



Η ΕΙΣ ΑΔΟΥ ΚΑΘΟΔΟΣ – THE ICON OF THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE EXISTENTIAL STATE (ΚΑΘΑΣΤΑΣΗΣ)

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ABSTRACT

The Descent into hell represents a fundamental pillar of Christian soteriology, being the event that marks the transition from the sacrifice on the Cross to the victory of the Resurrection. According to tradition, in the interval between His physical death and the Sunday of the Resurrection, Christ descended with His deified soul into the "abode of the dead" (Sheol or Hades), not as a prisoner of death, but as a victor over it. This saving act is biblically grounded in the writings of certain authors of the New Testament books, who affirm that Christ went to preach to the spirits kept in the prison of hell. Theologically, the purpose of this descent was twofold: the preaching of the Gospel to those who had fallen asleep and the liberation of the righteous of the Old Testament who were awaiting the Messiah. Christ shattered the gates of hell and broke its bars, restoring man's communion with God, which had been affected by Adam's fall. Thus, hell is emptied of its character as a place of eternal imprisonment for the righteous, through the victory accomplished by the Lord against the dominion of the devil.

Keywords: *Jesus Christ; human being; hell, Gospel; salvation;*

INTRODUCTION

The Christological dimension of Orthodox theology is expressed through the concrete acts of objective salvation: the incarnation, the sacrifice, the descent into hell, the resurrection, and the ascension into heaven of the Incarnate Son of God. The Descent of Christ into Hades is a fundamental truth of faith, confessed from the beginning by the entire Church¹. This action of the Christological economy constitutes the *border* between the humility and the glorification of the Son of God. The interpenetration of these two states manifested in the person of Christ through the act of His descent into hell cannot be penetrated by our human understanding.

¹ In the Scripture of the Old Testament, the word used to describe the afterlife is *Sheol*. This designated the *Abode of the dead*, that is, the place where the souls or spirits of those who had fallen asleep resided. The Greek word for hell used in the New Testament is *Hades*, meaning the realm of the dead. The term indicates a temporary place where they await the resurrection and the judgment. The biblical text in *Revelation* 20:11-15 shows that there is a clear difference between hell and *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* is the final, definitive, irrevocable, and eternal place, the consequence of God's judgment upon the sinners. Hell, however, is a temporary place. *Sheol* describes a space containing two compartments (*Matthew* 11:23; 16:18; *Luke* 10:15; 16:23; *Acts of the Apostles* 2:27-31), namely the abode of the righteous and the abode of the sinners. The abode of the righteous is also referred to in the Bible as Abraham's Bosom. The two compartments are separated from each other by a great gulf (*Luke* 16:26). When Jesus descended into hell, He took all those found in Abraham's Bosom with Him (see *Ephesians* 4:8-10 and *1 Peter* 3:18-20). The part of the lost in *Sheol* remained unchanged. All those who died in a state of sinfulness went there and are awaiting their final judgment.



The Descent into hell also represents an act of power, inasmuch as the deified soul of Jesus enters a zone subject to the evil one, against his will and with the purpose of destroying the kingdom of darkness². Certainly, based on what is contained in the *treasury* of Divine Revelation, the reasons why the Lord descended into hell are known, reasons which we shall expound in what follows. In any case, He did not do so to endure the torments there, since the victory over death coincided with the acceptance of death and, therefore, the Resurrection as a fact occurred at the exact moment of death.

Orthodox eschatology mentions that death is the premise for the resurrection of the body, and this bodily resurrection could have been accomplished immediately after His death on the Cross. According to the Jewish tradition of the time, it was considered that the soul definitively leaves the body after the third day from death³. By remaining in the tomb during this interval, the Savior Jesus Christ eliminated any doubt: His death was real, complete, and not a mere appearance. Furthermore, while His body lay in the tomb, He descended with His soul into hell to liberate the souls of the righteous found there⁴.

1. THE DESCENT INTO HELL – A BIBLICAL AND PATRISTIC EXEGESIS

The Savior's Descent into hell represents one of the most mysterious and inexplicable events in the history of the New Testament. In the contemporary Christian world, this event is understood differently. What was the conception of the early Church? What do early Christian sources tell us about the descent into hell? What is the position of Orthodoxy in this regard, and what is the soteriological significance of this episode from an Orthodox point of view? These are some of the questions we attempt to answer through the present study.

