

Chapter 11HE DESCENDED INTO HELL

The article of faith “He descended into hell” is right in the middle of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, it is the movement from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, mainly from death to life. This is an article which, strange as it may seem, is very close to us, because it greatly reveals the reality of today’s world absent from God. Holy Saturday is the day of God’s death. Nietzsche’s expression “God is dead and we have killed him” shows the unprecedented experience of our time, the God who is in the tomb, who no longer speaks, so then one no longer needs to gainsay him.<sup>1</sup>

The Cross has been left empty; all that remains is silence and desolation. This symbol which showed us the love of God through His heart placed on it, we must now strip of all embellishments. The light that enveloped the wood cannot be seen any more.

The statement “he descended into hell” can be interpreted in three different ways: it makes reference to the desolation of Christ on the Cross, to the fear of the disciples who shouted at Jesus: “don’t you care if we die?”, but it also shows the hope that moves Christians. The terms despair, fear and hope are a synthesis of other passages in the Gospel. Despair brings to mind Jesus’ words on the cross “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34); fear brings to mind the episode where the disciples fall prey to terror in the boat, in face of the absence of Jesus, who nonetheless is with them, but asleep, in the storm (cf. Mk 4:35-41); hope springs up from a passage in Mt 27, 52, which might be a little difficult to understand. This passage states that when Jesus died, “the tombs were opened and the bodies of the saints were raised”.

Let us also consider that the expression “descended into hell” talks not about the person of Jesus himself, but of the existential situation of all human beings, we live in despair, in fear, but we still retain hope. These three interpretations can also be found in the symbol we’ve been studying, the Cross of the Apostolate.

*What is the meaning of the word “hell”?*

Let us start by talking about the meaning of the word “hell”. In the Old Testament, hell is “sheol”. Sheol stands, albeit very vaguely, for the state beyond the grave, a kind of shadow existence, of emptiness and loneliness, where love cannot enter. From this definition, this article of faith which talks about Jesus descending into hell illustrates that the God of word is also the God of silence, that his disappearing is also true. God is not only the comprehensible word that comes to us; He is also the silent, inaccessible, uncomprehended, and incomprehensible ground that eludes us.

The descent of Jesus into hell is the complete fulfillment of the gospel announcement of salvation: the gospel was preached even to the dead (1Pe 4:6), Jesus Christ went down into the depths of death; He shared in the human condition with all it entails: pain, misery and solitude.

Jesus’ cry on the Cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34) shows in a thrilling way the solitude He feels in His agony. It is a stunning remembrance of His passion, and it particularly brings back to mind His prayer at Gethsemane: “My Father, if it is possible, let

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 294

this cup pass from me” (Mt 26:39). Faced with the anguish of certain death, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears (Heb 5:7). This image of Jesus, beset by weakness (Heb 5:2) shows with great realism the higher degree to which He embraced the fragility and suffering of the human being.

The Letter to the Hebrews accurately describes in 5:7-8 the road of human solidarity that made Christ take the reality of His incarnation to extremes: He was obedient until death, and death on the cross. The Son of God not only came to the “surface” of the earth, but he “penetrated” Earth, even to the place we call hell.

This penetration of Jesus into hell makes us understand that the core of the Passion is not only physical pain, but radical solitude and absolute desertion. In short, there it is revealed the depth of mankind’s tribulation, which only appears in the deepest parts of his being: My soul is sorrowful even to death, Jesus says. He expresses the same feeling in the prayer in the garden: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me”, and His cry on the Cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

#### *God’s silence and mankind’s solitude*

A second aspect of the statement “he descended into hell” has to do with the absence of God that is felt, not only by Christ on the Cross, but by every human being, immersed in his solitude. Just like the disciples in the gospel passage who are afraid because the boat is filling up with water, and Jesus, being “asleep”, seems not to be aware of the danger they are in: the disciples fear they will drown (Mk 4:35ss). Mark frequently comments about the disciples’ fear. Those who follow Jesus are afraid (Mk 4:40; 10:32; 16:8). A similar feeling to that of the Emmaus disciples, who, after Jesus’ death don’t have any reason to keep waiting.

This is the situation of the man of today who keeps getting further and further away from God. The number of people who have distanced themselves from the faith and those who don’t practice it has increased considerably in the past few decades. Individualism, one of the negative consequences of globalization, has led man to isolation and solitude.

Now, if Jesus went through the cross to submerge Himself into death, into the silence and darkness away from God, “Can we wonder” says Benedict XVI, “that the Church and the life of the individual are led again and again into this hour of silence, into the forgotten and almost discarded article “descended into hell”?”<sup>2</sup>

We have already stressed this point: hell is the solitude in which the word love cannot be heard any more, it’s the kind of solitude that implies insecurities in our own existence. There, in the deepest core of our existence, hell means despair, the inevitable and terrifying solitude. Man is afraid, not of something concrete he can avoid, but of solitude, of the restlessness, of the insecurity of his own existence, this is a fear he cannot overcome rationally, he fears being left alone with death.

