

# “Precious in the Eyes of the Lord Is the Death of his Holy Ones”: A Theology of Holy Saturday for a Culture of Life

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers a theology of life through death (properly called the Theology of Holy Saturday), developed from the thought of the spiritual writer and mystic Adrienne von Speyr (d. 1967) and the twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (d. 1988). The paper argues that the theological anthropology latent in their theology of Holy Saturday can be helpful for pro-life culture-making and for theological engagement in the pro-life movement. It shows the need of a Mariological theology of compassion to guide Christian service to the suffering.

**I**N SCRIPTURE, DEATH PRECEDES LIFE: “Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his holy ones” (Ps 116:15). Likewise, in the New Testament, Jesus says: “Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). Even more so, the descent into necessary suffering precedes life: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Lk 9:22; cf. Mk 8:31; Mt 16:21). After the Fall, experiences of death (pits, oppressions, and hells)

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precede life (blessings, restorations, and resurrections). In the end, life overcomes death, but first is the dying. This biblical principle is essential to an authentic Catholic Christology and should animate prolife culture in America and internationally.

In this paper, I develop a theology of life through death (properly called the Theology of Holy Saturday) that comes from the thought of the spiritual writer and mystic Adrienne von Speyr (d. 1967) and the twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (d. 1988). My thesis is that the theological anthropology latent within their Theology of Holy Saturday can be helpful for pro-life culture-making and for theological engagement in the prolife movement. It shows the need of a Mariological theology of compassion to guide Christian service to the suffering. Mary, the mother of Jesus, provides a theological way to see a pathway out of the cultures of death for the emergence of cultures of life.

By Holy Saturday, I mean the Christian remembrance of the day between the crucifixion of Good Friday and the resurrection of Easter Sunday. The day is a remembrance of Jesus in tomb when he has “descended to Hell,” as the ancient Christian creed articulates it. The motivation for this paper comes from *Gaudium et spes*, a document from the Second Vatican Council that mandates: “The joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties of people today, especially of those who are poor and afflicted, are also the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ, and there is nothing truly human that does not also affect them.”<sup>1</sup> At the root of “these anxieties of people today” stands the culture of death. Christians must be ready to bring the light of heaven to those living in death.

The verse that titles this paper has long haunted me: “Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the Death of his Holy Ones” (King James Version). Or, as the Revised Standard Version has it: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” There are also bad translations, such as: “The LORD cares deeply when his loved ones die” (New Living Translation). The original Hebrew, the Greek Septuagint, and the better English translations communicate that there is something precious and delightful in the Lord’s vision of the death of his holy ones, his people. It is not just that he delights in his saints or cares for them when they die. It is that he holds *blessed* their death, he sees it as

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, trans. John Mahoney, in *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, ed. Norman Tanner (New York NY: Image, 2012), paragraph 1.

*precious*, he *delights in* it. This verse has always haunted me. It's the same haunting that I feel when reading the line in T. S. Eliot's poem *Wasteland*, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust."<sup>2</sup>

Why is the God of life delighting in bringing back to dust his holy ones? Or, to put it in the context of this conference, why does the Lord allow cultures of death? First, we need to read the verse according to Trinitarian theology. The Father delights in the death of his Son, who will be delivered from the pit of death by the power of their Holy Spirit. The Father allows the death of his Son. He has sent him for this purpose. He even necessitates his own Son's death. The same is true for the followers of the Son: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:5); "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). The next step is to realize that wherever there is death, there is an opening to life. Wherever there is a culture of death, a culture of life can grow. Only through death can the dead arise to new life through the power of the gracious God.

Overall, Psalm 116 is a thanksgiving psalm, thanking the Lord for his deliverance and then demanding that the people give public worship for this new freedom. When we read this Psalm with Trinitarian faith, a new meaning unfolds. Jesus has been delivered from the pit of death and the Son now sees in a new and surprising way what is the delight of the Father. For the Father, the Son's death and descent contained a new joy in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. His Son loves him in perfect obedience. Further, the Son discloses to us what he already knew, that the Father will redeem him from death. The Father will make all things new through his Son and their Spirit. The path of trust is confirmed in the testing. The Son is not abandoned even when he cried, "Why have you abandoned me?" (Mt 27:46). Similarly, when our cultures cry out "Why have you abandoned us?", the Father still delights in the death of his holy ones, for then the healing can begin. They can know the healer, the desert will lead to the land of milk and honey (Dt. 31:20).

For those in the prolife movement need to be deeply in-formed (formed from within) by this Christian theology of Holy Saturday that "to die is gain," to accept death as gain means to see in cultures of death new possibility of life, to see as the Father sees, that God suffers with those who die in order to bring them to his life everlasting.

