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## 'He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows': Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Suffering in His Descent to Hell

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**Providence College, Graduate Theology Program**

**‘He hath borne our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows’:**

**Thomas Aquinas on Christ’s Suffering  
In His Descent to Hell**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Master’s of Arts in Theology**

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I answer that It was fitting for Christ to descend into hell. First of all, because He came to bear our penalty in order to free us from penalty, according to Isaiah 53:4: "Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows." But through sin man had incurred not only the death of the body, but also descent into hell. Consequently since it was fitting for Christ to die in order to deliver us from death, so it was fitting for Him to descend into hell in order to deliver us also from going down into hell.

— St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Question 52, Article 1

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**List of Abbreviations of the Works of Thomas Aquinas**

<i>Summa Theologica</i>	<i>ST</i>
<i>Commentary on the Sentences</i>	<i>Sent.</i>
<i>Reasons for the Faith Against Muslim Objections</i>	<i>De Rationes</i>

## Introduction

Hidden in plain sight in the middle of the Apostles' Creed is an astonishing statement: "He descended into hell." Traditional Catholic theology has cast this article of faith in light of Christ's victory on the cross: so total was Christ's work of salvation that not even Adam and Eve, along with the holy fathers, were beyond His redemptive reach. So complete was His defeat of the devil that He took the spiritual war to his own territory, trampling him underfoot as many ancient icons depict it. In the bowels of hell, Christ announced His victory over sin, death, and Satan. Nothing in the pages that follow is meant to negate or diminish this traditional account of Christ's descent to hell. However, this thesis does argue that there is another side to this story: that, along with these manifestations of His glory, Christ also suffered. The notion that Christ had pain and sorrow during his sojourn in hell has many intellectual parents, but perhaps none so notable as Hans Urs Von Balthasar, who saw the descent as an extension and intensification of Christ's suffering on the cross. This thesis will not attempt to relitigate the many theological issues raised by Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday. Rather, what concerns us is one of his core claims: that Christ suffered in hell. Here an important distinction must be made: one can affirm that Christ suffered in hell to a limited degree without adopting the maximalist position of Balthasar that such suffering was the greatest possible, resulting in His abandonment by the father and the destruction of His humanity. This thesis will demonstrate the viability of this alternative approach to Christ's suffering in hell by examining St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. This approach carries two advantages: first, Aquinas appears to endorse the view proposed above, that Christ endured limited suffering in hell; and, second, since Aquinas is one of the sources of the traditional doctrine, his text affords one the opportunity to explore this

claim within the theological paradigm in which that doctrine has been understood and articulated.

The foundation for this thesis is Aquinas' statement in the Third Part, Question 52, Article 1 that it was fitting for Christ to descend to hell "because He came to bear our penalty in order to free us from penalty, according to Isaiah 53:4: 'Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows.'"<sup>1</sup> This thesis will argue that Aquinas means exactly what he appears to say in this statement – that Christ suffered in hell by bearing our 'infirmities' and carrying our 'sorrows.' This thesis will develop this position further by bringing other sections of the *Summa* to bear in order to illuminate the nature and scope of Christ's sufferings in hell, which fall into two general categories – the pains of loss in the soul separated from its body, and the pains associated with being in hell.

While the focus of these interpretative efforts is the *Summa*, this thesis acknowledges that this text does not exist in isolation but is rather part of a vast corpus of works by Aquinas. One in particular bears mentioning here, the *Compendium of Theology*, in which Aquinas states that Christ's "soul went down to hell as a place, not to undergo punishment there."<sup>2</sup> This statement stands as an apparent contradiction to what we encounter in the *Summa* cited above. Chapter 1 will address this issue, offering two complementary resolutions. First, it will briefly review current scholarship on the dating of Aquinas' texts, showing that the section of the *Compendium* dealing with Christ's descent to hell can be dated before the Third Part of the *Summa*, suggesting a potential development of Aquinas' doctrine of the descent. Second, it will introduce Aquinas' own distinction between 'hell' as referring to the 'evil of penalty' and hell as signifying the 'evil

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1920), Second and Revised Edition, NewAdvent.org, III, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, translated by Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis & London: B. Herder Book Co., 1947, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/Compendium.htm>, c. 235.

of guilt.<sup>3</sup> Understood as a term for a place for the guilty, it cannot be said that Christ suffered in hell; however, it can be said that Christ suffered the pains of hell in the sense that it is a place of penalty. Aquinas therefore does not so much as reverse his prior position in the *Compendium* as develop and expand it through this distinction. This resolution then opens the door to the rest of the discussion of the thesis.

