Attolite Portas, ‘Open Up, You Doors!’: Liturgical Narrative and Christ’s Descent

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fears, from our suffering and disappointments and who will de-
deliver us into the hands of a loving God who empowers us to know,
accept, and love ourselves and know, accept, and love one another —
all in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Spirit. Unlike
Adam and Eve who snatched the forbidden fruit from the tree, we
do not take the Eucharist; we always receive it, for it is truly a gift.
The Eucharist is God’s gift to us of our crucified and risen Savior
empowering us, through the power of God’s own Spirit, to pass
through suffering and death so we might live an everlasting life
with God and with each other.

Christian initiation launches us on a journey which lasts all life
long. The eucharistic Bread and the saving Cup are nourishment
for the way, as we make our own exodus and pass over from
bondage to freedom, and as we return from exile to our true home
not only with the Father in Christ and the Holy Spirit but also with
one another.

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_Attolite Portas, “Open Up, You Doors!”:_
Liturgical Narrative and Christ’s Descent

As ironworkers sorted through the debris after last fall’s attack on
the World Trade Center, a beam was found in the wreckage of the
first tower standing straight up as a “perfectly symmetrical cross.”
The beam became an inspiration to workers whose task it was to
comb through the mess for signs of life or, as days passed, for the
corpse of those who did not escape the catastrophe.¹ The consola-
tion found in the cross testifies to a truth of Christian faith: the life

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¹Jennifer Steinhauser, “A Symbol of Faith Marks a City’s Hallowed Ground,”
_New York Times_ (5 October 2001); I thank Melissa Musick Nussbaum for pointing
me toward this image.

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of God is close to and evident in the dying and the dead. This might at first seem incompatible with the Christian proclamation of the resurrection, but instead it testifies to the inseparability of death and resurrection and to the place of God in the place of the dead.

From the New Testament to late antiquity the narrative of Christ’s descent to the dead — preaching the good news there, and, in some accounts, baptizing them — was received and, by the fourth and fifth centuries, nearly omnipresent in paschal theology. The instinct of faith in proclaiming this story was much like proclaiming the intimacy of God with the dead in the sign of the cross of New York City’s wreckage. There a priest came and sprinkled holy water on the cross, linking, perhaps unconsciously, immersion in death with immersion in blessed water for baptism as the entrance into the church. Neither faith nor baptism exempts any Christian from death, but the waters of baptism, as Paul wrote to the Romans (6:3-4), wed believers into a community of faith in which mysteries are celebrated and transitions marked, enabling believers to face sickness, catastrophe, dying, and death with eyes wide open. Christ’s descent to the dead, like the icon of Christ’s presence in the standing Manhattan beam, deepens God’s life in us.

In the Middle Ages the eventual liturgical proclamation *Attolite portas*, “Open up, you doors!,” was grafted into the celebration of the descent, and then into various liturgies in which the beginnings and transformations of Christian life were marked. The doors and Psalm 24’s imperative to them were found in many non-Roman Latin liturgies of the Middle Ages. The opening and widening of the doors portray God’s wide outreach to humanity in salvation, won not by human effort but by God’s generosity.

The paschal setting for the descent in the Latin traditions eventually signified the particular wideness of God’s embrace in anticipation of baptisms at the Easter vigil. Though the descent was proclaimed even before baptisms were celebrated at Easter throughout the church, the narrative was eventually located on Holy Saturday in the Roman tradition and remained there long after paschal baptisms had all but disappeared. The liturgical


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image and practice of the opening of the doors signals the unimaginable wideness of God's love for all, a theological truth that ever needs to be proclaimed and celebrated.

Contrary to what many imagine, the descent — as a key part of the Easter season at first, later sandwiched between Good Friday and Easter Sunday in the Latin traditions — was not really about the reconciliation of sinners, though the later name “descent into hell” suggests this. Rather, in its emergence the descent spoke of Christ rescuing the dead, those in the lower world who had lived before the incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth, those thought to be beyond the hearing of the proclamation of the good news. Christ’s visit and preaching in the descent, then, are not really directed to sinners only, but to all the dead, righteous and unrighteous both, to those who had missed or been incapable of receiving the proclamation of the good news before their deaths. The descent loosens up the tautness of time backward and forward and, as a metaphor, stands for the way God’s love transcends time and space, the basic strictures of human experience and imagining.

