



JESUS CHRIST

His burial and descent into hell

Texts from the

Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Sabbath rest after the fulfilment of man's salvation

“By the grace of God” Jesus tasted death “for every one” (Heb 2:9). In his plan of salvation, God ordained that his Son should not only “die for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3) but should also “taste death”, experience the condition of death, the separation of his soul from his body, between the time he expired on the cross and the time he was raised from the dead. The state of the dead Christ is the mystery of the tomb and the descent into hell. It is the mystery of Holy Saturday, when Christ, lying in the tomb, reveals God's great Sabbath rest after the fulfilment of man's salvation, which brings peace to the whole universe. (624)

Christ in the tomb in his body

Christ's stay in the tomb constitutes the real link between his passible state before Easter and his glorious and risen state today. The same person of the “Living One” can say, “I died, and behold I am alive for evermore” (Rev 1:18):

“God [the Son] did not impede death from separating his soul from his body according to the necessary order of nature, but has reunited them to one another in the Resurrection, so that he himself might be, in his person, the meeting point for death and life, by arresting in himself the decomposition of nature produced by death and so becoming the source of reunion for the separated parts.” (St Gregory of Nyssa) (625)

The Son of God continues to possess his separated soul and body

Since the “Author of life” who was killed (Acts 3:15) is the same “living one [who has] risen”, (Lk 24:5-6) the divine person of the Son of God necessarily continued to possess his human soul and body, separated from each other by death:

“By the fact that at Christ's death his soul was separated from his flesh, his one person is not itself divided into two persons; for the human body and soul of Christ have existed in the same way from the beginning of his earthly existence, in the divine person of the Word; and in death, although separated from each other, both remained with one and the same person of the Word.” (St John Damascene) (626)

“You will not let your Holy One see corruption”

Christ's death was a real death in that it put an end to his earthly human existence. But because of the union which the person of the Son retained with his body, his was not a mortal corpse like others, for “it was not possible for death to hold him” (Acts 2:24) and therefore “divine power preserved Christ's body from corruption.” (St Thomas Aquinas) Both of these statements can be said of Christ: “He was cut off out of the land of the living” (Is 53:8), and “My flesh will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let your Holy One see corruption.” (Acts 2:26-27) Jesus' Resurrection “on the third day” was the sign of this, for bodily decay was held to begin on the fourth day after death. (627)

“Buried with Christ...”

Baptism, the original and full sign of which is immersion, efficaciously signifies the descent into the tomb by the Christian who dies to sin with Christ in order to live a new life. “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Rom 6:4) (628)

IN BRIEF

- **To the benefit of every man, Jesus Christ tasted death (cf. Heb 2:9). It is truly the Son of God made man who died and was buried. (629)**
- **During Christ's period in the tomb, his divine person continued to assume both his soul and his body, although they were separated from each other by death. For this reason the dead Christ's body "saw no corruption" (Acts 13:37). (630)**

CHRIST DESCENDED INTO HELL

Out of the depths of death he made life spring forth

Jesus “descended into the lower parts of the earth. He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens.” (Eph 4:9-10) The Apostles' Creed confesses in the same article Christ's descent into hell and his Resurrection from the dead on the third day, because in his Passover it was precisely out of the depths of death that he made life spring forth:

“Christ, that Morning Star, who came back from the dead,
and shed his peaceful light on all mankind,
your Son who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.”
(Roman Missal, *Exsultet*, Easter Vigil) (631)

Jesus, proclaiming the Gospel, joined others in the realm of the dead

The frequent New Testament affirmations that Jesus was “raised from the dead” presuppose that the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his resurrection. This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ’s descent into hell: that Jesus, like all men, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. But he descended there as Saviour, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there. (632)

Jesus descended to free the just who had gone before him

Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, “hell” - *Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek - because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into “Abraham’s bosom”: “It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Saviour in Abraham’s bosom, whom Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell.” (Roman Catechism) Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him. (633)

The Gospel is spread to all men of all times and places

“The gospel was preached even to the dead.” (1 Pt 4:6) The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfilment. This is the last phase of Jesus’ messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ’s redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption. (634)

To liberate us Jesus holds the ‘keys of Death and of Hades’

Christ went down into the depths of death so that “the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” (Jn 5:25) Jesus, “the Author of life”, by dying destroyed “him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and [delivered] all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.” (Heb 2:14-15) Henceforth the risen Christ holds “the keys of Death and Hades”, so that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” (Rev 1:18; Phil 2:10)

“Today a great silence reigns on earth, a great silence and a great stillness. A great silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began... He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow Adam in his bonds and Eve, captive with him - He who is both their God and the son of Eve... ‘I am your God, who for your sake have become your son... I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead’.” (Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday) (635)

IN BRIEF

- By the expression “He descended into hell”, the Apostles’ Creed confesses that Jesus did really die and through his death for us conquered death and the devil “who has the power of death” (Heb 2:14). (636)
- In his human soul united to his divine person, the dead Christ went down to the realm of the dead. He opened heaven’s gates for the just who had gone before him. (637)