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<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York NY: Harcourt, 1934), part I, line 30.

A roadblock to my thesis could arise from those Hellenistic notions of God's impassability (that he cannot change or suffer) that have strong influence within Jewish and Christian theologies. Over the centuries Christian theology regularly assumed God's impassability. Along with it there has often been a theory of life that the truly alive ought to reflect divine impassability – no change, no suffering. There are many examples through Christian history of attempts to create sectarian communities of this sort, including the Montanists, the Docetists, the Amish, and many recent versions of hyper-sectarian communities.

In the course of the twentieth century the horrors of the holocaust and the gulags, significant theologians like Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel adopted what could be called a “death of God” theology. They believed that the concept of the impassible, living God must be declared dead if Christianity were ever again to be relevant. The consequence of this development was that their thought became imbued with theologies of process or hyper-contextualizations. Many of these theologians gave up orthodox Christianity. Their churches have proven to be unsustainable, as shown by the unremitting decline in membership of those mainline Protestant churches that adopted these heterodox theologies.

Another roadblock is that so many cultural leaders, artists, and academics in the second half of the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first have ceased to think Christianity relevant. Many today speak about the world cultures not just as postmodern but really as post-Christian. These figures forget, of course, the dramatic growth of Christianity throughout the Southern Hemisphere in its Catholic, Evangelical, and Pentecostal forms. The trend is well documented by Philip Jenkins.<sup>3</sup> The third millennium will be even more Christian on the global scale at the same time that formerly Christian cultures will become more secularized.

Could there be a way for cultures of death to be transformed by cultures of life? I think that the Christian theology of Holy Saturday, presented as a theology of compassion, can show the relevance of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, the theology of Holy Saturday has gained more scholarly attention, principally through the influence of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, third edition (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> See *God Alone: A Trinitarian Spirituality of Adrienne von Speyr* (Lanham MA: Lexington, forthcoming).

Balthasar (1905-1988). He was inspired to pursue this theology by his friend and collaborator Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967). She claimed dramatic, mystical experiences of Jesus Christ's solidarity with the dead in his descent to Hell, understanding it as the Son of God sharing in the suffering of God-forsakenness.

Among their most significant contributions to modern theology is the theology of Holy Saturday. How are we supposed to understand the that Jesus spent in the tomb on Holy Saturday? Is it just a time of waiting for his human body to be re-animated and for the moment to proclaim in the underworld the victory of his redemption, or is it somehow an agony event of a suffering destitution within himself and somehow revelatory of the triune nature of God?

In the history of Christian theology there have been two main interpretations of Holy Saturday. In Balthasar's words:

We could, simply put, distinguish the two great movements of the tradition: that of the East and that of the West. For the East, the icon of Christ's descent makes the main representation of our salvation. Christ strides over the gates of hell which lie across under his feet, as victor over death, and extends His saving hand to those waiting in the darkness of *Sheol*.... In the West, theology and liturgy mainly honor the silence of death, so the church watches quietly and prayerfully with Mary at the grave. However, both traditions have an inner limit. The Eastern tradition shows us not the dead but the one who is fully alive, namely the Christ of Easter.... The Western tradition with their pure silence remains somehow eventless, and nothing seems to happen between Good Friday and Easter. Is there a possibility to reconcile both theologies by criticizing their weak points?<sup>5</sup>

In his book *Mysterium Paschale* as well as in the second part of his trilogy *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar attempts this reconciliation through a Christian theological reflection on *kenosis* (self-emptying). This is a word from the ancient Christian hymn used by Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Balthasar employs the term not just in regard to its traditional place, the Incarnation, but also in regard to the Trinitarian exchange of love among the divine persons as a kind of supra-kenosis. He finds the ultimate unfolding of its meaning in the descent of the Son into Hell on Holy Saturday.

To understand Balthasar's Trinitarian theology we need to understand his

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<sup>5</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Theologie des Abstiegs zur Hölle" in *Adrienne von Speyr und Ihre Kirchliche Sendung: Akten D. Röm. Symposiums, September 1985*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar et al. (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Johannes Verlag, 1986), pp. 140-41.

definition of personhood. To be a person, for Balthasar, means being in a relational matrix of kenotic, self-emptying offer to the other. A person is an I in self-offering/emptying to a Thou. As an illustration, the newborn child comes to know her identity as a person by deep connection with her mother while being held for those long quiet months at the beginning of life outside the womb. As the mother pours out her life in love to her child in self-gift, the child comes to know who she is and in turn pours her life in gift to her mother. Beholding each other, face to face, the mother and child come to know who they are in self-giving personhood.<sup>6</sup>