**DOORS AND LIGHT IN THE LITURGIES OF THE DESCENT**

In many icons of the descent, one will see tall, narrow doors broken down over the pit of the dead in the form of a cross. Christ, the savior, stands on the X-shaped doors and reaches out from there to Adam and Eve, the primogenitors whose disobedience brought sin and death into the world. Like the beam standing in the rubble of New York, the crucifomed, broken-down doors of icons and of liturgical rhetoric antedating the icons are signs of God’s generosity in human regard. This depiction of the descent announces that even Adam and Eve are rescued in the narrative and theology of the descent, and with them humanity from the garden until now. One might imagine that, in the linking of the hands and arms of Christ with those of Adam and Eve, humanity — from the time of creation to Christ — is swept up for the resurrection’s life-restoring complement to the descent’s plunge into death.

For centuries and still today doors — as images and as boundary-markers through which processions march — mark movement from one life to another. Doors used in rites have long represented change in the physical, sacramental, and spiritual life of communi-
ties of faith. At the start of the Easter vigil assemblies gather outside in the darkness, set fire to their past, and process through the doors with the lighted Easter candle on their way into a church vanquishing darkness, a church about to be reconstituted in the power of the Holy Spirit, a church about to be swaddled in candle-light, a church reborn as the body of Christ. The local assembly and its bishop knock on and then process through doors for the dedication of a church. At church doors baptizers meets parents and infants to be initiated or a priest meets a man and woman about to become one in the church and then in the flesh, the one flesh in the carne ("meat") of the in-carnation. Here too the parish priest meets a corpse borne by mourners for a funeral and drapes it in the white garment of its earlier baptism. The dead body is carried back through the doors for a last time.

As ordinary and extraordinary thresholds, doors capture the human boundary-crossings — spatial and temporal, individual and communal, spiritual and corporal — that Christian faith evokes. The descent is one of the earliest narratives that capture the renewed liturgical theology of doors, and this theology might survive more visibly in the tradition still as communities celebrate the lavishness of God’s grace in the most surprising of circumstances and people, even in dead people, as well as in places and people we too easily reckon as languished and forgotten.

Light is the other omnipresent metaphor in the prayer tradition of the descent. Though the scriptural warrant for the Latin tradition’s theology of baptism emerged out of the death-resurrection motif of Paul’s Letter to the Romans (chapter 6), the Greek and Syriac liturgical traditions drew baptismal imagery from a narrative of nascency in the Gospel of John (chapter 3). With birth and maternity, light is a metaphor at the heart of the Nicodemus narrative: “The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil . . . But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (3:19, 21). The light as a

Within recent years we are still mindful of the papal prescription for sealing and then opening a church door as a sign of humanity’s breaking into the new millennium.


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metaphor of Christ's presence continues through the Gospel of John until just before the passion, when Jesus says: "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of the light" (12:35-36). The use of light in prayer texts of the descent signifies the incorporation into the body of Christ of those dwelling in darkness, those not seen by the church, those in the lower world, those gone and those without hope. Light in the liturgy bears the ancient theological meaning of conquering darkness, of salvation vanquishing death.

The presence of the redeemer, "the light of the world" (John 8:12), is marked liturgically by the lighting of candles. Today this liturgical element is found most foundationally in the light drawn from the destructive conflagration at the start of the Easter vigil. The candle is borne into a church about to be reborn, a church in which the Holy Spirit is breathing. The candle is thereafter present at liturgies symbolically tied to salvation and redemption. The Easter candle is present for baptisms at Sunday Eucharist, and by the dead body in the rite of Christian funerals. The gradual extinguishing of candles in the Holy Week liturgy of Tenebrae until there is merely one, the light of Christ, prepared the church in anticipation of the paschal theology of salvation by the light of the world. On February 2, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, the assembly gathers outside the church with unlighted candles, and, as the candles are blessed, lighted and the procession begins, we pray:

God our Father, source of eternal light,  
fill the hearts of all believers with the light of faith.  
May we who carry these candles in your church  
come with joy to the light of glory.