The doctrine in question had penetrated deeply into the theological consciousness of the early Church through apostolic catechesis. The biblical evidence pertaining to this truth of faith is composed of both Old Testament verses⁵ and New Testament citations⁶. Thus, Christ the Lord "also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison" (*1 Peter* 3:18-19). At the same time, countless patristic sources highlight the pan-cosmic resurrectional act performed by the Incarnate Divine Logos. A careful examination of the Church Fathers shows a widespread acceptance of Christ's descent into hell.

Here is the testimony brought by Saint Irenaeus of Lyons: "It was for this reason, too, that the Lord descended into the regions beneath the earth, preaching His advent there also, and [declaring] the remission of sins received by those who believe in Him"⁷. In a similar manner, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem recalls the fact that the Lord descended into hell to save the righteous: "He was truly laid

² Natalia MANOILESCU-DINU, *Iisus Hristos Mântuitorul în lumina Sfintelor Evanghelii* (Jesus Christ the Savior in the Light of the Holy Gospels), vol. II, Bizantină Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 407.

³ This detail provides fascinating historical profoundness to the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection. References to this belief also appear in *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Yerushalmi Moed Katan*

⁴ The Holy Priest Confessor DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului* (Jesus Christ or the Restoration of Man), 2nd edition, Omniscope Publishing House, Craiova, 1993, p. 333.

⁵ *5 Psalms* 6:5; 15:10; 29:3; 48:16; 73:24; 75:13; 106:16; 138:7; *Isaiah* 24:22; 49:19; *Daniel* 12:1-3; *Hosea* 13:14; *Zechariah* 9:11; *Malachi* 2:17; 3:13-15; *Wisdom of Solomon* 9:15 and 16:13-14.

⁶ *Matthew* 12:39-40; 24:52-53; *Luke* 16:22-23; 23:43; *John* 5:25 and 29; *Acts* 2:24-25, 31; *1 Corinthians* 15:24; *Ephesians* 1:21-22; 4:8-10; *Philippians* 2:10; *Colossians* 1:18; 2:15; *Hebrews* 11:39; 12:23; *1 Peter* 3:18-20; 4:6; *Revelation* 1:18.

⁷ St. IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Împotriva ereziilor* (Against Heresies), 4.27.2, in the "Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church", anthology, vol. 1, ed. by Philip Schaff, 1885, p. 499.



as Man in a tomb of rock; but rocks were rent asunder by terror because of Him. He went down into the regions beneath the earth, that thence also He might redeem the righteous"⁸. He also linked Christ's descent into hell to a verse from the *Gospel of Matthew* (27:52-53) in which the resurrection of some of the fallen asleep saints and their appearance in Jerusalem after the Lord's Resurrection are mentioned: "I believe that Christ also was raised from the dead; for I have many testimonies of this, both from the Divine Scriptures, and from the operative power even at this day of Him who arose — who descended into hell alone, but ascended thence with a great company; for He went down to death, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose through Him"⁹. Saint Hilary of Poitiers states: "When He descended to Hades, He was never absent from Paradise (just as He was always in Heaven when He was preaching on earth as the Son of Man), but promised His martyr a home there, and held out to him the transports of perfect happiness... for the Lord Who was to descend to Hades, was also to dwell in Paradise. Separate, if you can, from His indivisible nature a part which could fear punishment: send the one part of Christ to Hades to suffer pain, the other, you must leave in Paradise to reign"¹⁰. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus uses the expression "twofold descent" regarding Christ's descent from heaven to earth and then from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Christ's purpose for this is our salvation. The expression "save all men absolutely" indicates a broader understanding of salvation than the mere forgiveness of sins: "If He descend into Hell, descend with Him. Learn to know the mysteries of Christ there also, what is the providential purpose of the twofold descent, to save all men absolutely by His manifestation, or there too only them that believe"¹¹.