The argument will be presented in three steps. Chapter 1 will examine the meaning of Aquinas' statement in Question 52, demonstrating that it is indeed an endorsement of the view that Christ suffered in His descent to hell. This leads to the question of exactly which pains Christ took on, which Aquinas does not answer explicitly. This thesis aims to fill the gap by a close analysis of Question 52, the related questions on the Passion, and other sections of the *Summa*, constructing a likely answer of what it would have been fitting for Christ to endure based on Aquinas' theology. The result is a two-part answer based on the two 'infirmities,' or 'defects,' that Christ assumed in descending to hell: death and being in hell, each of which has its associated pains and sorrows. In submitting to these defects of human nature it would have been fitting for Christ to choose to also bear the corresponding interior suffering they normally entail (with some important qualifications and exceptions that will be fully detailed in the chapters that follow).

Chapter 3 will focus on the 'defect of death' and the sorrows of Christ's soul over the loss of its body. Chapter 4 then turns to the 'defect of place' (being in hell), considering the suffering proper to hell as a whole and then the pains proper to its individual abodes, drawing upon Aquinas' *Commentary on the Sentences* for additional source material as needed. The chapter will propose that it was fitting for Christ to bear some of the pains of hell in the generic

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<sup>3</sup> ST III, q. 52, art. 1, ad 1.



sense, but that it is unlikely and unfitting for Him to have incurred pain specific to the various abodes, with the exception of limbo. Overall, the suffering Christ endured in hell, due to the dual defects of death and place did not merely represent a change in His metaphysical state, but also entailed real inner ‘psychological’ pain, due to His death and His soul’s descent to hell.

Rather than insisting that these pains were necessary, this thesis follows Aquinas in making arguments on why they were fitting for Christ to endure. A total of seven arguments – three primary and four supplementary ones – based upon Aquinas’ theology of redemption, the Passion, and the Incarnation will be formally identified and outlined in the second chapter.

At this juncture, a question naturally arises: Why study this question and not another? Why argue that the *Summa* supports a doctrine of Christ’s descent to hell in which there was some suffering by the Savior? There are two main reasons for this undertaking. First, in His life, and in His death, a fundamental principle of Catholic Christology is that Christ was alike us in all respects save one, the commission of sin.<sup>4</sup> According to the gospels, Christ hungered when he was in the desert;<sup>5</sup> longed for a place to rest His head;<sup>6</sup> and mourned the death of His fellow man.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in dying on the cross, He permitted Himself to be affected, in both body and soul, by the pains appropriate to that ‘experience,’<sup>8</sup> including the agony in the garden beforehand and the cry of dereliction from the cross itself. It seems unfitting that His three days in a state of being dead in hell would have been an exception to this rule.

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<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), second edition, Vatican.va., accessed November 5, 2021, secs. 456-477.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 4:2. When referencing quotations from Scripture that Aquinas himself makes, Aquinas’ own translated text will be cited. Apart from Aquinas’ texts, the American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE) translation, available online at <https://bible.usccb.org/bible>, will be used for Scripture citations unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 9:58.

<sup>7</sup> John 11:35.

<sup>8</sup> “Jesus, the Son of God, also himself suffered the death that is part of the human condition,” *Catechism*, accessed November 6, 2021, sec. 1009.

