contradiction against him and against every gesture that “gathers with him,” even as this self-gift is held together and promoted by the spiration of the Spirit at this humanly dead point. This divine drama is the ultimate reality that radically cures and transforms the world’s tragedy, changing it into a theo-drama. The Father’s creation is fundamentally good thanks to the Son’s action, and for this reason the self-gift of being in man’s free action becomes a fruitful and positive dramatic form. Holy Saturday illumines for us the unity of love and justice that is consummated between Father and Son (not without struggle—see the Garden of Olives) and that embraces and heals the whole of creation and every human drama with it. The light of this consummation “in-fluences” from within, from non-subsistent being in fruitful creativity that we call the good and that “con-vinces” us to realize the convertibility of being, love, and goodness: *esse et bonum convertuntur*. The *Eschatos* of Love suffers and communicates himself *in* every created love:

The Son has taken their sin away, precisely in order to make out of their distance from the Father the highest proof of his love for

²³Ibid., 336.

the Father. Everything that was, is, and will be thus comes together in the Son hanging on the cross now in the present. He is the whole history of humanity, but also the whole history of God with humanity. And so it is only from the earthly point of view that suffering and death are an end. For God it is a midpoint, which goes right through the middle of the Father. After all, even in his dying, the Son does not stop being generated by him and rendering him thanksgiving, in a love that, precisely at this very moment, is expressing its uttermost. The death of the Son is the display of the highest vitality of trinitarian love.²⁴

3. *Theo-Logic*

The third wing of the triptych, the *Theo-logic*, considers the same event as the first two, but from a new, distinctive point of view. The *Theo-logic* attempts to show and understand how Christ's gift of self "to the very end" is the "*Auslegung*," the "exegesis" or exposition, of the Father's love in and for the world, and in this sense the "truth" (in the Johannine sense). Christ is the truth as fullness, and for the same reason as covenant: in him, the Father's whole love is unfolded in the whole incarnate Son in and for the world thanks to the mediation of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the exegete of the exegesis of the Father that is the Son. Having given his whole being, Christ is raised from the dead and, at that moment, the Spirit simultaneously seals the Son's exposition of the Father's love performed by the Son and unfolds the wealth of this exposition with creative fidelity as the "*Spiritus Creator*." Only then is the Spirit "released" to explicate Christ's exegesis of the Father in our hearts. Only then is the plenitude of truth accomplished and the New Covenant sealed.

Christ is the *Logos*, the "middle person" (Bonaventure) of the Trinity. As such, he never speaks in the first instance of himself, but of the Father. And, in speaking of the Father, he does not emphasize his own authority as the Father's exegete, but leaves his exegesis in being and act in the hands of the Holy Spirit so that the Spirit may do with it as he wills (and the Spirit wishes only to act in perfect creative fidelity; he wishes to "blow" only in and towards the love

²⁴Adrienne von Speyr, *Das Angesicht des Vaters* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1981), 64. Eng., *The Countenance of the Father*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997).

of the Father and the Son). Because the Logos is the “central person,” this double relationality—backwards towards the Father and forwards (with the Father) towards the Holy Spirit—structures his *Logos*-character. Insofar as the *Logos* is the middle person, he has a structure, a logical form, which is at the same time inseparably an exegesis of the living God:

It is not until Jesus Christ that we arrive at the identity of unity and difference that was described just now, an identity that, for Christian faith, points unambiguously straight into the mystery of the Trinity. Jesus simultaneously posits essential divine unity and opposition [therein], to which he bears witness by speaking about a relational vis-à-vis [within God]. By doing so, Jesus gives us the key to the mystery of the living God, which reveals its mysteriousness never more so than just when an access to it is opened up for us.²⁵

According to Balthasar, then, “[c]reaturely logic can be rightly seen for what it is only as an analogous participation in an absolute Logos, which points into itself back to its (paternal) origin and out of itself forwards to the Spirit of free love who flows from it and its origin.”²⁶ In the ana-logical part of the second volume of *Theo-logic*, Balthasar explains how creaturely logic reflects the Logos. Part of his explanation is negative: Balthasar critiques, that is, a conceptualist logic that closes being in the abstract self-identity of $A=A$, and so equates the other— B —with the absolute negation of A : $A \neq B$. Such a logic, Balthasar insists, cannot capture, understand, and structure reality, in which B , C , etc. are A ’s “co-constituents, insofar as their otherness positively co-determines A , which has a double presupposition: being-with-others in a finitude (common to all) that in turn is different from, and related to, its origin.”²⁷ This logic expresses the real being of the world: “one *and* the other in a constitutive, differentiated unity.”²⁸ This logical expression is what

²⁵Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik (=TL) II: Wahrheit Gottes* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1985), 119. For an English translation, see *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 2: *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

²⁶Balthasar, *TD IV*, 57.