With that in mind, Balthasar suggests that God as Trinity has already within a supra-kenosis, a self-destituting, a self-emptying. The Father's supra-kenosis means that he "makes himself 'destitute' of all that he is and can be so as to bring forth a consubstantial divinity, the Son."<sup>7</sup> In the eternal unfolding of the three divine Persons in God, the Father gives his being God to the Son, which the Son receives, while he also eternally returns his being God to the Father, and the Father through and with the Son gives their being God to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit eternally gives his being God through the Son to the Father. The unfolding of the Trinity is then an eternal self-emptying unfolding of the persons toward each other. When we say God is love, this is part of what we mean. As absolute love, God contains all the modalities of love, even the modality of suffering-separation and self-destitution that is anchored in the love-exchange of the Trinitarian persons in the one God.<sup>8</sup>

Using these basic aspects of Balthasar's Trinitarian Theology, I would like to move to his theology of Holy Saturday, in which he develops his understanding of the Trinity in fascinating ways.<sup>9</sup> For Balthasar, Hell is state of "supreme solitude" in which life is made torturous by not being in relation to all others and especially to God. It is the ultimate suffering and madness of

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<sup>6</sup> These ideas are in many places in Balthasar's works, but the shortest, most compact would be Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco CA: Ignatius, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburg UK: T&T Clark, 1990), pp. viii-ix.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed telling of this Balthasar's Trinitarian Theology, see my "A Compelling Trinitarian Taxonomy: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of the Trinitarian Inversion and Reversion," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14 (2012): 161-76.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this insight, see Anne Hunt, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery: A Development in Recent Catholic Theology* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1997).

being eternally alone – an eternal solitary confinement. For Balthasar, on Holy Saturday Jesus descends into this Hell.

Let us also consider Balthasar's understanding of redemption, which is a compelling reclamation of more traditional, orthodox Christologies and avoids the tragedies of many current extreme Christologies of today. For Balthasar, Christians must believe in redemption by substitution: the God-man took on the whole experience of human suffering, death, God-forsakenness, and self-destitution so as to save all that is authentically human. We see this theme in Saint Paul: "For our sake God made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). This is to say that he took on the whole experience of sin: "Christ willed to deliver us by his solidarity with us who were (physically and spiritually) dead."<sup>10</sup> He needed to undergo the fullness of solidarity. Death and Hades engulfed us all, and "that is why Christ did not only come down to earth, but also under the earth.... He found us all in the netherworld...and brought us out from there not on to earth but into the Kingdom of heaven."<sup>11</sup> The Son takes into himself "what in the realm of creation is imperfect, unformed, and chaotic so as to make it pass over into his own domain as the Redeemer."<sup>12</sup> In his vision of sin and experience of the God-forsakenness of Hell, Jesus as the Son of God maintains objectively his beatific vision, that is his union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and yet he also experiences the vision of the "sheer sin." The suffering of Hell is not then something that just touches his humanity. Rather, "by virtue of his deepest Trinitarian experience, he takes 'Hell' with him, as the expression of his power to dispose, as judge, the everlasting salvation or the everlasting loss of man."<sup>13</sup> This suffering touches the Son's divine relation with the Father. Although objectively, he is one with the Father, subjectively he experiences the God-forsaken, self-destitution of suffering Hell.

In his compassionate (suffering-with) love, he makes himself present to those who are abandoned in alienation. Indeed, the perpetual loneliness so often invoked in postmodernism is at the heart of the culture of death. But we can in a way say that it is Jesus Christ who has experienced this loneliness in its utmost extent, for he cried out: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," and yet he was always at one with the Father in the Spirit who is Love.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

In speaking this ugly cry of humanity from the culture of death, Jesus fills it with the beauty of his divine presence, the culture of life. Our most reliable way to approach the power of Holy Saturday is through Mary, the Mother of Jesus. In Catholic theology, she is the only one who on that Saturday kept faithful to the promises of the Father in the midst of the culture of death swirling around her in the crucifixion of her Son, his abandonment by his disciples, and the loneliness of burying her only-begotten son.

From the Church's earliest liturgical tradition, Saturday is dedicated to Mary and to the remembrance of her faithfulness on that Holy Saturday. She was, as it were, the only one keeping bright the Easter candle that Saturday. It seems extinguished on Friday, but it re-emerges at the sacred Easter Vigil and leads us into the brightness of Easter Sunday.

What does this mean for us who are people for life? Even as we live, defend, and protect life, we must have this larger horizon of meaning. In the culture of death that surround us, we know in faith that we are surrounded by an even greater culture of life. God has made life come after death and come from within death. The author of Life has died. He went down to the dead and spoke freedom to the captives. The path to Heaven goes through Hell. He rescued us from death to bring us to life. And Precious in the Eyes of the Lord is the death of his holy ones.