Advancing towards the *zone* of patristic exegesis, we cannot fail to cite Saint Cyril of Alexandria who, starting from the text mentioned by the Holy Apostle Peter at the beginning of our study, asserts: "The soul of Christ which had been united with the divine Logos descended into hell; and making use of the divine power and divine authority, it appeared to the spirits there... The Word of God (the Logos), going forth, spoke to the spirits (the souls of the dead) in prison (hell), as soul to souls. I do not say that the Divinity alone and of itself of the Only-Begotten descended into hell and preached to the spirits there, completely separated from the soul. For the Divinity is beyond sight... just as the Only-Begotten dwelt in the body with those who lived in bodies, so too His soul (united with the Divinity – ed. note) spoke to the souls in hell, having its own garment"¹².

This does not mean that the sins of all who lived before His coming were forgiven. Here is the argumentation of the same Church Father, Saint Cyril: "Christ, going with His soul into hell, conversed as a soul with souls; Whom the gatekeepers of hell seeing, were terrified, and the bronze gates were shattered and the iron bars were broken. And the Only-Begotten cried out with power to the souls who were suffering alike: 'Come out'... He announced also to those in hell, to set free those who would have believed, had He become incarnate earlier and lived in the time of their life"¹³.

⁸ St. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Lectura* (Lecture) 4.11, in the "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church" anthology, vol. 7, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, New York, 1894, p. 22.

⁹ *IBIDEM*, 14.18, p. 99.

¹⁰ St. HILARY OF PICTAVIUM, *On the Trinity*, in the "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church" anthology, vol. 9, translated by E. W. Watson, ed. by W. Sanday, New York, 1908, p. 190.

¹¹ St. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Oratio* 45, 24, in the "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church" anthology, vol. 7, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, New York, 1894, p. 432.

¹² St. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Despre dreapta credință către Teodosie* (On the Right Faith to Theodosius), in the "Migne" anthology, *Patrologia Graeca* (abbreviated PG), vol. 76, 1165.

¹³ *IDEM*, *Fragmente din prima Epistolă a Sfântului Petru* (Fragments from the First Epistle of Saint Peter), in the "Migne" anthology, PG, vol. 74, 1013.



Furthermore, the illustrious patristic author shows why not all those present in hell at that moment were liberated, but only a part, that is, only the righteous: "therefore, just as by His coming in the flesh Christ spoke to those on earth and those who believed benefited, so also by the descent into hell, He released from the bonds of death only those who would have known Him and would have believed in Him. For the souls who lived in idolatry and in illicit fornications, as if blinded by their bodily passions, could not look towards the radiance of His appearance. That is why they could not truly recognize the One who liberated everyone (the righteous), and Who preached there to all, with love for mankind, but showing also justice. So that those who departed from this kind of benefaction might accuse themselves that they abandoned the Creator and God of all and served man-hating demons, spending their life according to their own will"¹⁴. In the *Oration on Great Saturday*, Saint John of Damascus shows as clearly as possible who benefited from this descent of the Lord into hell: "In my opinion, none received from His saving goodness except those who on earth led a very pure life, who practiced modesty, temperance, and chastity, without however having received the light of faith. Those, the Lord, who extends His Providence over all, drew to Himself; and, projecting His divine rays upon them, He caught them in His divine net, determining them to believe in Him. For He, the Merciful One, could not truly allow them to have labored in vain"¹⁵.

Christ descends into hell as a victor, proclaiming the victory over death and the devil and liberating the righteous from there. As stated at the beginning, the descent into hell represents first of all a mystery. At the end of the *Third Book*, in the *twenty-ninth chapter* of his *Dogmatics*, Saint John of Damascus records the following about the descent into hell: "The deified soul descends into hell, so that just as the Sun of Righteousness rose for those on earth (Malachi 4:2), so too light might shine for those under the earth who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death (Luke 1:79; Isaiah 9:2); that just as He proclaimed peace to those on earth, liberation to the captives, sight to the blind (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18), and to those who believed became the cause of eternal salvation, while to those who did not believe, a reproof of unbelief, so too for those in hell. That to Him every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth (Philippians 2:10). And thus He released those bound from the ages and again returned from among the dead, opening for us the way to resurrection"¹⁶.

Paradise, "the ancestral and paternal homeland, had remained closed to all after Adam's removal. Now Jesus reopens it, in the presence of the thief, who is the first among those who entered the kingdom of heaven"¹⁷. The Lord reopened paradise for us as well and restored to the human race the hope of eternal happiness. Thus, the righteous were brought out through the Lord's resurrection from "darkness and the shadow of death" (*Psalms* 107:10) and brought to the light, joy, peace, and happiness of the open paradise.