²⁷*TL II*, 35.

²⁸*Ibid.*, italics added.

we call the logical form of created being, the self-expression of this being that at one and the same time captures it, structures it, and illumines it. Balthasar's conclusion:

Neither "identity" nor mere "difference," Blondel has shown us, can express the structure of real worldly being. . . . In the real, difference, what is "other than myself," is always already overtaken by a third, within which I can notice this otherness in the first place. The antitheses are not mutually indifferent, but each is always for the other—differently.²⁹

Returning to our topic in the light of what we have just said, we can say that the *Logos*, descending into the flesh, assures "catalogically" the analogy between worldly "logic" and trinitarian love. Concretely, this requires a redemptive action from above, because the creature has rejected the logic of love inscribed in being, contra-dicting, saying "No" to, the other, to oneself, and to the love of the Trinity that is its Original Source. The question of how Christ is the logical form of Revelation thus becomes, *concretissime*, the question of how the *Logos*, the exegete of trinitarian love, can include and tame the "No" pronounced by the creaturely image. How can the *Logos*, who is a pure "Yes" to the Father, take on himself and overcome (*tollere*) the creature's "No"? In accord with the other wings of the Trilog, Balthasar's answer will be based on the Son's obedience of love to the extreme of Godforsakenness.

Holy Saturday is the last step in the descent of the *Logos* into the flesh, which is concretely a *caro peccati*. On Holy Saturday, the *Logos* that was in the beginning (Jn 1:1) enters into the darkness that can neither comprehend nor receive him, indeed, *refuses* to do so. The *Logos*, who is the Father's Word (judgment, decision, "diction") enters into the contra-diction, the "No," of the creature to what this "diction" expresses: the Father's love. Because he is the truth *par excellence*, to contradict him is to cooperate with an untruth, with an anti-truth, with pure falsehood. What is at stake is not a failure to understand the truth, but an open hatred of it.

This contra-diction, then, cannot be integrated into the truth. But since it is not simply nothing, where can this hate-filled untruth "end up" if not in hell? Hell is the dark kingdom of naked untruth, shut up in false shadows. But in order for the un- or anti-

²⁹Ibid., 33.

truth of the creature's contra-diction to end up in hell it has to be uprooted and carried there. This is the main task of the Incarnate Word. This task poses a theological problem, however. How is it that the incarnate *Logos*, who is the truth, can carry and bear the contradiction of sin within his always veridical exposition of the Father, without blessing this contradiction in the slightest as if it were part of the total truth itself? How can he unite the creature's "No," its deep-rooted aggressive negativity, with his simple, pure "Yes," without turning that "Yes" into a "No"? For it is just this union that he must bring about and must bear witness to:

At this point, it finally becomes clear what "negative theology" is in a Christian sense. No longer the sublime experience that God's majesty transcends all human experience and conceptual-ity, but that in the cross the contra-diction of sin, its falsehood and unlogic, is taken into the logic of the triune love, not, however, in order to find a place in it, but in all truth to be "damned in the flesh" (of the Son) (*katakrinein*; Rom 8:3). The flesh, "God's enemy" (Rom 8:7), insofar as it is against God, is cast out of the cosmos, which is God's, "into the outermost darkness."³⁰

"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." According to the exegesis of *Theologik.II*, Christ, as Lamb of God, literally "takes" and "takes away," not only the punishment for sin, but also sin itself, while at the same time making this action an exegesis of the Father's love. In other words, the redemptive act is an act of substitution in which Christ puts himself in the sinner's place. Here the Latin *tollere* (to take away, to cancel, to overcome, to conserve) joins with Hegel's *Aufheben* in order to give rise to a dense logical play of different, related meanings. Now, this brings us back to the above-mentioned problem. How can Christ take upon himself something that is incompatible with the Father's love without putting himself at odds with that love? Note that what is at stake here is nothing less than the identity of the *Logos* as an expression of this fontal love. How can the *Logos* take on himself what contradicts him without ceasing to be the central *Logos* of the theo-logic? Balthasar's answer, once again, lies ultimately in the

³⁰Ibid., 297.

obedience of love that goes to—and remains in—the extreme of Holy Saturday.