The second reason is soteriological. Christ's descent to hell has, perhaps understandably, received less attention than the two events surrounding it, Christ's suffering and death on the cross beforehand, and His resurrection afterwards. Both of these events are of definitive importance to the Christian faith, and its precepts regarding salvation, the nature of the good, and the end times. The claim advanced by this thesis, that Christ's sojourn in hell involved both glory and suffering lends the event a 'mixed character,' echoing elements of the cross even as it looks forward to the resurrection. A better understanding of the descent, it seems, has the potential to shed further light on the Passion and Christ's resurrection.

Perhaps an additional reason is theological curiosity. Both Christ's death on the cross and resurrection were public events, seen by many witnesses, even if in a delayed manner in the case of the resurrection. The descent, on the other hand, is very much a concealed event, because it could not be physically observed at the time and it remains little understood by Christians in the present day. At the most basic level, theology involves the rigorous and orderly exposition of those hidden truths that have been revealed to man. Put another way, theology is like a prism refracts and breaks down the beam of light of revelation into its many wondrous colors, further illuminating those things that were once hidden. Investigation of the doctrine of the descent is a quintessential theological undertaking in that it promises to uncover an event which very much remains hidden from our understanding.

In the *Summa*, Christ's descent to hell garners just one question compared to four for Christ's Passion and death on the cross. Moreover, as to the question of Christ's suffering while in hell, Aquinas leaves us with just a single statement on it. Yet, the *Summa* has more commentary on this matter than might at first appear. Indeed, throughout the text, Aquinas has much to say about the defect of death, the fullness of Christ's humanity, and the extent to which

Christ shared in our weaknesses. Moreover, the questions on the Passion and the descent say more on the topic upon closer examination. It is hoped that in the chapters that follow, these new textual treasures will be unearthed, allowing Aquinas to speak, indirectly, yet nonetheless forcefully, on the question about Christ's suffering in His descent to hell. Ultimately, the objective is not to propose new doctrines, but rather to discover what is already latent in the text of the *Summa*.

## Chapter 1: Aquinas on Christ's Suffering in His Descent to Hell

In Question 52 of the Third Part of the *Summa*, Aquinas states that Christ descended to hell in order “to bear our penalty in order to free us from penalty, according to Isaiah 53:4: “Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows.”<sup>9</sup> This thesis is devoted to explicating the meaning of this statement, which, on its face, appears to be a clear endorsement of the view that Christ suffered the punishment of death both in terms of the metaphysical separation of body and soul and the psychological pain of sorrow that arises from this condition. However, this is not Aquinas’ original view, but one He came to over the course of several works, after initially arguing against Christ suffering in hell. This chapter will briefly summarize the evolution of Aquinas’ view on the issue and then address his statement in Question 52 in both its immediate context and within the broader backdrop of Aquinas’ questions on the Passion. The main objective in this chapter is to establish the fact of Christ’s suffering in hell, at least according to the *Summa*, deferring questions about the precise nature and scope of such suffering to the third and fourth chapters.

In his earlier work, *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas takes the opposite position from the one in the *Summa*, instead arguing that Christ did not suffer any punishment in hell. In the *Commentary*, in responding to the question as to whether Christ had to descend to hell, Aquinas answers in the affirmative, but with an important distinction: Christ descended to hell only in the sense that hell implies a place (*locum*), not hell in the sense of punishment (*poenam*).<sup>10</sup> The reason for this is the nature of Christ’s redemptive mission: while He assumed

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<sup>9</sup> ST III, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences, Book III*, d. 22 q. 2 a. 1 qc. 1 ad 1 as cited by Harm J. M. J. Goris, “Thomas Aquinas on Christ’s Descent to Hell,” in *The Apostles Creed: ‘He Descended Into Hell,’* Studies in Theology

all defects in order to free us from them, He did not assume any defects of grace. Those in hell, Aquinas adds, suffer either in a state of damnation due to mortal sin or purgation due to venial sin.<sup>11</sup> Since these sufferings are due to a defect of grace, Christ could not partake of them. In his analysis of this text, Harm J.M.J Goris concludes, “The reader, then, is left with a rather trivial if not contradictory notion of the defect that Christ carried: it was merely a relocation, a descent to a certain place, but without experiencing any of its torments.”<sup>12</sup>