This solitude, that we try so hard to hide, is a real situation where we can find mankind, and it’s the complete opposite of his real essence. Because man cannot be alone, he has need for

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<sup>2</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 297

company. And so solitude is a realm of anguish proper of the fate of a being who is called to live in relationship with others and this is, at the same time, impossible to him.

### *A sign of hope*

A third aspect of the statement “descended into hell” has a different connotation from the ones we already discussed: it explains the penetration of the Son of God in the hell of our solitude to give us life. Christ crossed the threshold of our deepest solitude. In His Passion he penetrated in the abyss of our abandonment so He could participate in the mortal fate of all mankind. Christ, the new Adam, did not want to be left outside this dimension of nature which affects all of humankind.

Benedict XVI teaches that Jesus’ entering into the sin of others is a descent into the ‘inferno’. But He does not descend merely in the role of a spectator, as in Dante’s *Inferno*. Rather He goes down in the role of one whose suffering-with-others is a transforming suffering that turns the underworld around, knocking down and flinging open the gates of the abyss<sup>3</sup>.

The Living God takes on the suffering of His creatures in the most intense manner, with an active suffering. God is always present to suffer with man and to communicate to him the immense value of suffering offered out of love. This is the God who gives meaning to the suffering of the world, because he has taken it on to the point of making himself the same suffering out of love<sup>4</sup>.

In this sense, the presence of Christ in our solitude radically changes things. Hell is overcome; better yet, death which was previously hell is hell no longer. Neither death nor hell is the same any longer because there is life in the midst of death, because love dwells within it. There, where no voice can reach us any longer, is He. Now only deliberate self-enclosure is hell. Hell resides formally in the man who does not want to receive anything, who wants to be autonomous. This is the expression of our confinement within our own selves. Here is what Benedict XVI has to say:

“From this angle, I think, one can understand the images – which at first sight look so mythological – of the Fathers, who speak of fetching up the dead, of the opening of the gates. The apparently mythical passage in St Matthew’s Gospel becomes comprehensible, too, the passage that says that at the death of Jesus tombs opened and the bodies of the saints were raised, (Mt 27:52). The door of death stands open since life-love has dwelt in death<sup>5</sup>.

### *In the Cross of the Apostolate*

Up to now we’ve only talked about the resplendence of the Cross of the Apostolate, of the presence in it of the Holy Trinity; but now we need to consider the most obvious element, that which takes up the center of the representation: the wooden cross, covered in blood. This cross represents the suffering of Christ, both His physical and His spiritual suffering. The latter is symbolized by the little cross embedded on the top of the heart, the symbols don’t just represent the suffering which is

<sup>3</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 20

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Forte, *Essence of Christianity*

<sup>5</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 301

part of His human nature, but also the spiritual pain, the one mentioned in the beatitude “Blessed are they who mourn”, because eventually they will be consoled.

It is this spiritual pain that Concepcion Cabrera’s mystical experience makes reference to when she speaks about the “intimate pains” that Jesus suffered. Not only at the time of His Passion, but throughout His life, and that He still suffers today as part of the mystery. Concepcion enters in those intimate pains of the Heart of Christ through her own experience of life; it’s an experience that arises from what is going on in her own spirit and the events happening around her in the late 1890s.

Let us just mention them briefly. Between May 1894 and February 1897 Concepcion was living an internal cross, she was suffering terrible desolations and distress. In keeping with her particular vocation, she embraced them as a participation in the agony of Christ. She was going through hard times and while looking at the cross she saw the reflection of her own life. She herself was the cross of Christ. From that day on she hung around her neck a crucifix without a cross, making her body be the cross of Christ. And since then she began to penetrate the “internal sufferings” of the heart of Christ. After that vision she understood that the Cross where the Heart was resting, with the Holy Spirit bathing it in light, was she herself. (cf. Diary 2,1.16;3,173).

That is to say, at the anthropological source of her vision is her life full of pain, which naturally takes her to a deepening of the suffering of Christ on the Cross, and it allows her, at the same time, to better understand the meaning of said cross. Her devotion to the Heart of Jesus helps her discover in the little cross embedded on it the intimate sufferings of Christ, the ones caused by the ungratefulness of mankind.