The principle thanks to which the *Logos* assumes our sin is not itself sinfulness, but obedience. The Son, “bearing up” patiently (*Aushalten*) under the action and consequence of sin, cancels and overcomes sin on its own ground. Because he *lets* the Father load him with the whole weight of the world’s sin as the uttermost consequence of his mission, he can make our “No” his, as if he were responsible for it, yet without actually pronouncing or confirming it himself. His obedience allows him to experience our “No” in its naked contradiction, in its hellish meaninglessness. It allows him to cross it and to get underneath it with the pure, almighty fire of his love. At this point the Son accomplishes the exegesis or explication of the Father’s love in the contradiction of sin, without for an instant violating his identity as the *Logos* of absolute love:

The obedience of the Son even in his being dead, even in hell, is his perfect *identity* in all contradiction and so the overcoming also of the last contra-diction through this identity, which infiltrates everything from below [*unterlaufende Identität*]. An obedience, which, christologically speaking, is nothing other than the expression of the Son’s trinitarian love, which precisely here, in the absolutely excessive demand, in ‘impossible obedience’ (Adrienne), demonstrates itself to be the Son’s hypostatic obedience.³¹

“Father, why have you abandoned me?” This “why” receives (at the moment) no answer but . . . silence. On the other hand, this silence means that the incarnate *Logos* bears the experience of meaninglessness that sin entails in its a-logical contra-diction. On the other hand, by remaining under the a-logical “No” of sin, the *Logos* embodies the answer to the “why” that he himself calls out on the Cross. And this answer is the love that has no “point” or “motive” or “why” beyond itself and that exegetes itself as love precisely in the death of the *Logos* in the absurdity of the Cross. The incarnate *Logos*, remaining in the midst of the illogic of sin, embraces from below (*unterfasst*) its “gratuity” (its futility, its perverse folly) with the ever-greater “gratuity” (the whylessness, the “folly” of super-positive creativity) of the Father’s love. The *Logos*, verifying

³¹Ibid., 323.

in his missional being the absolute trustworthiness (*emeth*) of the One who sends and in this sending gives himself away (Jn 3:16), is the exegesis, the un-veiling, the illumination of the inoriginate origin (*Grundloser Grund*) of the Father's love. And it is in this way that he is *the* logical form *par excellence*. The Son's obedience of Love makes him once again the form: this time the logical form of all forms.

"Life's absurd wound" has been cured at the roots of its being, within the gratuitous wound of the incarnate *Logos*, the center of the Trinity. This means that the rupture, the expressive bursting forth of worldly being in its self-unveiling that we call "truth" (*aletheia*) can be conceived, acknowledged, and said (*legein*) as a light of love—despite all the falsehood and all the anti-metaphysical speculation that attempts to rob it of its evidence and its reliability (*emeth*). This "whylessness" of love as the meaning of being is, then, the foundation that carries truth and gives it sense. This is why, on the creaturely level, the Christian's theo-logical task is to affirm and promote the convertibility, the mutual growth of being, love, and truth: *esse et verum convertuntur*.

The interpretation of Holy Saturday offered in tandem by Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr is often criticized for rupturing the unity of the *Logos*, with the lamentable result, supposedly, of a hopeless irrationalism. In reality, Holy Saturday, as the qualitative center of the *triduum*, is the concrete foundation in the history of salvation of the truth of the world within the truth of the Trinity, of worldly logic within the logic of God. The silence of Holy Saturday is at the center of the transcendental *verum*. This means that the truth is the coming to light and articulation of a foundation that, confirming itself by means of its plenary presence, convinces us with all desirable evidence that it is always greater. The truth, then, is neither rationalist nor irrationalist, it is mystery: a form in which the groundless ground makes itself known as such—gratuitously judging, saving, and giving meaning to all that it grounds. And the thing that guarantees the coherence of this form is not the abstract identity of $A=A$, but the trinitarian identity of love, which is itself in the fecundity of mutual exchange and mutual gift. This identity can do the impossible: use what is meaningless as an occasion, a means (a middle term), for the manifestation and consolidation of its groundless, because gratuitous, meaning. The point here is not the transformation of all things into the frenetic hostility of contradiction, nor again the false peace of identity without difference, but the mature simplicity of the identity of

triune love, that is, its obedience to itself and to nothing but itself—and so its humble service of the creature:

This folly [of the Cross] is not revealed in the essence of God . . . but in the One who, in a single act, was able to unite the absolutely divine and the absolutely anti-divine—not in the insanity of a titanic super-human posture, but in the simplicity of his obedience. This obedience alone exegetes God as trinitarian love, and precisely in the fact that the Father delivers his Son to the contra-diction of the anti-divine out of love. Cross and Trinity prove each other mutually, taking the Cross in all its above mentioned, for human logic, difficult to understand dimensions. In this reciprocity (of Jn 1:1 and Jn 1:5 and 14) is present for us that Logos that will not pass away, even if heaven and earth pass away. These die, but in the embrace of the one who also calls himself “the life.” A life that has held fast through every death, possesses the keys of death and hell, but which, being the life *tout court*, also bestows life and light, grace and truth on men.³²

4. *Dawn of hope*

“*Quand tout descend seule elle remonte. . .*” (Péguy)

The enemy is conquered by the Lord: “I hold the keys of death and of hell” (Rv 1:18b). The state of death with no hope of return becomes the sealed center of the economic form of God, in which the immanent form glorifies itself and intensifies its grace in the reciprocity of its gratuitous donation as the consummation of the Covenant. The reciprocity that awakened the nostalgia of ancient man and the covenant that nourished the faith of the Jews both find their superabundant fulfillment in the Son’s descent.

But what the Father’s two hands fulfill in the first instance is the desire of the Father’s heart: the creation of the real possibility (real because resting on the foundation of being and of grace) that “all men [and in and through them all creation] be saved and attain the full knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). The Son’s descent into sin as contra-diction against the Father’s love, which he accomplishes thanks to the Spirit’s silent and discreet work of unification, brings

³²Ibid., 331.

an absolute novelty: the death laced with sin is transformed into the gratuitous gift-giving in which the love of God and the love of man give themselves to each other and illumine each other in an ever-greater reciprocity. Love, then, is worthy of faith, because it is, has become, and has illumined itself as the absolute: by overcoming the final bond that imprisoned creation and oppressed the Father's heart. And that is why Péguy can say "*la foi que j'aime le mieux, dit Dieu, c'est l'espérance*" [the faith I like best, says God, is hope].

Love hopes all things. In love's faith, there is room for all hope. . . . Love has experienced in God that sin has been overcome by means of the death of the Son, and this experience—and every experience—of the fulfillment God has accomplished has given love the infinity of action, for all eternity. Love cannot be placed before any fact and any sin and any alienation without keeping its hope. A hope that is much more alive, much greater, and much truer than what men can invent in order to destroy it.³³

Holy Saturday, as we have seen, is far from being a rupture of the objective meaning of being or of the creative passion of human subjectivity. On the contrary, it is the absolute triumph of the redemption. By the same token, it is the central point from which shines forth the glory, the goodness, and the truth of the triune God—and, in him, of his creation. The trinitarian exegesis that Adrienne and Balthasar offer of the article of faith that "he descended into hell" shows this item of the Creed to contain a mysterious source of light that shines forth to reveal the full catholicity of the faith. The Son's death out of love, his real solidarity with sinners in their state of being dead, is the origin of the new creation, the beginning from which the Father's will shines out in its unity with the will of the Son and the Spirit, now and for all eternity. It is the momentous day when the Father holds in his hands the Spirit of his dead Son: "*Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum*" (Lk 23:46). His fatherly hands that created man from the primordial *humus* and that sent his own substance into Mary's womb. On this day, the holy God, and not *l'homme révolté ou dépressif*, achieves the decisive integration between the original goodness of creation ("and God saw that it was all very good": Gn 1) and the body of his Son lacerated by the aggression of the sin of the world that it has borne:

³³Adrienne von Speyr, *Korinther I* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1956), 411f.