In the *Paschal Homily*, Saint John Chrysostom uses persuasive language referring to the destruction of hell by Christ: "... He despoiled Hades, He that descended into Hades... Hades

¹⁴ *IBIDEM*.

¹⁵ ***Cazanii ce cuprind în sine Evangheliile tâlcuite ale duminicilor de preste an și cu cazaniile sinaxarului praznicelor împărătești și ale sfinților de preste an (The cauldrons containing the interpreted Gospels of the Sundays of the year and the cauldrons of the synaxarion of the royal feasts and of the saints of the year), Tipografia cărților bisericești Publishing House, Bucharest, 1911.

¹⁶ St. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Dogmatica* (Dogmatics), translation by Dumitru Fecioru, Scripta Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 117.

¹⁷ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Cuvântarea 104* (Conversation 104), in the "Migne" anthology, *Patrologia Latina* (abbreviated PL), vol. 39, 2045.



received a body, and encountered God. It received earth, and met Heaven. It received that which it saw, and fell upon that which it saw not"¹⁸.

In the same manner of interpretation, the author of the first manual of Systematic Theology, Saint John of Damascus, notes: "The deified soul descends into hell, so that, just as the sun of righteousness rose for those on earth, so too He might shine on those who sit under the earth, in darkness and the shadow of death; that just as He preached peace to those on earth... becoming the cause of eternal salvation for the believers, and a reproof for unbelief to the disobedient, so too for those in hell"¹⁹.

The doctrine regarding the descent of the Lord Christ into hell is mentioned in the 5th article of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* through the formula *descendit ad infernos*, and in the *Athanasian Creed (Quicumque Vult)*, a symbol erroneously attributed to Saint Athanasius the Great in the 4th century. The formula of faith gradually imposed itself in the Creed of the Western Church, becoming generalized throughout the Western Church as early as the 8th century, as well as in several confessions of faith of the Orthodox Church. This dogmatic statement also entered into Orthodox liturgical worship.

Thus, at the conclusion of the Proskomedia (Prothesis), as well as at the entrance with the Holy Gifts (the Great Entrance), the priest recites, in secret, the prayer: "In the tomb with the body, in hell with the soul, as God, in paradise with the thief, and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit, wast Thou, O Christ, filling all things, Thyself uncircumscribed"²⁰. Then, at the Matins of the Lord's Resurrection, we sing: "One was the Godhead of Christ in hell, and in the tomb, and in Eden, indivisible, together with the Father and the Spirit, for our salvation, of those who sing: O Deliverer God, blessed art Thou"²¹. The descent of the Lord Jesus Christ into hell with His deified soul took place immediately after His death with the body on the cross, during the time He lay with the body in the tomb, that is, in the period between the crucifixion and the resurrection (cf. *Matthew* 16:21). The Savior Himself spoke about this period of time through the words: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (*Matthew* 12:40).

The sin of the first humans led to the weakening, diminution, and lessening of the image of God in man, through the partial darkening of the spiritual powers and the inclination of man more towards evil than towards good. But this weakening does not mean the erasure or destruction of the divine image in man. Through ancestral sin, the first humans lost the ability not to die²². Thus, they lost the perfect peace of nature, for sin awakened in them the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life²³. But the greatest punishment for sin was death, which, according to the Holy Apostle Paul, is the *wages of sin* (*Romans* 6:23; *James* 1:15 and *1 Corinthians* 15:22). The first humans attracted this punishment upon themselves because they transgressed the divine

¹⁸ ***Penticostar, *Slujba Învierii, Cuvântul de învățătură al Sfântului Ioan Gură de Aur* (Word of Teaching of Saint John Chrysostom), IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 25.

¹⁹ St. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Dogmatica* (Dogmatics), III, XXIX, translation by Dumitru Fecioru, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993, p. 231.

²⁰ ****Liturghier* (Missal), IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 2012, pp. 130 and 165.

²¹ ***Penticostar, *Canonul Sâmbetei celei Mari, cântarea a VII-a* (Canon of the Holy Saturday, The Song VII), IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 11.