Aquinas advances a similar viewpoint in the *Compendium of Theology* “even more strongly,” according to Goris.<sup>13</sup> Aquinas states three times that Christ did not experience any punishment in hell, being present in hell only in the sense of being in a different place:<sup>14</sup>

On the part of the soul, death among men is followed, in consequence of sin, by descent into hell, not only as a place, but as a state of punishment. However, just as Christ’s body was buried beneath the earth regarded as a place but not with respect to the common defect of dissolution, so His soul went down to hell as a place, not to undergo punishment there, but rather to release from punishment others who were detained there because of the sin of the first parent for which He had already made full satisfaction by suffering death. Hence nothing remained to be suffered after death, and so without undergoing any punishment He descended locally into hell that He might manifest Himself as the Savior of the living and the dead. For this reason He alone among the dead is said to have been free, since His soul was not subject to punishment in hell and His body was not subject to corruption in the grave.<sup>15</sup>

Here the argument centers on the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross.<sup>16</sup> Aquinas states that Christ has “already made full satisfaction by suffering death ... [h]ence nothing remained to be suffered after death.” Within this text there is a secondary argument as well, based on the necessary parallel between Christ’s body and soul: just as His body did not suffer

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and Religion, Volume 24 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 104. I am also closely relying on the summary of this text offered by Goris, 104-105.

<sup>11</sup> *Sent.*, III, d. 22, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 1, ad 1, as cited by Goris, 104.

<sup>12</sup> Goris, 104.

<sup>13</sup> Goris, 105.

<sup>14</sup> Goris, 105.

<sup>15</sup> *Comp. Theol.*, c. 235.

<sup>16</sup> Goris, 105.

corruption normally associated with being dead, so also His soul was not visited by the punishments normally levied on souls after death.<sup>17</sup>

The *Compendium of Theology* is now dated earlier than previously thought, between 1265 and 1267, making it prior to the Third Part of the *Summa*.<sup>18</sup> Aquinas' statement in the *Summa*, therefore, "represents the third and final change in the development of Aquinas' view," according to Goris.<sup>19</sup> Aquinas declares,

It was fitting for Christ to descend into hell. First of all, because He came to bear our penalty in order to free us from penalty, according to Isaiah 53:4: "Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows." But through sin man had incurred not only the death of the body, but also descent into hell. Consequently since it was fitting for Christ to die in order to deliver us from death, so it was fitting for Him to descend into hell in order to deliver us also from going down into hell.<sup>20</sup>

According to Goris, in the above text Aquinas endorses the viewpoint that Christ endured punishment in the twofold sense noted above, metaphysical separation of body and soul and psychological pain. In hell:

Aquinas says there that Christ carried our punishment/pain in the underworld. Christ came to carry our pain/punishment (*portare poenam nostram*) in order to free us from it. Because of sin, man not only incurred bodily death but also the soul's descent into hell. Therefore, Aquinas argues, as it was fitting that Christ died to free us from death, likewise it was convenient that he should descend into hell to free us from the descent. Christ's descent into hell involved more than a mere change of place and included some kind of punishment and pain.<sup>21</sup>

Aquinas is able to advance this new interpretation without contradicting the principle he laid down in the *Commentary on the Sentences* thanks to a different distinction, "between the 'evil of

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<sup>17</sup> This parallel is based on the notion of the goodness of the body; the doctrine of the Incarnation, in which Christ assumed the fullness of human nature, body and soul; and the doctrine on the hypostatic union, in which Christ's divinity remained united to His body and soul even when His body and soul were separated from each other.

<sup>18</sup> Goris, 105. Goris is citing Jean-Pierre, O.P. *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Vol. 1. The Person and His Work*, revised edition (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), Amazon, 147, 164.

<sup>19</sup> Goris, 105.