Through this body of the Son, the Father's hope shines . . . and the Spirit unites the Spirit of the Son's passion and the light of the Father so that the Father's hope might shine in the world, in the Church, and in the mother.³⁴

This light of theological hope pours itself out catalogically on what is the metaphysical question and decision *par excellence*: being's not subsisting in itself, but in what is other than itself, so as to make *it* exist in itself³⁵—does it point in the last analysis to God's gratuitous goodness or towards an abyss of nothingness?³⁶ Christ's overcoming of death as an automatic entryway to Hades is the ultimate, eschato-

³⁴Adrienne von Speyr, *Das Wort und die Mystik.I: Subjektive Mystik*, 259f.

³⁵As Thomas Aquinas puts in a text that is canonical for Catholic metaphysics: "being [esse] signifies something complete and simple, but not subsistent" (*De Potentia*, I, 1, ad 1). Creatures' be-ing, their *esse*, is the quintessence of their actuality—hence describable as "complete and simple"—and yet it does not exist in its own right as a substance—which is why Thomas says it is "non-subsistent." Created *esse* is not formally identical with created substances, and yet it never "exists" except as their act of be-ing. By the same token, at the moment in which *esse creatum* makes substances be as their supra-formal cause, it also "depends" on those substances. This moment of dependence in the act-fullness of created *esse* is what makes it, according to Balthasar, a "similitude of the divine goodness" (Thomas, *De Veritate*, XXII, 2, ad 2): the vehicle, that is, of a liberality so generous that it can depend on what it creates—in the sense of giving it a real freedom that counts before the Creator himself.

³⁶"Being [*das Sein*] does not squeeze entities [*Seiendes*] tightly to itself, but lets them be. In the same way, entities, in the serene confidence of being let be, let being be in their turn, so that being's light might rise like the sun to shine over all things. . . . In the space of the difference that opens for being to let us be and we being, two things can happen. On the one hand, being's lofty elevation over us can make it look alien, indifferent, even terrifying to us, so that we can be assailed by the temptation to perceive it as neutral, as worth-less, as sense-less, and so to prefer non-being. The shadows that darken our own existence because of guilt, sickness, and death; the horror of the world's being as a whole—all this seems to warrant a curse on existence. . . . And yet: in the same distance of letting be, being can also dawn on us in its glory . . . in a glory that sublimely and mysteriously transcends all the beauty and order of the real world, even though the latter are an irradiation and an index of this glory. The worth of this glory is in principle so unsurpassable—the most one can do is unfold it—that all glorious 'power' (in its victory over the impotence of the merely possible), all 'light' (in its victory over the darkness of nothingness), and all 'grace' (in it is endless self-impartation) are gathered up in it. The Western metaphysics of light ultimately mean a decision for the second possibility: a homage of being as a whole in the act of letting it be" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*).

logical foundation of the decision for the first possibility. The mortal wound of created being (the death of sin) has been borne and overcome in the Father's heart, inasmuch as the Son has died and descended into hell in the ever-greater unity of the Spirit. For this reason, this death—together with all the suffering that evil inflicts on the world—can no longer be interpreted as the annihilation of all existence. It has become, instead, a mid-point, a source, that traverses the Father's heart in his eternal generation of the Incarnate Son and, therefore, in his re-creation of us as his sons. For this reason—and for this reason alone—the oscillation of non-subsistent being, together with all of its differences (disappropriation in the other; the polarity and potentiality of created being; the finitization that constitutes the essence of created beings), is not the yawning of a dark abyss of nothingness, but the reflection of the gratuity of divine Being, the image of the divine goodness.³⁷ The theological light that springs up from the mystery of Holy Saturday enables us to read every difference, every otherness, every night—especially the rupture of death—as the expression and concretion of a super-positive meaning, of a power, light, and grace emanating from super-essential being as love. Being and love, in other words, *convertuntur* in each of being's transcendentals. This light of being-as-love transforms the night of nothingness that frenetically anguishes man—transforms it into the “womb” in which “being bathes” (Péguy). This super-luminous ground of being—which is light in its being-given to entities—itself comes to light as the pure image and presence of the Father's abyssal bosom, from whose “fountain of the water of light” the Son will give us to drink without cost (Rv 21:6b). The night of being and of its gratuity grow one in the other as an image of the unfathomable gratuity of the Foundation:

So I want to find in them a sort of gratuity
Which reflects the gratuity of my grace,
Which is as it were created to the image and likeness of the
gratuity of my grace. . . .
In a word, I want them to love, says God, not just freely,
But gratuitously as it were.³⁸

³⁷Gustav Siewerth, *Schicksal der Metaphysik* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 2003), 390–391.

