

# The Descent of Christ into Hell

THE descent of Christ into hell is mentioned in the Apostles Creed, and also in the New Testament: "Because Christ also died once for our sins, the just for the unjust; that he might offer us to God, being put to death indeed in the flesh, but enlivened in the spirit, in which also coming he preached to those spirits that were in prison." – First Peter 3:18

"There are many other things which Jesus did; which if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written." (Jn. 21:25) The following passage is taken from the *Mystical City of God*, by Mary of Agreda.

These were the occupations of the heavenly Queen during a part of the Sabbath. At the approach of evening she again retired, leaving the Apostles now renewed in spirit and full of consolation and joy in the Lord, yet also full of grief for the Passion of their Master. In her retirement during this evening the great Lady contemplated the doings of the most holy soul of her Son after it left the sacred body. For from the first the blessed Mother knew that the soul of Christ, united to the Divinity, descended to limbo in order to release the holy Fathers from the subterranean prison, where they had been detained since the death of the first just man that had died in expectance of the advent of the Redeemer of the whole human race. In order to speak about this mystery, which is one of the articles of faith pertaining to the most sacred humanity of Christ our Lord, it seemed best to mention that which has been given me to understand about this limbo and its situation. I say then, that the diameter of the earth's sphere, passing through the center from one surface to the other, measures 2,502 leagues; and from the surface to the center, 1,251 leagues; and according to the diameter is to be calculated the circumference of this globe. In the center is the hell of the damned, as in the heart of the earth. This hell is a chaotic cavern, which contains many darksome dwellings for diverse punishments, all of them dreadful and terrible. All of these together form a vast globe like a huge round jar, with an opening or mouth of vast expansion. In this horrible dungeon filled with confusion and torments were the demons and all the damned, and shall be there for all eternity, as long as God is God; for in hell

there is no redemption. [Matthew 25:41; Apocalypse 20:10]

To one side of hell is purgatory, where the souls of the just are purged and where they cleanse themselves, if they have not satisfied for their faults in this life, or have not departed from this earthly life entirely free from the defects incapacitating them for the beatific vision. This cavern is also large, but not so large as hell; and though there are severe punishments in purgatory, they have no connection with those of hell. To the other side is limbo with two different divisions: The one for the children, who die unbaptized and tainted only with original sin, without either good or bad works of their own election. The other served as a retreat for the just, who had already satisfied for their sins; for they could not enter heaven, nor enjoy the vision of God, until the Redemption of man was accomplished, and until Christ our Savior should open the gates of heaven, closed by the sin of Adam. This cavern is likewise smaller than hell, and has no connection with it, nor are there in it the pains of the senses like in purgatory. For it was destined for the souls already cleansed in purgatory, and implied only the absence of beatific vision or pain of privation; there also stayed all those who died in the state of grace until the death of the Redeemer. This is the place to which Christ's soul descended with the Divinity, and which we refer to in saying that He descended into hell. For the word "hell" may be used to signify any of the infernal regions in the depths of the earth, though commonly we apply it only to the hell of the demons and the damned. This is the most notable meaning of this word, just as "heaven" ordinarily signifies the empyrean, the habitation of the saints, where they are to dwell forever, while the damned remain forever in hell. The other parts of hell have also the more particular names of purgatory and limbo. After the final judgment heaven and hell only are to be inhabited, since purgatory shall become unnecessary, and since even the infants shall be transported to another dwelling-place.

To this cavern of limbo then the most holy soul of Christ our Lord betook himself in the company of innumerable angels, who gave glory, fortitude and Divinity to their victorious and triumphant King. In accordance with his greatness and majesty they commanded the portals of this ancient prison to be opened, in order that the King of glory, powerful in battles and Lord of virtues, might find them unlocked and open at his entrance. At their command some of the rocks of the passage were rent and shattered; although this was not really necessary, since the King and his army were immaterial spirits. By the presence of the most holy Soul this obscure cavern was converted into a heaven and was filled with a wonderful splendor;

and to the souls therein contained was imparted the clear vision of the Divinity. In one instant they passed from the state of long-deferred hope to the possession of glory, and from darkness to the inaccessible light, which they now began to enjoy. All of them recognized their true God and Redeemer, and gave him thanks and glory, breaking forth in canticles of praise saying: "The Lamb that was slain is worthy to receive power and Divinity, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory and benediction. Thou hast redeemed us, Lord, in thy blood, out of every tribe, and tongue and people, and nation; and hast made us to our God a kingdom and priests, and we shall reign on the earth (Apoc. 19:12). Thine is, O Lord, the power, thine the reign, and thine is the glory of thy works." Then the Lord commanded the angels to bring all the souls in purgatory, and this was immediately done. As if in earnest of the human Redemption they were absolved then and there by the Redeemer from the punishments still due to them, and they were glorified with the other souls of the just by the beatific vision. Thus on that day of the presence of the King were depopulated the prisonhouses of both limbo and purgatory.

But for the damned in hell this was a terrible day; because by the disposition of the Most High all of them were made to see and feel the descent of the Redeemer into limbo, and also the holy Fathers and the just were made witnesses of the terror caused by this mystery to the demons and the damned. The demons were yet terrorized and oppressed by the ruin which they had undergone on Mount Calvary, as related above; and when they heard (according to their manner of hearing and speaking) the voices of the angels advancing before their King to limbo, they were confounded and terrified anew. Like serpents pursued, they hid themselves and clung to the most remote caverns of hell. The damned were seized with confusion upon confusion, becoming still more deeply conscious of their aberration and of the loss of salvation, now secured to the just. As Judas and the impenitent thief had so recently and signally shared this misfortune, so their torments were greater; and the demons were the more highly incensed against them. Then and there the infernal spirits resolved to persecute and torment more grievously the Catholics, and chastise more severely those who should deny or repudiate the Catholic faith. For they concluded that these merited greater punishment than the infidels, to whom it is not preached.

Of all these mysteries and of other secrets, which I cannot mention, the great Lady of the world had a clear knowledge and vision from her retreat. Although this knowledge, in the higher parts of her being or in her soul where this knowledge originated, caused her

exquisite joy; yet she did not permit it to overflow in her virginal body, in her senses or inferior faculties, to which it should naturally have been communicated. On the contrary, when she felt that some of this joy overflowed to the inferior parts of her being, she besought the eternal Father to retard this overflow; for she did not wish to permit such enjoyment to her body, as long as that of her divine Son rested in the grave and was not yet glorified. Such a careful and faithful love was that of the blessed Mother toward her Son and Lord, that she strove to be a living, true and perfect image of the deified humanity in all respects. Attending thus minutely to the smallest particulars, she was rejoiced exceedingly in her soul, while she still felt the sorrows and depression of her body, in imitation of the state of Christ our Savior. During this vision she composed songs of praise magnifying the mysteries of this triumph and the most loving and wise providence of the Redeemer, who as an affectionate Father and omnipotent King wished, in his own person, to take possession of the new reign, given to him by the Father, and who now rescued his subjects by his own presence, in order that they might commence immediately to enjoy the reward merited for them. For these reasons, and others recognized by her in this sacrament, she rejoiced and glorified the Lord as his helper, and as the Mother of the Conqueror.

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Chapter 26. The Resurrection of Christ our Savior, and his apparition to his most Blessed Mother, in company with the holy Fathers of limbo.

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Taken from *The Mystical City of God, the Life of the Virgin Mary*,  
by Venerable Sister Mary of Jesus of Agreda (1602—1665)

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