²² St. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Comentariu la Epistola către Romani* (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans), 5, 18, in the "Migne" anthology, *PG*, vol. 74, 789.

²³ *1 John* 2:16.



commandment²⁴. The tree in Paradise brings hell, and the wood of the Cross crushes it²⁵. Holy Scripture teaches us that the soul, being indestructible, keeps all its faculties intact even after its departure from the body, continuing its existence beyond the *threshold* of death. Until the Lord's descent into hell, all the souls of all those fallen asleep, righteous and sinners, from Adam and Eve until those times, went to a *place* called by the Holy Apostle Peter, in his epistolary word, *prison*, and by the Church Fathers, *hell*.

Due to the fact that paradise was closed and the righteous had not yet received access to eternal happiness, they too were in this *prison*, in this existential realm called *Sheol*, which was composed of two compartments (see *Luke* 16:20-31). Although the souls of the righteous were locked in darkness, this did not constitute great suffering for them. They were not punished there, as were the souls of the sinners. From the words of the Holy Apostle Paul, transmitted through the *Epistle to the Romans* 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord", we should understand that hell was not created for humans, even if some of them choose to remain unbelieving and evil.

Initially, hell was a spiritual destination prepared for the devil and the fallen angels. The Savior Himself affirmed this in the *Gospel according to Matthew* 25:41: "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels'". From here, however, the following challenge arises: if hell was created for the evil angels, then why will some humans also end up in it? To clarify this matter, it is necessary to find out which humans will go there.

Descending into hell, the Lord Jesus Christ brought the good news to all souls, from Adam until the coming of the Lord, thus not only to the righteous who lived throughout the duration of the Old Testament and who fulfilled God's will, but also to those among the nations or the pagans (*Matthew* 8:10) who, although they do not have the law, by nature do the things in the Law (*Romans* 2:14). Therefore, the Lord descended into hell with His soul to proclaim to those found there the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies that highlight the beginning of the collapse of the devil's power and of death (cf. *Ephesians* 4:9; *1 Peter* 3:18-20; 4:6), but also to show Himself to those who did not believe in His coming and rejected His redeeming teaching.

The virtuous pagans prior to Christ, even if they did not know God and did not hear of the Redeemer of the world, nevertheless cultivated natural virtues in their lives: wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, mercy, kindness, forgiveness, purity of heart, etc. Just as by His coming in the flesh Christ spoke to those on earth and those who believed in Him benefited from the teaching of the Gospel, so too, by the descent with the deified soul into hell, the Lord released from the bonds of death only the righteous who fulfilled the will and work of God; while the souls who lived in idolatry and in the fulfillment of passions and the lusts of the fallen nature, being blinded by their own sins, could not look towards the radiance of His appearance. That is why they could not truly recognize the One who liberated the righteous, because the Lord preached not only love for mankind, but also His divine justice.

The Resurrection of the Lord is preceded by the descent into hell. The Orthodox Church teaches that the latter pertains to the kingly dignity of the Savior Jesus Christ, that is, to the second

²⁴ THEOPHILUS OF ANTIOCH, *Către Autoliu* (To Autolytus), 2, 25, in the "Migne" anthology, *PG*, vol. 6, 1092.

²⁵ Nicolae BUZESCU, *Sfânta Cruce în imnografia cultului ortodox* (The Holy Cross in the hymnography of the Orthodox cult), in the magazine "Ortodoxia", nr. 2/1982, p. 296.



phase of divine kenosis: the state of glorification²⁶. "Jesus' kingly dignity was also manifested while He lived His earthly life, through the authority that emanated from Him, through the miracles performed, and through the acts of power by which He granted the forgiveness of sins or by which He established the future organization of His Church. But principally, this dignity is manifested in the victory over death, through the descent into hell and the resurrection, in His sitting at the right hand of the Father from where He conducts the saving work and the final judgment"²⁷.

