Lyra Pitstick

Christ's Descent Into Hell: John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger, and Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Theology of Holy Saturday. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016. Pp. 149. Pb, \$20.

Without a doubt, the exchange between Alyssa Lyra Pitstick and Edward Oakes, S.J. regarding Christ's descent into Hell has been one of the more riveting and insightful theological disputations of this young millennium. Oakes's passing in 2013 (at the young age of sixty-five) was an untimely interruption of this exchange, an exchange which—despite the amount of ink spilled across the pages of *First Things* and the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*—was in many ways only a beginning.

Christ's Descent into Hell is Pitstick's most recent contribution to the aforementioned disputation; it grew organically out of her engagement with Oakes and other defenders of von Balthasar's theology of the descent. The book is a systematic riposte to a specific tendency among von Balthasar's defenders, namely, to invoke the authority of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Saint John Paul II in their attempt to argue for the orthodoxy of von Balthasar's theology in general, and his theology of the descent in particular. To this end, Pitstick engages three distinct, though interwoven questions: (1) is there a similarity of theologies of the descent among von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, and Pope Saint John Paul II? (2) If the answer is yes, should it be said that a similarity implies a kind of approval? Or if the answer is no, which theologian is right? (3) Does the commendation of von Balthasar's theological work by two popes render its orthodoxy unassailable?

With her characteristically precise and lucid presentation, Pitstick offers the reader an exposition in distinct chapters of the theologies of von Balthasar, Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, and John Paul II with regard to the descent. The result of this exposition, which occupies more than half of the book, is starkly put: "a dramatic contrast has emerged among the theologies of Christ's descent set forth by Balthasar, Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, and John Paul II" (85). The startlingly brief exposition of von Balthasar's position (only a few pages) presupposes and presents in summary form the interpretation of von Balthasar in Pitstick's previous text, *Light in Darkness*. The author's subsequent and more satisfying treatment of Ratzinger/Pope Benedict, amounting to over fifty pages, suggests that Ratzinger's understanding of the descent remains difficult to grasp; Pitstick argues that, especially after his election as pope, Ratzinger's "approach grew increasingly concrete," and that he ultimately espouses what the author calls the "traditional doctrine," though only indirectly (54; see 51–53 to see what Pitstick means by "indirectly"). The main conclusion drawn by the author is that "Ratzinger never asserts, as von Balthasar does, that the redemp-

tion was incomplete upon the Cross, that Christ's suffering intensified after His death into abandonment in His filial relationship to the Father, that He was literally made sin in His descent, and that the whole Trinity experienced that event" (53). In this sense, any similarity of language between von Balthasar and Ratzinger should not be taken to imply any substantial agreement or theological approval. Pitstick takes Ratzinger's comment in *The Sabbath of History*—that he "finds it difficult fully to concur with" von Balthasar on the descent—as something of a hermeneutical guide (see 26, 53, and 106).

Further removed from von Balthasar's theology of the descent, and in contrast even to Ratzinger/Benedict, John Paul II's theology of the descent is not only clear and concrete, but is also "completely consistent" (94), we might say *directly* consistent, with the "traditional doctrine." In this sense, the doctrine of John Paul II on the descent "contrasts dramatically with Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday" (74).

At this point in the book, Pitstick reveals *in nuce* what will be elaborated more laboriously in the remaining chapters: the standard with which to determine which theologian is correct with regard to the descent is "God's Revelation, transmitted in Scripture and Tradition as interpreted by the Magisterium" (92), helpfully articulated in the two universal catechisms, the *Roman Catechism* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see 71–72, 92–93), which Pitstick summarizes in four points. The commendations of von Balthasar by the two popes do not alter or compete with this standard: "there is certainly praise of the man and praise of the theologian [i.e., von Balthasar], but there is no approbation of a specific thesis, least of all his theology of Holy Saturday" (106). The application of this standard results in the following conclusion: "Balthasar's position is not consistent with Scripture and Tradition as interpreted by the Magisterium [...] John Paul II's position possesses just such consistency [...] [and] Ratzinger's position is somewhere between Balthasar's and John Paul II's" (110).