In our fervor for the historical-critical method, the narrative of the descent has nearly been forgotten, yet it still bears a profound theological truth: Even if all others forget, God does not forget the dead. Over the centuries Christ's descent was incorporated into prayers recounting the events of salvation, and the descent was often included in even the most reduced account of the paschal mystery. Yet without much scriptural warrant, other images from

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its narrative were picked up and knitted into the tradition. Doors and light, in particular, were the images most frequently present in the prayers. Below we consider relevant scriptural texts and their incorporation into medieval prayers that count the descent in the rhetoric of the paschal mystery. To this end the essay has three parts: 1) The theology of the descent in the early church; 2) Scriptural traditions assembled into the euchology of the descent; 3) The earliest Latin prayers with descent imagery.

**THE THEOLOGY OF THE DESCENT**

Without the narrative of Christ’s descent to the dead Christians might live as if death were somehow escapable, or were the price one paid for a life of sin, a human experience apart from God’s life-giving embrace and love. Yet none of these is true, for no Christian has escaped or will escape death, and belief in Christ’s descent to the dead reminds believers that God’s love endures even after an individual life is over. Perhaps this truth is what prompted churches in antiquity to bring the descent to a central place in preaching and worship even without a dependable biblical narrative.

In the Christian faith inculturated in the West, oversight of the descent to the dead in the celebrations and preaching of Christian communities of faith withdraws a measure of consolation and hope for those close to death and those caring for them. Its absence is no surprise in the West, where there is an economic interest in ignoring the inevitable end of every human life, for a culture of acquisition and glamour is predicated on the ruse that we might not die. Too often ministers of the church are too inculturated and therefore do not proclaim a truth that would indict this fundamental deceit of the culture. The avoidance of death is a lamentable result of our culture of limitless acquisition. Christian churches and their ministers have too readily accepted the easy route by embracing capitalism’s comfortable ruse.

The church is called to keep communities of faith sober and alert to the ever-joyful and ever-grim realities of human life and to proclaim — in the life, death and resurrection of Christ — how lives shaped in the communal realization of God’s ever-incarnate presence are beautiful and true expressions of God’s gifts. The culture prompts us to ignore the stultifying reality that our bodies will

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eventually be meals for maggots and fodder for flies. But to this the faith might be a counter-witness by proclaiming God's love revealed in Christ's descent to the dead. Perhaps it is odd to lament the overshadowing of a rather enigmatic and sobering Christian narrative, but a reconsideration of the proclamation of Christ's descent is needed for Christian health, for it might counter the American inclination to see death and sickness merely as consequences of sin. Though each of us is a sinner and, by conception and birth, is immersed in a world of sin, we as the people of God and as the body of Christ, so constituted by baptism, are perfect and sinless. When knitted together by the power of the Holy Spirit as the body of Christ, we are by God's grace — completely unearned, prorsus indebitum — reconciled to one another and thereby able to experience the life of God in the church and its sacraments. The descent announces that, though living and moving and having being in a world soaked in sin, we the baptized are "freed from the corruption of sin and death." The descent is an expression of God's love, a love that makes incorruptibility and immortality not only believable, but possible.

The descent supports the belief that the dead have not failed in faith and that, in the power of the Holy Spirit, God is one with the dead Christ and with the dead in Christ. I posit that the "dead" of this cosmological tenet includes not only those who have died already but those who, for whatever reason, have not, like those who died before the incarnation, been able to hear the proclamation of the good news. The descent is, then, a narrative knitting humanity together — the quick and the dead, the visible and invisible, the beautiful and the maggot-ridden — including especially those who have no hope and those who while alive seemed to have no chances left. Yet as God's grace and generosity were wide enough to bring the first couple on board, so too are there opportunities for all.

**The Descent in Scripture**

The narrative that emerges for the descent was not seamlessly drawn from the Bible, but constructed from various books. The liturgical prayers in which the descent appears were made by

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5 The blending of various texts and narratives is considered in R. Joseph Hoffman, "Confluence in Early Christian and Gnostic Literature: The *Descensus*
cutting and pasting scriptural passages wedded to one another by their poetic imagery. In this way did doors opening to a light-conquering darkness find their way into the prayers. Although Psalm 24's imperative "Open up, you doors!" would eventually be a key in the narrative and euchological tradition, the door imagery in the descent, at its earliest appearance, came from the Book of Job (38:17) — "Have the doors of death been opened for you? Have you seen the dark doors?" (Vulgate) — which appears in Arian creeds of the mid-fourth century. Eventually the doors of Job are bound together in prayer texts with the doors of Psalm 24, and together they became a primary image, seen still today in the Eastern image of the criss-crossed doors on which Christ stands.