<sup>20</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>21</sup> Goris, 105.

punishment' (*malum poenae*) and the 'evil of guilt' (*malum culpae*).<sup>22</sup> Or, as Aquinas himself puts it, "The name of hell stands for an evil of penalty, and not for an evil of guilt."<sup>23</sup> Thus, Christ can assume the punishments and pains of hell without assuming the defects of grace that would be inconsistent with his innocent and sinless state. This naturally leads to the question of which punishments and pains did He suffer, which will be explored in the next two chapters.

For now, two other issues need to be resolved. First, it's important to note that Christ's taking on the penalty of hell was part of his single voluntary decision to suffer and die on the cross. That choice included all the consequences that came with it, including death, the separation of the body and soul, the laying of His body in the tomb, and His soul's descent to hell. Aquinas confirms that Christ chose His suffering in Question 48, stating that "*Suffering [passio], as such, is caused by an outward principle,*" but adds that "*inasmuch as one bears [sustinet] it willingly, it has an inward principle.*"<sup>24</sup> All that Christ suffers is a passion (external principles) that He voluntarily assumes (internal principle), not because it is His due, but because He wills to take upon himself the sin of the human race. Aquinas reaffirms this principle in the context of the descent in Question 52, "As Christ, in order to take our penalties upon Himself, willed His body to be laid in the tomb, so likewise He willed His soul to descend into hell."<sup>25</sup>

Christ's descent to hell was an extension of the Passion on the cross that added to its sufferings. In the *Compendium*, Aquinas suggests that the passion of Christ's death was complete, with "nothing remain[ing] to be suffered."<sup>26</sup> However, in the *Summa*, Aquinas distinguishes between two ways of speaking of Christ's death – His death in becoming (*in fieri*)

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<sup>22</sup> Goris, 106.

<sup>23</sup> *ST III*, q. 52 a. 1 ad 1.

<sup>24</sup> *ST III*, q. 48, art. 1, ad 1.

<sup>25</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 4, co. See also q. 52, art. 1, ad 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Comp. Theol.*, c. 235. I am closely following Goris' in his interpretation of this text. See Goris, 105 and 107.

and in fact (*in facto esse*).<sup>27</sup> Death ‘in becoming’ occurred on the cross, while “death is considered in fact, inasmuch as the separation of soul and body has already taken place.”<sup>28</sup> It is Christ’s death ‘in fact’ about which we are speaking here and in this sense we can say Christ’s sufferings in hell were an extension of His death on the cross because they were its consequence and included in Christ’s choice to offer Himself. The pains of hell added to the sufferings of Christ on the cross because the pains His soul endured in hell, such as the absence of the body, are different than the pains of the cross. The next two chapters will endeavor to define those pains more precisely.

In the meantime, the above discussion brings us to Aquinas’ other initial objection to Christ’s infernal suffering based on his commitment to the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning work on the cross in the *Compendium*. How can this be reconciled with what he says in the *Summa*? Goris does not offer an explanation but the issue is too important to pass on here. The solution is first hinted at in the *Commentary on the Sentences* where Aquinas notes that the pains endured by the damned and those being purged are not satisfactory because they are not in a state of merit.<sup>29</sup> If infernal suffering is not satisfactory, then Christ could have experienced it without calling into question whether the satisfaction He made on the cross was sufficient. Aquinas himself makes this argument in the *Summa*:

Christ's descent into hell was not satisfactory; yet it operated in virtue of the Passion, which was satisfactory, as stated above (III, q. 48, art. 2), but satisfactory in general, since its virtue had to be applied to each individual by something specially personal (III, q. 49, art. 1, ad 4 and 5).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *ST*, III, q. 50, art. 6, co.

<sup>28</sup> *ST*, III, q. 50, art. 6, co.

<sup>29</sup> *ST*, I–II, q. 87, a. 6 and *Sent.*, III, d. 22 q. 2 a. 1 qc. 1 ad 1 as cited in Goris, 96. Again, this summary of Aquinas’ texts relies heavily on Goris’ own account in Goris, 96.