³⁸“*Ainsi j’aime à trouver en eux comme une certaine gratuité/ Qui soit comme un reflet de la gratuité de ma grâce,/ Qui soit comme crée à l’image et à la ressemblance de la gratuité de ma grâce.../ J’aime qu’ils aiment en fin, dit Dieu, non seulement librement mais comme*

Where being bathes
 Immersed in the night.
 It is the night that continues on, where being bathes, it is
 the night that is one continuous fabric,
 A continuous fabric without end where the days are only days
 . . . like windows. . . .
 Because it is you who rock all Creation
 In a refreshing sleep.
 As one beds a baby down on his little bed. . . .
 You alone, night, dress the wounds.
 The aggrieved hearts. That are broken to bits. Torn apart.
 O my black-eyed daughter, the only one of my daughters
 who can claim to be my accomplice. . . .
 O my starry night whom I created first.³⁹

It was then, night, that you came. The same night.
 The same night that comes every evening and who had come so
 often since the first darkness. . . . The same that had fallen over
 so many crimes since the
 beginning of the world;
 And on so many stains and so much bitterness;
 And on this ocean of ingratitude, the same as came over my grief
 And over this hill and over this valley of my desolation
 it was then you came.
 O night, mustn't, o mustn't my paradise
 Be one great night of splendor that will fall on the sins of the
 world?⁴⁰

gratuitement" (Charles Péguy, *Œuvres Poétiques Complètes* [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967], *Le mystère des saints innocents*, 720f).

³⁹«Où se retrempe l'être/ En plein dans la nuit/ C'est la nuit qui est continue, où se retrempe l'être, c'est/ la nuit qui fait un long tissu continu,/ Un tissu continu sans fin où les jours ne sont que des jours ... comme des fenêtres..../ Car c'est toi qui berces toute la Création/ Dans un Sommeil réparateur./ Comme on couche un enfant dans son petit lit..../ Nuit tu es la seule qui panses les blessures./ Les coeurs endoloris. Tout démanchés. Tout démembrés./ O ma fille aux yeux noirs, la seule de mes filles qui sois, qui puisses te dire ma complice..../ O ma Nuit étoilée je t'ai créée la première" (Charles Péguy, *Œuvres Poétiques Complètes* [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967], *Le porche de la deuxième vertu*, 662–666).

⁴⁰«C'est alors, ô Nuit, que tu vins. O nuit la même./ La même qui viens tous les soirs et qui étais venue tant/ de fois depuis les ténèbres premières.... / La même qui étais venue sur tant de crimes depuis le/ commencement du monde;/ Et sur tant de souillures et sur tant d'amertumes;/ Et sur cette mer d'ingratitude, la même tu vins sur mon deuil;/ Et sur cette colline et sur cette vallée de ma desolation/ c'est alors, ô nuit, que tu vins/ O nuit faudra-t-il donc, faudra-t-il que mon paradis/ Ne soit qu'une grande nuit de clarté qui tombera sur les péchés du monde" (Péguy, *Le mystère des saints innocents*, 683).

The ultimate decision of the metaphysics of being as love is to affirm, to let be, the non-subsistence of being as the gratuity of being-for-the-other, and so to collaborate in the intensification of the beauty, goodness, and truth of reality. In the light of these passages from Péguy we can say that this decision rests on an ultimate decision for hope. For hope means self-gift in the night, at once temporal and eternal, for the salvation, at once temporal and eternal, of all of the Father's creatures. To hope is to give oneself for the salvation (*salvus*), sanctity (*sanctus*), and integrity (*sanus*) in body and spirit, in time and eternity of all, that they might all be "*sanctos esse sanos*":

It is for my little hope alone that eternity will be.
 And that beatitude will be.
 And that paradise will be. And heaven and all.
 For she alone, as she alone in all the days of this earth
 Makes a new tomorrow spring forth from an old evening.
 So also she alone from the residue of the Judgment and the ruins
 and the debris of time
 Will make a new eternity spring forth.⁴¹