The imperative to the doors in Psalm 24 is followed by another, "Let the King of glory come in," which the church used to sing on the morning of Holy Saturday. The manifestation, indeed incarnation, of the King of Glory in the church anticipated the initiation of new members that happened when the descent was locked into its Holy Saturday place. The generosity of God's gift of salvation in Christ was rendered by the widening of doors and Christ standing on them. Crossing the boundaries set by the devil, Christ demands, "Open up, you doors! The King of Glory's coming in."

With the opening of the doors the prayers have light cast into the formerly dark recesses of the place of the dead. Be it the Sheol of the Hebrew Bible or the Hades of the New Testament, the place of the dead was a place of darkness, and in the fathers and the Middles Ages the advent of the redeemer is seen as light conquering that darkness.

New Testament: The First Letter of Peter. Though none of the canonical gospels bears direct witness to the descent, one can soon


6 These early symbols in which the doors appeared are the fourth formula of Sirmium, and the creeds of Niké and Constantinople, all having met in the year 359; see Rémi Gounelle, as above: 273–304.
8 See, for example, Psalm 139:8–12.

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enough find church leaders in the West wedging a non-scriptural narrative into the narrow temporal span between Christ’s death on the cross and the proclamation of the resurrection on the first day of the week. In the euchology and preaching of the Western traditions, the burial and the descent gradually occupy the same narrative span. The only canonical account of the descent appears in the First Letter of Peter (3:18-21a): “Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you.” Though this was seen as a warrant for the descent, it did not have much influence in shaping the tradition. The doors and the light, more than any details from First Peter, are central to medieval euchology. These images, and the soteriological tradition they bear, likely came from a dramatic non-canonical text.

The Gospel of Nicodemus. The account that was likely taken up in iconic representations from the medieval period; in both Greek and Latin traditions, is from the odd apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus. Unlike some of the apocryphal works that have come to popular attention in recent decades as of very early provenance, the Gospel of Nicodemus is quite late, with no firm evidence before the fifth century. Its dissemination, however, was not widespread until even a few centuries later, taking off most noticeably in the ninth


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The intensity of devotion in the late Middle Ages and Reformation period witnessed the Gospel’s greatest impact and widest readership.

Supplying the imagination-engaging imagery that icons will later incorporate, a detailed description of the light, the doors and their hardware comes after the introduction of the main cast of characters of the Gospel: “[T]he voice sounded: Lift up the gates. When Hades heard the voice the second time, he answered as if he did not know it and said: Who is this King of glory? The angels of the Lord said: The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle [Psalm 23:8]. And immediately at this answer the gates of brass were broken in pieces and the bars of iron were crushed and all the dead who were bound were loosed from their chains, and we with them. And the King of glory entered in like a man, and all the dark places of Hades were illumined.”

With reference to the sequence of the paschal events, Hades, a personification of what most imagine as a place, speaks to the King of glory, who has just entered, and Hades reveals the juxtaposition of opposites in the salvation revealed in the Son: “We are defeated, woe to us. But who are you, who have such authority and power? And who are you, who without sin have come here, you who appear small and can do great things, who are humble and exalted, slave and master, soldier and king, and have authority over the dead and the living? You were nailed to the cross, and laid in the sepulchre, and now you have become free and have destroyed all our power. Are you Jesus, of whom the chief ruler Satan said to us that through the cross and death you would inherit the whole world? Then the King of glory seized the chief ruler Satan by the head and handed him over to the angels, saying: Bind with iron fetters his hands and his


12 Literally, the first part of the Gospel is the narrative of the Acts of Pilate; the second and shorter is the narrative of the descent. (The two were likely separate texts in origin.) It seems like the Gospel has been more efficacious indirectly, from the art it has inspired, rather than directly, from the proclamation of the narrative itself. Here will not be addressed the complex issues of the origins of this narrative. For full text and more critical information on this text, see note 6 and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., New Testament Apocrypha, volume 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1991) 501–36.