<sup>30</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 8, ad 2. Note: The intra-textual citations added by the English editor to the text in parenthesis have been retained in the quotation but edited to eliminate irregularities and ensure a consistent style. This will be done for all such quotations from the *Summa* that follow.



Aquinas suggests that the descent to hell could be understood as a consequence or effect of the Passion. While the descent to hell was not satisfactory, it is related to his satisfactory death upon the cross to the extent that it did involve suffering.

Now we turn to Question 52 in order to better understand exactly what Aquinas says about Christ's suffering in hell. Because of its importance to the subject of this thesis, it's worth quoting the answer at length:

I answer that, It was fitting for Christ to descend into hell. First of all, because He came to bear our penalty in order to free us from penalty, according to Isaiah 53:4: "Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows." But through sin man had incurred not only the death of the body, but also descent into hell. Consequently, since it was fitting for Christ to die in order to deliver us from death, so it was fitting for Him to descend into hell in order to deliver us also from going down into hell. Hence it is written (Hosea 13:14): "O death, I will be thy death; O hell, I will be thy bite." Secondly, because it was fitting when the devil was overthrown by the Passion that Christ should deliver the captives detained in hell, according to Zechariah 9:11: "Thou also by the blood of Thy Testament hast sent forth Thy prisoners out of the pit." And it is written (Colossians 2:15): "Despoiling the principalities and powers, He hath exposed them confidently." Thirdly, that as He showed forth His power on earth by living and dying, so also He might manifest it in hell, by visiting it and enlightening it. Accordingly it is written (Psalm 23:7): "Lift up your gates, O ye princes," which the gloss thus interprets: "that is—Ye princes of hell, take away your power, whereby hitherto you held men fast in hell"; and so "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow," not only "of them that are in heaven," but likewise "of them that are in hell," as is said in Philippians 2:10.<sup>31</sup>

In the above, Aquinas gives three reasons for Christ descending to hell: 1. to 'bear our penalty' so that we'd be free from it; 2. to free the captives, having overthrown the devil on the cross; and 3. to manifest His power. It is the first reason that concerns us here. Aquinas first establishes the principle that Christ's mission was to 'bear our penalty' in order to 'free us' from it. The phrasing here suggests a kind of transfer: as Christ takes our penalty upon Himself, our burden is lightened. This assumption of the penal burden entails suffering, which, as this thesis argues, includes a psychological suffering in light of Aquinas' quotation of Isaiah 53:4. This much is

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<sup>31</sup> ST III, q. 52, art. 1, co.

clear from Aquinas' quotation of Isaiah 53:4, "Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows." Because this verse helps set the context for Aquinas' discussion of the descent, we will briefly look at how Aquinas interpreted it.

In his commentary on Isaiah, Aquinas confirms that the phrases quoted from Isaiah 53:4 refer to suffering:

[T]ruly, as true man, he hath borne, suffered, our infirmities, infirmities, such as hunger and thirst, and carried our sorrows, of sense, in suffering and sadness; or, our infirmities, our sins, he has taken from us; or in our place, he has suffered punishments: he bore our sins in his body upon the tree (1 Pet 2:24).<sup>32</sup>

According to Aquinas, to have 'borne' our infirmities entailed that Christ 'suffered.' And, likewise, to carry our sorrows encompasses both suffering and sadness. The immediate context in Isaiah is relevant:

[3] Despised, and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity: and his look was as it were hidden and despised, whereupon we esteemed him not. [4] Surely he hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows: and we have thought him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted. [5] But he was wounded for our iniquities, he was bruised for our sins: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his bruises we are healed (Isaiah 53:3-5; Douay-Rheims.)