Pitstick's overall attempt to assess theological positions in light of the Church's magisterial teaching is something for which this reviewer is grateful. Her work is undoubtedly part of a broader renewal of Catholic theology in which magisterial teaching is understood as a *sine qua non* for the proper exercise of theology, not its antidote. However, I wish to observe three aspects of Pitstick's text that cast substantial doubt upon the ultimate veracity of her conclusions, as well as the soundness of the method she employed to arrive at them:

- (1) This reviewer was disappointed that *Christ's Descent into Hell* simply restated the author's theses in *Light in Darkness* without including

any responses to her critics. It is unfortunate, for example, that the text does not engage Michele Schumacher's book, *A Trinitarian Anthropology: Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas* (CUA Press, 2014). Schumacher's text criticizes several of Pitstick's most foundational and crippling interpretations of von Balthasar's work (both with regard to the descent and other more central areas of theology), and it does this with the same level of speculative intensity and rigor that characterizes Pitstick's theological style. If Schumacher's divergent interpretations of von Balthasar are correct (as I am personally inclined to think), then Pitstick's conclusions about von Balthasar's relationship to Ratzinger and his relationship to Catholic teaching are significantly weakened.

- (2) While Pitstick's assessment of Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's theology of the descent is thorough and helpful, she appears to minimize certain aspects of his theology in order to prove that it differs "substantially" from von Balthasar's (54). Surely she is right that there is no substantial identity between their work. But is it really true, as she asserts, that "[Ratzinger's/Benedict's] lack of agreement with Balthasar's most essential theses makes it difficult to see where he concurred with him at all" (53)? After all, while Ratzinger did say that he "finds it difficult fully to concur with" von Balthasar, just a sentence later he wrote that his own chosen direction with regard to the descent—in a word, reconsidering the meaning and nature of death—"can take up what seems to me to be the essential point in von Balthasar's thesis." Pitstick does not mention the latter sentence, leading to confusion and perhaps a misrepresentation (her block quote of Ratzinger's text ends just before the sentence in question [see 11]). Pitstick's assessment should be read alongside Oakes's own published exposition of Benedict XVI on the descent in *Nova et vetera* (2013), with which Pitstick's text does not engage.
- (3) Finally, Pitstick's adjudication of theological orthodoxy raises several pressing questions. The standard for an adjudication of orthodoxy is taken to be "God's Revelation, transmitted in Scripture and Tradition as interpreted by the Magisterium," as it is mediated by Pitstick's four-point summary of the two universal catechisms. Pitstick observantly cautions that papal commendations of the catechisms "do not mean [that] the texts are written in irreformable statements, but that the doctrine taught is a reliable expression of Catholic belief and is, as far as Catholic belief is concerned, true" (93). But precisely here a problem arises: Cardinal Ratzinger notes explicitly that "the individual doctrines within the Catechism [i.e., in the particular case of Ratzinger's comments, the *Catechism of the*

Catholic Church] receive no other weight than that which they already possess" (*Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 26). Thus, while the Catechism is "a valid and legitimate tool [...] and] a sure norm for instruction in the faith" (Pope John Paul II, *Fidei depositum*, IV), it *presupposes* the placement of any particular teaching within the appropriate hierarchy of magisterial teaching as observed in *Professio fidei* and *Donum veritatis*. The problem, then, is that it is not inclusion in a universal Catechism *per se* that makes something doctrinally binding for the believer. It would seem that a theologian must argue more specifically than Pitstick does, especially when the dramatic question of orthodoxy is on the table. Adjudication must be made according to the hierarchy of magisterial teaching provided by the magisterium itself, and through an engagement with the original magisterial decrees and writings that establish a particular doctrine as an aspect of the deposit of faith. (The fact that the two universal catechisms differ in their content, especially with regard to the descent, necessarily points the theologian in this direction.)

The absence of a more specific adjudication along these lines may end up obscuring the Catholic teaching on the descent—not by severing theological speculation from magisterial teaching but by the conflation of the two. For example: is it magisterial teaching that "[Jesus's] descent was glorious in a way similar to His resurrection" (71), or is it theological speculation? Is the use of the phrase, "the limbo of the Fathers" (*ibid.*) magisterial teaching, or is it theological speculation? (For an engagement of these questions, see Paul Griffiths, "Is There a Doctrine on the Descent into Hell?" *Pro Ecclesia*, 2008). Before a determination is made regarding von Balthasar's apparent departure from Catholic doctrine (or Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI's merely "indirect" affirmation of it), further specification seems required from magisterial sources beyond the catechisms in order to verify Pitstick's claim that her four points are, in their entirety, contained materially in the formal profession of faith.

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