13 Schneemelcher, as above, here at 524.

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feet and his neck and his mouth. Then he gave him to Hades and said: Take him and hold him fast until my second coming."  

A soteriological key in the Gospel of Nicodemus is the absence of a resurrection narrative: The descent is the victory, the descent the feast. Jesus was "nailed to the cross, and laid in the sepulchre, and now has become free and destroyed all power." The world is saved "through the cross and death." Hades says that "the King of glory should be crucified, so that he should come here and strip us naked" so that no dead are left in hell. The descent is the salvific narrative even with no resurrection.

In icons the doors — busted down by Christ, rescuer of the dead, superhero of the Nicodemus narrative — are tall and long so that, when the two sections of the doors fall over the pit of the dead, they form a cross on which Christ stands as he pulls Adam and Eve up from the pit. Moreover, in most icons of the descent, one will find the metal accessories and hardware of door-hanging — hinges, knobs, locks, and so on — in the foreground. The details are likely taken from the imaginative description quoted above.

Though late, the promulgation of the Gospel of Nicodemus and its descent motif was wide. In medieval versions it existed in Greek, Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, and Old Slavonic. Artistic renderings of the descent based on the text of this Gospel were even more numerous, though many of these may simply

14Schneemelcher, 524–25.


have been copies of other artwork rather than representations of the written or proclaimed narrative.

THE DESCENT IN THE LITURGY

There was virtually no gap between the New Testament books and the appearance of the descent in the earliest liturgical texts, in, for example, the sermon of the Anonymous Quartodeciman of the second century.\(^{18}\) In this and other early evidence, Christ descends to the place of the dead (descensus ad inferos), not to hell (descensus ad inferna), highlighting that the descent was not about Christ’s ministry to sinners but about his own experience of death and, thereby, his intimacy with the dying and the dead. But formulas like the Apostles’ Creed, by which the descent came to be known, appear only after one begins to see the vocabulary of the descent shift from the “dead” toward “hell,” a change of just two Latin letters, as above. The shift marks the growing theological and anthropological rhetoric about humanity and sin after the fifth century, apparent in the darker Christian anthropology in the Middle Ages.

In the early third century — two centuries before the introduction of inferna, “hell,” to the descent — one finds the descent in the Apostolic Tradition: “Fulfilling your will and gaining for you a holy people, he stretched out his hands when he should suffer, that he might release from suffering those who have believed in you. And when he was betrayed to voluntary suffering that he might destroy death, and break the bonds of the devil, and tread down hell, and shine upon the righteous, and fix a term, and manifest his resurrection, he took bread, and gave thanks to you.”\(^{19}\)


One of the keys here is the chronology of the salvific events the author describes. One can recall that in the early third century the Triduum with which we are familiar today — Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday — had not yet emerged. In the first three or four centuries, the events of the paschal mystery, including the descent, are not in the order that will appear by the late fourth century. But in *Apostolic Tradition* we hear “that he might destroy death, break the bonds of the devil, tread down hell, and shine upon the righteous,” as drawn from the descent to the dead, which “freed those imprisoned there before the incarnation, and shined light on them,” perhaps suggesting the light of baptism brought to the dead by the narrative of the descent.

Until the Middles Ages there is little surviving evidence of Western liturgical prayers in the decades after the *Apostolic Tradition* in the early third century. It would be a few centuries before the freedom of liturgical prayer evolves into the formulas of liturgical prayers that we find in the early medieval *libelli* and sacramentaries. Though there is testimony referring to the descent in theological works of bishops and authors in the fourth and fifth centuries, few liturgical texts survive. The next liturgical sources for the descent are a few hymns, but the preponderance of

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23 One of the earliest is from bishop Ambrose of Milan (+397). Ambrose oversaw the church in Milan for a quarter-century, and his use of hymnody to promulgate theological orthodoxy and clobber his enemies — most aggressively, the Arians — has been studied closely. A reference to the descent appears in one of the hymns in which the theological issues are blatant, in his *Intende qui regis Israel*, or, perhaps, “Harken, Ruler of Israel.” In its rhetoric we also find a brief summary of the theology of the paschal feast, yet the redeemer’s descent to the

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prayers with the descent is from non-Roman liturgical traditions of the Middle Ages.