Old Protestantism considered it as belonging to the high priestly ministry. We encounter this latter teaching even in Sergei Bulgakov who, as the Holy Confessor Priest Dumitru Stăniloae also remarked, does not explain and does not ground this assertion except through the general observation that "Christ's sacrifice reveals through this its power not only in life, but also in death, in the tomb; Jesus' victory over death is real only if it could not hold Him for a single moment under its dominion. His descent into hell to suffer the torments there would mean, however, that death took dominion over Jesus as over a sinful man. When we say that death did not take dominion over Him, we understand that the separation of the spirit from the body did not mean for Him a continuation of suffering, of diminished existence, but an outburst of the spirit in all the plenitude of its powers. At the moment when 'He was put to death in the flesh, He was made alive by the Spirit' (1 Peter 3:18) and thus He descended into hell, as the church hymns also say"²⁸.

2. A BRIEF INTERPRETATION OF THE ICON OF THE LORD'S RESURRECTION – THE DESCENT INTO HELL

In the Orthodox tradition, the scene of the *Descent into Hades* is considered the true icon of the Resurrection²⁹, because it represents the moment when Christ liberates humanity from the bondage of death and hell. Christ does not rise alone, but He grasps Adam and Eve by the hands, thus raising all of humanity. This action emphasizes that salvation is an act of liberation of the entire human race from the bondage of eternal darkness.

In the center of the icon of the glorious Resurrection, we see the Son of God trampling the gates of hell underfoot and shining with light. The Savior appears as the Lord of Life and victor over the darkness of death. His resurrected body radiates with the presence of the Holy Spirit, from

²⁶ Hristu ANDRUTSOS, *Dogmatica (Dogmatics)*, translation from Greek by Holy Priest Confessor DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, Sibiu, 1930, p. 230.

²⁷ The Holy Priest Confessor DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului (Jesus Christ or the Restoration of Man)*, 2nd edition, Omniscope Publishing House, Craiova, 1993, p. 332.

²⁸ *IBIDEM*, pp. 332-333.

²⁹ "The depiction of the Resurrection in the form of Christ's descent into Hades has several important theological motivations. The first motivation is linked to the fact that no one saw Christ at the hour when He rose, for He emerged from the sealed tomb. The coming of the angel who rolled away the stone from the tomb and the earthquake occurred solely so that the Myrrh-bearing women might be assured of the fact that Christ had risen. The second motivation relates to the fact that Christ crushed the dominion of death and of the devil at the hour when His soul, united with the Divinity, descended into Hades. In other words, He conquered death through His own death. Thus, the Orthodox Tradition reveals the fact that, through Christ's death, the dominion of death was utterly shattered. Therefore, in the Church it is intoned: *Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death...* Christ's victory over death took place at the exact moment when His soul, united with the Divinity, crushed death. The third motivation for such a representation of the Resurrection stems from the fact that, through His descent into Hades, Christ liberated Adam and Eve from the dominion of death. If through Adam's fall the entire human race fell, because Adam was the parent from whom we all descended, then with his resurrection we too have tasted of the fruits of resurrection and salvation. Due to the natural bonds that exist between descendants and ascendants, what happened to our first-formed father happened to the entire human nature" (Hierotheos VLACHOS, *Predici la Marile Sărbători (Sermon on the Great Feasts)*, Egunenița Publishing House, Galati, 2008, pp. 218-219).



Whom comes the brilliance of the uncreated energies of the uncreated Godhead. The Lord Christ is entirely light, and His whole being announces the beginning of a new day, the unwaning day of the Kingdom of God.

Shattering the gates of hell, Christ brings out Adam and Eve, who, kneeling before Him, implore deliverance. The Savior grasps them by the hand, liberating them from the darkness of hell³⁰. The close bond between the Risen Christ and the parents of the human race, whom He raises with Himself in His own resurrection, announces the good news of the resurrection of all those who have fallen asleep. After bringing Adam and Eve out of hell, the Son of God extended the work of deliverance to all the righteous of the Old Testament.

Here is how the scene of the *Descent into Hades* is described in the Orthodox vision of iconic hermeneia: "the depiction of hell as a dark cave, beneath hills, angels wearing luminous garments, binding Beelzebub, the ruler of hell, with chains, as well as the demons, beating some and driving others away with spears; also several people without clothes and bound with chains, looking upward towards liberation. Against this background, many locks or bolts are broken, and the bronze gates thrown down; the Savior, having around Him boundless light and many angels, treads upon them, holding Adam with His right hand, and Eve with His left. On the right, the Forerunner points towards the Lord, near him stands David and other kings or righteous ones wearing wreaths or crowns; and on the left the prophets Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the righteous Abel, likewise wearing wreaths"³¹.