These internal sorrows, the ones mentioned in her writings, not only refer to Jesus’ earthly life, but also to the present time, in a way that is difficult to understand, because we can naturally ask: how can we understand suffering of a glorious Jesus? Isn’t it a contradiction that the Son of God, who enjoys the glory of the Father, is still suffering? The inability to suffer is apparently considered an indispensable element of perfection and divine happiness. “Isn’t this a sign maybe, that Christian theology has not up to date developed a concept of God consistent with Christianity, but has instead based this concept in the metaphysical tradition of Greek philosophy?”<sup>6</sup>

To try to understand this topic would be too lengthy and would take us away from today’s meditation. Nonetheless, finding support in some studies about this topic that contemporary authors have made, we can venture to talk about a suffering **in** God. If God were incapable of suffering in every sense, He would be incapable of love. But, if He is able to love that which is different from

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<sup>6</sup> J. Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for today’s world* (pg 41 in Spanish version)

Him, then He exposes Himself to the suffering that comes with loving somebody else, where love for the other helps overcome pain. God doesn't suffer like a creature because of an ontological shortfall. But He nonetheless suffers because of His love, because it flows from the abundance of His being. In that respect He does suffer.

In Christian theology the axiom of God's inability to suffer means only that God is not subject to suffering in the same way that we, His finite creatures are. But it does not exclude the possibility that God could suffer in another way, and that He does indeed suffer.

God shows us, through the event of Christ, and in a more concrete way on the Cross, His most intimate reality, His Heart. In it He forever creates communion with mankind. In it He shares with us His own life. In Jesus, and in the Holy Spirit sent by Him, God reveals Himself.<sup>7</sup>

In the fact that the Father gives us His own Son we can see the depth of His love for mankind. "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins" (1Jn 4:10), The Father, sacrificing His own Son, manifests the greatness of His merciful love. The offering of the cross finds the source of the biggest gift in time and eternity in The Father who suffers; the cross reveals that God is love. The "suffering of the Father", states a contemporary author, "is nothing but another name for His infinite love; the supreme and sorrowful surrender is in the Son, as it is in the Father, the mark of an extreme love which changes history".<sup>8</sup>

To the suffering of the Son corresponds a silent suffering on the Fathers's part; God suffers on the cross as the Father who makes the offering, besides offering Himself up as the Son, for us, through death. The cross is God's love story for the world; a love that doesn't just tolerate suffering, but chooses it. While the Greek-Roman mentality can only understand a passive, endured suffering, and for this reason, imperfect, and so it theorizes about the divine insensibility, the Christian God reveals an active suffering, freely chosen, perfect with the perfection of love; this is not a God unfamiliar with human suffering, passive spectator of it in His unchangeable perfection.<sup>9</sup>

These words confirm what the Spirituality of the Cross teaches regarding the consolation of the heart of Christ. To give consolation only makes sense if, indeed, we are able to find suffering in God.

And so we can understand the symbolic strength of the message of the Cross of the Apostolate. In the bleeding Heart of Christ we find the God who loves us, who is compassionate, who suffers with us and understands us. This is why in our suffering we can participate in His

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. G. Greshake, *To believe in God, One and Triune* (pg 14-15 in Spanish edition)

<sup>8</sup> Cf. B. Forte, *The Trinity as History*, (pg 39 in Spanish version)

<sup>9</sup> J. Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for today's world*, (pg 42 in Spanish version)

suffering, in His intimate sorrows, and in our affliction we can share in His. He who believes in the God who suffers with us, is able to recognize his own suffering in God and God in his own suffering. And man finds in the communion with Him the strength that allows him to remain in this love despite suffering and sorrow, without fretting. When we feel the presence of God amid our sufferings, then we have found the source where life is reborn.<sup>10</sup>

In summary: the article of faith “he descended into hell” tells us about the apparent silence of God in our globalized world. The noise of our occupations and interests, frequently selfish, are not conducive to our hearing the voice of God. For a great part of our world, “God has died”, the world doesn’t need Him anymore, or rather it thinks it doesn’t need Him. The consequences are terrible. Man has lost meaning for life, because he has lost the support he used to receive from the word of God.

“To be sure, in Christianity there is a primacy of the *logos*, of the word over silence. But this does not entitle us to forget the truth of God’s abiding concealment. Only when we have experienced Him as silence may we hope to hear His speech, too, which proceeds in silence”.<sup>11</sup>

Let us look again to the Cross of the Apostolate, to be able to find in it the always old and always current truth of the love of God the Father for His creature; the truth of the love of the Son, our brother, who shows us His hurt Heart; of the love of the Holy Spirit, which fills our lives with hope and consolation.

The symbol of the cross allows us to come closer to the pain of God, of a God who is historically involved in the Passion of Christ, and who, today, as part of the mystery of our faith, continues suffering for us. Nevertheless, not everything is over on Holy Saturday, the announcement of His death was always hand in hand with the promise of resurrection.

This truth is emphatically proclaimed by our Creed: He arose from the dead!

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Ibid*, (pg 43 in Spanish version)

<sup>11</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 296