The Descent in the Mozarabic Tradition. There are many references to the descent in the liturgical manuscripts of the Mozarabic tradition in medieval Spain. What is especially engaging in examining these prayers is that many of the elements seem far removed from the narratives of Jesus of Nazareth and the risen Christ as we know them from the New Testament. In classical narratives of gods and heroes, the descent tradition antedates Christianity, and perhaps some of these pre-Christian classical narratives are embedded in the content and in the rather strange vocabulary in the Mozarabic texts.

The narrative of the Gospel of Nicodemus seems to have entered the tradition before these prayers, for the hardware of door hanging in the apocryphal gospel, as well as some of its soteriological images and elements, has been introduced into the prayer tradition by the time these prayers were received into Spanish euchology.

The temporal framework for the descent in the liturgical year had not yet been narrowed to Holy Saturday, at least in the communities in which these prayers were proclaimed, so one finds, for example, a text such as the following at morning prayer for Holy Thursday, rather than for Holy Saturday as one might expect from later texts: "Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ — alone ruling all by his word of power, and bearing all our wounds on the cross — broke into pieces the iron bars and shattered the locks of the bronze doors. He descended to the depths of the dead. With an unknown clear brightness, he shone on those sitting in the shadow of death. The sun of justice, with his risen body, going forth from the grave, wondrously illuminated our darkness by his radiance. Amen."

dead is listed in it: "He goes forth from the Father, / Returning to the Father; / He runs forth to the place of the dead, / Returning to the seat of God." Author’s translation of Latin as found in Ambrose of Milan, Hymnes, text, trans., notes Jacques Fontaine (Paris: Cerf 1992) hymn at 272-75; textual and historical commentary at 263-301. For an Eastern testimony to the descent in a hymn, see, among others, the text of Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes, intro., text, trans., notes José Grosdidier de Matons, volume 4 (Paris: Cerf 1967) 263-311.

24 Translation mine with the help of my colleague Helen Rolfson O.S.F.; original as in PL 85:744: Dominus noster Jesus Christus filius tuus: qui solus verbo virtutes

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This is a narrative, but clearly not one recognizable from any one text of the Bible. Rather it is an amalgam of images and vocabulary, canonical and not, among them the iron doors and bars (see Psalm 107:16), the prison (perhaps from 1 Peter), the light conquering death, and the specific light image of the sun of justice (see Malachi 4:2). In this prayer from the Mozarabic missal, the doors and the light are intertwined, though in the scriptural traditions they do not appear narratively in this way. The expression of the theological truth of God’s care and love for the dead survives in these texts even without a narrative warrant.

The prayer above was proclaimed a few days before Holy Saturday, but, within the same Mozarabic sacramental tradition, a variation can also be found a few weeks later in the liturgical year, during the Easter season. The following oration would have been proclaimed in the eucharistic prayer, just after the “Holy, Holy” on the Third Sunday of Easter: “Truly holy and blessed is your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who — alone ruling by his word of power, and bearing every fate on the cross — broke into pieces the iron bars and shattered the locks of the bronze doors. He descended to the depths of the dead. With an unknown clear brightness, he shone on those sitting in the shadow of death. The sun of justice, with his risen body, going forth from the grave, wondrously illuminated our darkness by his radiance. Through Christ our Lord.”

As the reader can readily see, the content is

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25 The sol iustitiae, a rising “sun of justice,” of this prayer is provocative because it was earlier adopted in the Roman tradition as an image of the birth of Christ. The light of Christ at the end of December is considered an antidote to the span when the daylight was shortest in the year. See Bernard Botte, Les origines de la noel et de l’épiphanie; etude historique (Louvain: Abbaye du Mont Cesar 1932).