In this context, the great Alexandrian theologian, Saint Cyril, in the interpretation applied to the *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*, emphasizes in a more understandable way that "The Lord, conquering death, neither could hell hold Him within it..."³². Christ stands in the center, being the bridge of connection not only between the two testaments but also between the two worlds: that of those on earth and that of those who have fallen asleep. On the right side of the icon, we find illustrated the ancestor of the human race, Adam the first-created, followed by his son, the righteous Abel. Abel's presence is crucial: he is the first victim of death in human history, being now the first redeemed. On the left side, we see Eve represented, followed by the kings of the people of Israel, David and Solomon, and the prophets of the *Old Covenant*. Among the latter, the position of honor is held by Saint John the Baptist, in his capacity as Precursor and Baptizer of the Lord. His gesture of pointing towards Christ makes the direct connection with the moment of Baptism, confirming the divine-human identity of the One who descended into hell.

³⁰ Summarizing all the variants encountered throughout time, we can describe four clear iconographic types: Christ bending towards Adam to pull him from the tomb; Christ, in motion, causing Adam to emerge from the tomb, followed by Eve; Christ, positioned frontally, flanked by the kneeling Adam and Eve, and Christ grasping simultaneously the hand of Adam and that of Eve, placed on the same side. One may also encounter, though much more rarely, an iconographic type in which Christ is represented frontally, showing His palms where the marks of the nails are visible; this is the so-called "dogmatic or hymnographic" compositional type (See Patrick SHERRY, *Images of Redemption: Understanding Soteriology through Art and Literature*, London, 2003, pp. 44-46 and 52). In the book *Images of Redemption*, Patrick Sherry pays particular attention to the icon of the *Anastasis* (Descent into hell), considering it a supreme example of the "art of redemption" which succeeds in communicating theological truths that abstract language omits.

³¹ C. SĂNDULESCU-VERNA, *Erminia picturii bizantine după versiunea lui Dionisie din Furna* (The Erminia of Byzantine painting according to the version of Dionysius of Fourna), Banat Metropolitanate Publishing House, Timișoara, 1979, pp. 155-156.

³² St. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Scrieri. Partea a IV-a* (Writings. Part IV), translated by the Holy Priest Confessor Dumitru Stăniloae, in the „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești” anthology, vol. 41, Bucharest, 2000, p. 1141, note 2155.



CONCLUSION

Man was created to taste eternally of true happiness, to feel and respond to divine love, to tend towards this love of the Creator, becoming deified, passing, thus, from image to likeness and becoming a son of God by grace. But by disobeying the divine commandment and submitting to the serpent's deception, man deprived himself of the Creator's love and, clinging through the senses to created things, estranged himself from the high purpose of becoming a god by grace. He thus made himself earth by his own will, as Saint Maximus the Confessor says³³.

God, however, did not cast away His creature, even when it was in sin, but, wishing to reconcile it to Himself, He sent His Son into the world to correct human nature and to redeem it from the bondage of the devil and from the tyranny of death. Man was thus given the chance that, through Christ's sacrifice, he might return to God, be subject to Him, and taste again the joy and love of filial obedience lost through the fall.

Through sin, death which entered the world manifests as an unnatural separation of the soul from the body, being the disastrous consequence of man's exit from communion with God, of the departure from the One who, through His grace, held man's soul and body in a unity and perfect harmony.

The Descent into hell is an event placed in the centrality of Christological economy in Eastern theology, located in the interval between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, that is, on the Great Saturday of the Orthodox Pascha. In this interval, while His body was in the tomb, Christ descended with His deified soul into the *world* of those fallen asleep, to liberate the souls of the righteous from *Sheol*. The Incarnate Son of God *penetrates* the unhappy depths of human existence bearing His own divinity like a blinding light that abolishes the ontological darkness of hell. Through this descent, the Lord shattered the *bars* and *gates* of hell, transforming a state of pain into a path to Heaven.

³³ St. MAXIM THE CONFESSOR, *Ambigua* (Ambiguous), translation, introduction and notes by the Holy Priest Confessor Dumitru Stăniloae, in the „Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești” anthology, vol. 80, Bucharest, 1983, p. 94.



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