Hope leads us to abandonment, letting be, poverty, the night that covers man's dream and his creation. The night, the most beautiful of the Father's creatures. Its infinite starry veil covers and cradles the misery and the grandeur of every life. The night of hope pursues the sinner into his darkest hideouts. It is the motor that transforms the nihilism lurking in every human heart (and the heart is the center of creation where the being of the world either lights up or is extinguished) into the gratuity of love, into the light of the transcendentals. It does this by letting the other be in God. Hope, the little sister of the poor who is not afraid to handle the sick and the poor, has a special relation to God's merciful heart, thanks to which it enables us to perceive, to perform, and to unveil within the vain gratuity (*vanitas*) of fallen existence the fontal gratuity (*gratuitas*) of the Father, which changes the old creation into the new:

⁴¹"*C'est pour ma petite espérance seule que l'éternité sera. / Et que la Béatitude sera. / Et que le Paradis sera. Et le ciel et tout / Car elle seule, comme elle seule dans les jours de cette terre / D'une vieille veille fait jaillir un lendemain nouveau / Ainsi elle seule des résidus du Jugement et des ruines / et du débris du temps / Fera jaillir une éternité neuve*" (ibid., 746).

But it is exactly with those bitter waters that she makes her
springs of pure water.
And that is why she has never missed it
But that is also why she is Hope. . . .
How she manages it, how she does it,
Well, that, my children, is my secret.
Because I am her Father. . . .
But it is from bitter waters that she makes an eternal spring.
She knows all right that she will never miss it.
The eternal source of my grace.
She knows all right that she will never miss it.⁴²

“Longer than a poor man’s hope,” says a Spanish proverb. Hope knows how to relate to the “poor in Spirit.” The poor in Spirit, in fact, are those who do not keep for themselves the gift of being or the gift of grace. They let the gift flow, and, as they have received it as a free *don*-ation, they *par-don* in order to be *par-doned* themselves. They let the gift of being reach the other and, in him, the Non-other who is God. They thus become agents of reciprocity—between men and between man and God. They allow the Son, the poorest of the poor, to drink their bitter waters, to cleanse them of this bitterness, and to take their sin into the black depths of hell. They let him open all that is closed to the paternal Font. They allow the Spirit to create a reciprocity of hope between them and the Father, so that God’s thoughts become theirs:

This is why the world’s hope lies with the poor: “The world will be saved by the poor. . . . And they will save it without trying . . . without asking for payment in return, because they have no idea of the price of the service they have performed”. . . . “To build is always a work of love. . . .”⁴³

⁴²“*Mais c’est justement avec les eaux mauvaises qu’elle fait ses sources d’eau pure. / Et c’est pour cela qu’elle n’en manqué jamais / Mais aussi c’est pour cela qu’elle est l’Espérance / Comment elle y réussit, comment ell s’y prend, / Ça, mes enfants, c’est mon secret. / Parce que je suis son Père. . . . / Mais c’est des eaux mauvaises qu’elle fait une source éternelle. / Elle sait bien qu’elle n’en manquera jamais. / La source éternelle de ma grace même. / Elle sait bien qu’elle n’en manquera jamais*” (Péguy, *Le porche de la deuxième vertu*, 640–641).

⁴³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Gelebte Kirche: Bernanos*, 3rd ed. (Einsiedeln—Trier: Johannes Verlag, 1988), 533. Balthasar is citing from Bernanos, *Les enfants humiliés* (Paris: Gallimard), 248–249; 253–254.

To enter into the Father's hope; to live in the reciprocity between hope for the accomplishment of all things (body and soul; earth and heaven) to which man aspires and the Hope that the salvation wrought by the Son reach all creatures through the Spirit. Such is *the* task of the Christian in the world, *the* integration *par excellence*, *the* eschatological fulfillment. And this eschatological plenitude is not a future utopia, but the serene presence we feel in the pages of John's Gospel:

You have to put your hope in God, after all, he put his hope in us. . . .
 You have to put your faith in God, after all, he put his faith in us.
 A singular mystery, the most mysterious of them all,
 God took the initiative. . . .
 All the feelings, all the emotions we need to have for God,
 God had them for us, he started it, having them for us first. . . .⁴⁴