26 Translation mine; original as in Le Liber Mozarabicus Sacramentorum et les manuscrits mozarabes, ed. D. Marius Férotin (Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot 1912) 308–09; Vere sanctus, uere benedictus Dominus noster Ihesus Christus Filius tuus. Qui solus uerbo uirtutis cuncta moderans et omnia crucis destina portans, uectes ferreos comminuit portarumque aerearum clastra perfregit, tartaris profunda descendit, sedentibus in umbra mortis ignote lucis claritate

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nearly identical to the other prayer, though the context in the liturgical year is quite different. The descent and the efficacy of Christ's visit to the place of the dead were so fundamental in the theological, soteriological, and liturgical traditions of medieval Spain that the narrative is incorporated into the celebrations of daily prayer and of the Eucharist, and its time frame expansive enough to find a home in Holy Week and during the Easter season.

The Descent in the Gallican Tradition. As in Mozarabic sacramentaries, so in Gallican manuscripts are there numerous references to the descent. Christ's visit to the dead is central to the soteriology of the medieval Gallican tradition also, but the details of the story, the vocabulary, and the imagery are different. The most animated texts in which the descent is featured are blessings of the Easter candle and Exsultets, as is the one below:

This is the night
Which, by the illumination of the column [of light],
Cleansed the darkness of sin.

This is the night,
Which today takes those
Divided by the vices of this life and by the gloom of sin,
Those believing in Christ throughout the world
And returns them to grace and joins them to holiness.

This is the night, on which Christ the victor,
Having broken the chains of death,
Ascended from the lower world . . .

O wonderful condescension of your kindness toward us!
O indescribable delight of love,
You handed over your Son, so that you might redeem your servant!
O certainly necessary sin of Adam,
which the death of Christ wiped away!
O happy fault, which merited to have such and so great a redeemer!
O blessed night,
which alone merited to know the day and the hour
when Christ rose from the dead!

resplenduit: et Sol iustitie de tumulo corpore suscitato procedens, radiis suis
tenebras nostras mirabiliter inlustruit. Christus Dominus.

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This is the night, about which was written:  
And night will be as bright as day,  
and night [will be] my illumination in my delights.\(^27\)

What is important here is the mix of images of the descent and resurrection, and the combination affects the paschal rescue and its two-way feat, one of descent and its complementary ascent (or resurrection). And so, unlike a resurrection from one place to another, perhaps higher, celestial one, as the resurrection is imagined in much of the Latin tradition, the descent in the Gallican prayers is a travel-complement to the resurrection, salvation a two-way street, a round-trip ticket for the body of Christ. The feat is not point-to-point, from a here to a there, but of Christ going down to the lower world for the rescue of the dead and back to the place where he had already been, with the living. From the pit he returns to the world bearing Adam and Eve, and all the dead, with him so that they are united with those, like ourselves, still alive in the body of Christ, the church. The down-and-up of the prayer is clear, as is the reunion of the dead with the church already assembled: “This is the night, on which Christ the victor, having broken the chains of death, ascended from the lower world. . . . O wonderful condescension of your kindness toward us! O indescribable delight of love!”

Other prayers in the Gallican sacramentaries bear this out, though not with as much detail as the candle-blessings and Exsultets: “He, by whose descent the doors were broken down,

O mira circa nos tuae pietatis dignacio! O inestimabilis dileccio caritatis, ut seruum redimeris, filium tradidiisti! O certe necessarium Adae peccatum, quod Christi morte deletum est ! O fílex culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem! O beata nox, quae sola meruit scire tempus et hora<m>, in qua Christus ab inferis resurrecti! Haec nox est, de qua scriptum est: Et nox ut dies inluminabitur, et nox inluminacio mea in diliciis meis.

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carries those in hell: at his rising the angels rejoice and the world exults with all who dwell in it.”

As Christians in a culture of consumerism and capitalism, we place an extraordinarily high value on individualism and autonomy, even in our faith and spirituality; our soteriologies also reflect this. We believe that we will be received into God’s kingdom for eternity (or not) based on our individual merits (or, if applicable, demerits). With the witness of the sacraments and the scriptures, the proclamation and liturgical celebration of Christ’s descent counters this inclination toward individualism and its concomitant survival-of-the-holiest competition. The descent reminds us of the communion we share with the dead and of the web of Christian life into which all the baptized are knitted.

The descent reminds us that salvation — of the living and of the dead — comes not from our efforts, but from God’s love. The doors and light of the liturgical tradition and narratives of the descent reflect the ever-expanding boundaries of God’s embrace, and these metaphors counter our oft-errant imaginations about being saved as individuals. The descent reminds us that the communion of saints embraces more people than we could ever imagine, people long or recently dead, people alive now, and people not yet conceived in their mothers’ wombs.

Christ’s descent to the dead was among the earliest narrative expressions of a basic truth of nascent Christianity: that by God’s grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is found with the dying and among the dead. For those who joined early communities of faith, the dawning gift of salvation would have prompted concern in believers about loved ones and family members who had died before hearing the good news of God’s love, or about those who had heard the news but been unable to receive it. The descent addressed the need for an expression of hope in the face of human perplexity and complexity, and these situations in need of redemption, love, and hope did not end at the incarnation.

Translation mine; original as in Missale Gallicanum Vetus [MGall] (Cod. Vat. Palat. lat. 493), ed. Leo Cunibert Mohlberg (Rome: Herder 1958) 52: Cuius descensu confractis portis lugit infernus: quo resurgente, letantur angeli et exultat terra cum habitatoribus suis; see also a similar text in Missale Gothicum (Vat. Reg. lat. 317), ed. Leo Cunibert Mohlberg (Rome: Herder 1961) 78: lines 13–16.

\[\text{Attolite Portas, “Open Up, You Doors!”} \]
The instinct in the rescuers in the World Trade Center tower, in the heat and nadir of so great a tragedy, was that God was near. The same sense of God with the dying and the dead is felt by all who minister to them. We arrive to console the dead, but usually find that it is they who give witness to the presence of God for us; the dying serve, console, and minister to us the living far more than the reverse.

However complex its origins, the descent is a narrative to be proclaimed even without support from the historical-critical method of biblical studies. The twentieth century witnessed the spread of Christian faith around the world, but since Vatican II most believers have taken the universality of faith for granted as one in *space* only, not complemented by a pastoral reception of the universality of God’s grace in *time*. Most Christians expect that the good news will be proclaimed from now to the end of time, but few consider God’s care for those who lived before the incarnation. The descent is the narrative that can uniquely capture the universality of Christian salvation in time.

Now two millennia away from the days of the incarnate savior’s life, the question of the place of the dead is no less important. Like the cross in the rubble of New York, the metaphors of doors and light — markers of God’s presence through space and time — are fundamental expressions of our communal experience of God’s life as completely unearned, incredibly lavish, at times humorously surprising, and always dependably consoling. The crisis in New York reminded us that the dead are still with us and that the descent is not merely about there and then, but here and now.

Biblical studies and church teaching about the Bible since Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) teach us that the narratives of the life of Jesus in the canonical gospels reflect both the memories of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and later experiences of the risen Christ in the first-century communities from which the gospels emerged. In the same way does the narrative of the descent of Christ to the dead capture a theological truth of the early church and might emerge again today from our own experience of the risen Christ in our parishes.

As church we have restored the rites of the catechumenate and initiation, and churches have been reawakened to the abundance of God’s gifts in human life celebrated in a community of faith.

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RCIA has given the church an opportunity to witness the fruits of God’s grace in human life. The descent is a remarkable complement to the experience of adult initiation for it welcomes the dead into our assemblies and our communion, and it prepares those in the assembly for their own deaths. It might still be a vital narrative in the life of the church for expressing our thanksgiving for the life we have, according to the Nicene Creed, as a “communion of saints,” a communion that includes not only the living, with whom we are present and physically united at worship, but with the baptized dead and, reflecting God’s unimaginable goodness in the descent, the to-be-baptized dead.

Keith Kennific

“Chocolat” in Lent: A Discussion

Would you, at a Friday-night movie, expect to be provided with a reflection on Lent and its implications for the Christian life? That was my experience one Lenten evening last year when I attended a showing of “Chocolat” at a local theater. After providing a brief synopsis of the film’s story line, this paper will discuss the movie in terms of its portrayal of three Lenten themes: fasting, conversion, and community, while situating these in the larger context of Christian response to the gospel imperative.

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2 We assert from the outset that these reflections grow out of the experience, study, and faith of a particular viewer who has no access to the film’s intention to present any particular message or point of view. This fact, however, should in no way negate the validity of my, admittedly, eisegetical observations.