The true Christian, who is genuinely "poor in Spirit," obeys the command of grace to enter into the sentiments of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit of which Péguy speaks. He does this on behalf of all, giving himself over into God's own bold hope for the world. The success of this final integration of hope depends, however, on the Christian's willingness to pass through the eschatological fire of Love. The Christian does not purify himself for himself. Rather, he lets the Fountain of life cleanse, nourish, and transform him in a source of love, given *gratis*, for others. The Christian willingly allows Christ's descent to take place again in his despairing heart, giving himself over completely so that this descent might also take place again in each one of the *desperata corda* (Gregory the Great)⁴⁵ of his brethren. Following the Son in his descent, letting himself be placed at this "intersection" of abandonment and anguish, the Christian

⁴⁴"Il faut faire espérance à Dieu, il nous a bien fait espérance a nous / Il faut faire foi à Dieu, il nous a bien fait foi à nous / Singulier mystère, le plus mystérieux, / Dieu a pris les devants. . . . / Tous les sentiments, tous les mouvements que devons avoir pour Dieu / Dieu les a eus pour nous, il a commencé de les avoir pour nous"(id., *Le porche de la deuxième vertu*, 603).

⁴⁵Cited in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologie der drei Tage* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1990), 169. For an English translation, see *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

begins to be poor, chaste, and pure like “sister” water, “who,” says Saint Francis, “is very useful and humble and precious and chaste”:

And to put us at the heart of this axis of distress . . .
 And to take the hurt in its full justice. . . .
 May we, o queen, keep the honor,
 And save for him, him alone, our small tenderness.⁴⁶

This last reality brings us to a final step into the center where the Christian’s task lies: the tender, poor, omnipotent heart of the Father. Hope bears us to its own origin. The night, the most beautiful of God’s daughters, bears us to that same origin, as does the Son’s descent into hell. And that origin is the mystery of the Father’s omnipotent heart displayed in creation and redemption. The Father—the inoriginate origin of God, of creation, of redemption; the depth where hope for universal salvation is anchored. The mystery of hope protects us, keeping our worship focused on the heart of God, which is full of tenderness, hope, and patient omnipotence.

It is just here that Péguy brings us back to our two authors. Hell, we said at the beginning, is the encounter between the liberality of the Father who both creates human freedom and bears its consequences *and* of the darkness of sin, the second, perverse chaos of sin caused by human wickedness. Hell is the Father’s “preserve,” something that he had “reserved” for himself. And the two things—the original chaos that the Father orders and the second chaos that the Son orders—are reflected each in the other. “The chaos of hell, which is a chaos of sin, is like a mirror reflecting the chaos that existed at the beginning of creation.”⁴⁷ On Holy Saturday, the Father puts this mystery of sin in the Son’s hands so that he, the Son, might order it, judge it, and transform it into a straight path to the paternal heart that is rich in mercy. The Father hands over to the Son in the economy of salvation his ultimate “reserve” so that the

⁴⁶“*Et pour bien nous placer dans l’axe de détresse . . . / Et de prendre le mal dans sa pleine justesse. . . / Puisse-nous, ô régente, au moins tenir l’honneur, / Et lui garder lui seul notre pauvre tendresse*” (Charles Péguy, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes* [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967], *Les cinq prières dans la cathédrale de Chartres, Prière de confiance*, 918).

⁴⁷Adrienne von Speyr, *Kreuz und Hölle I*, 175, cited by Balthasar in *Theologik II*, 321.

Son, victim and eschatological judge, might administer it for his greater glory.

Finally, then, the Son, after taking everything down with him into hell, brought up again with him the ultimate mystery of the Father's gratuitous love, accompanied only by "little hope" as his accomplice (cf. Péguy's "*quand tout descend seule elle remonte*"). This is the ultimate mystery that generates and covers, veils and unveils, earth and heaven, time and eternity. For "it is only the 'chaos' of love (that is, in its unfathomable depth) that makes the chaos [the gift of freedom, which can be misused] of sin"⁴⁸ possible. And it is this same "chaos" of love—another name for its gratuitous "whylessness"—that alone holds the power to overcome the chaos of sin in its ever-greater love.—*Translated by Adrian J. Walker.* □

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⁴⁸Ibid., 107, cited by Balthasar in *Theologik II*, 322.