It's also notable that these verses are taken from the section of Isaiah known as the Suffering Servant narrative. In his commentary on the first verse, Aquinas adopts this reading, describing the chapter as a prophecy of Christ's Passion.<sup>33</sup> This helps explain why Aquinas cites Isaiah 53 so frequently. He quotes from the chapter a total of seven times in Questions 46 to 51 and, significantly, the quotations always are in the context of suffering.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Isaiah 53:4 itself

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Literal Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, translated by Louis St. Hilaire (The Aquinas Institute, 2020), available at <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Isaiah.C53.n960>, accessed March 25, 2021, *ad loc.*

<sup>33</sup> *In Isaiah, ad loc.*

<sup>34</sup> Based on the author's own survey and analysis conducted on March 25, 2021. The references are: *ST III*, q. 46, art. 1, arg. 2, Isaiah 53:7; *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, ad 4, Isaiah 53:4; *ST III*, q. 47, art. 3, arg. 2, Isaiah 53:12; *ST III*, q. 47, art. 3, co., Isaiah 53:10; *ST III*, q. 47, art. 3, co., Isaiah 53:7; *ST III*, q. 49, art. 3, s.c., Isaiah 53:4; q. 51, art. 1, ad 2, s.c., Isaiah 53:9.

accounts for two out of those seven times.<sup>35</sup> Viewed through the lens of Isaiah 53, the Passion is, for Aquinas, an event soaked in suffering. And, in the opening of Question 52, he reminds us that his approach to the descent remains anchored in this perspective.

Christ's bearing of the penalty of hell on our behalf involves two things, according to Aquinas. One is the death of the body; the other is being in hell.<sup>36</sup> As Aquinas puts it, "through sin man had incurred not only the death of the body, but also descent into hell."<sup>37</sup> It is significant that Aquinas classes the descent to hell with Christ's bodily death. He continues to draw a parallel between the cross and the descent: "Consequently, since it was fitting for Christ to die in order to deliver us from death, so it was fitting for Him to descend into hell in order to deliver us also from going down into hell." Aquinas is unequivocal: Christ went to hell so that we don't have to.

Much of the meaning of III.1.52's Answer hinges on the word 'penalty.' In Latin the word is *poena*, which can be translated as both 'penalty' and 'pain,' which is the case in the *Summa*.<sup>38</sup> The double definition of *poena* reflects a linguistic and sociological reality: penalty usually comes with some form of pain. This conceptual pairing also occurs in the *Summa*: wherever else Aquinas discusses *poena* in Questions 46 to 51 it is typically associated with

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<sup>35</sup> See n. 58.

<sup>36</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>37</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>38</sup> See for example *ST* I, q. 48, art. 5, arg. 1, "It would seem that evil is not adequately divided into pain and fault." In Latin this is: "Videtur quod malum insufficienter dividatur per poenam et culpam." The corresponding Latin for Question 52's Answer is: "Primo quidem, quia ipse venerat poenam nostram portare, ut nos a poena eriperet," (Textum Leoninum Romae, 1903 edition, translated by Robert Busa, SJ, Corpus Thomisticum, accessed June 24, 2021). This overlap in meaning between penalty and pain indicated by the single word *poena* is important to keep in mind when assessing the criticisms of scholars like Pitstick, who acknowledges that the descent was part of Christ taking our punishment but simultaneously denies that there was any suffering. This thesis argues elsewhere but especially here that penalty entails pain (Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell*. Grand Rapids: The William B. Eerdmans Company, 2007). See Pitstick 66 on the descent as an assumption of our penalty and 18, 20, 28, 48, 69, and 113 for her discussion about suffering in the descent.

suffering. For example, in Question 50, Aquinas states that a fitting way of satisfaction for another is to “submit oneself to the penalty deserved by that other,” which in the immediate context is Christ’s death for sinners.<sup>39</sup> In Question 49, Aquinas declares that Christ’s Passion has delivered us from the debt of punishment for sin individually and for the human race in general, because “He paid the penalty on our behalf.” It’s clear from context that Christ’s Passion, or His suffering, was the means by which He paid this penalty.<sup>40</sup> Later in Question 49 Aquinas notes that individual sinners are also delivered from punishment after baptism by union with Christ’s Passion:

Hence it is necessary that those who sin after Baptism be likened unto Christ[’s] suffering by some form of punishment or suffering which they endure in their own person; yet, by the co-operation of Christ’s satisfaction, [a] much lighter penalty suffices than one that is proportionate to the sin.<sup>41</sup>

Aquinas is suggesting a sort of tradeoff or exchange here: through Christ, the sinner’s punishment and suffering is lessened. This is due to union or ‘co-operation’ with Christ’s own satisfaction. The conclusion is that Christ took some of the sinner’s own suffering upon Himself, earning them a ‘lighter penalty.’ Similar language to the above also occurs in Question 48:

For the atonement by which one satisfies for self or another is called the price, by which he ransoms himself or someone else from sin and its penalty, according to Daniel 4:24: “Redeem thou thy sins with alms.” Now Christ made satisfaction, not by giving money or anything of the sort, but by bestowing what was of greatest price—Himself—for us. And therefore Christ’s Passion is called our redemption.<sup>42</sup>

Penal suffering connects Christ’s descent to hell to Aquinas’ broader theology of the redemption.

A brief review of that theology will help us to better appreciate the paradigm within which Aquinas approached the topic of the descent. In Question 48, Aquinas aims to answer a

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<sup>39</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 1, co.

<sup>40</sup> *ST III*, q. 49, art. 5, co.

<sup>41</sup> *ST III*, q. 49, art. 3, ad 2.

<sup>42</sup> *ST III*, q. 48, art. 4, co.

fundamental question: How did Christ's Passion save us?<sup>43</sup> Rather than opting for one answer, Aquinas gives four of them. The first is that Christ, as the head of the corporate Church, merited salvation on our behalf by suffering for justice's sake.<sup>44</sup> The second means of salvation was by atonement, which is achieved by offering something the person offended 'loves' as much or more than the offense, which in this case was Christ's 'suffering out of love and obedience.'<sup>45</sup> The third means is Christ's voluntary, true sacrifice which rendered honor due to God 'in order to appease Him.'<sup>46</sup> In the fourth explanation, Aquinas reframes atonement as redemption. Due to sin, man had a dual captivity: he was in bondage to the devil and owed a debt of punishment to God.<sup>47</sup> Christ redeemed us from this double captivity by paying the ransom price, which was Himself.

The last three explanations all have a basic structure: Man sins. Through sin, man incurs some sort of debt or deficit that has to be made up. Then Christ acts in a corrective or remedial way that erases or reverses the consequences of sin, relieving man of his debts. In the first of these three theories of atonement (48.2), Christ offers something equal in value to the severity of man's offense: His own love and obedience. Where man fell short in loving and being obedient to God, Christ made up the difference. The sacrifice theory of atonement (48.3) mirrors this, except the emphasis is shifted to honoring God. Also, the reality of Christ's suffering is reinforced by understanding it as a 'sacrifice,' which Aquinas notes is a 'true' and 'perfect sacrifice' because His human body was 'passible and mortal' and therefore 'fit for

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<sup>43</sup> This is the author's own phrasing of the question, reflecting his understanding of the fundamental issue at stake.

<sup>44</sup> *ST III*, q. 48, art. 1, co.

<sup>45</sup> *ST III*, q. 48, art. 2, co.

<sup>46</sup> *ST III*, q. 48, art. 3, co.

<sup>47</sup> *ST III*, q. 48, art. 4, co.

immolation.<sup>48</sup> Finally, in the redemption theory of atonement (48.4),<sup>49</sup> there is another emphatic shift, from Christ's virtuous actions to His suffering. It is also in the redemption theory of atonement that the idea of a penalty that is owed to God comes to the fore: by paying the penalty, Christ frees us from this debt. Aquinas offers us several overlapping terms to describe this action—ransom, making satisfaction, and redemption. The common denominator is the idea of a price, or penalty, being paid, which is Christ's suffering which was “out of charity.”<sup>50</sup>

The above synopsis of Aquinas' theories of the atonement answers the question of ‘how’ the Passion saves us. An even deeper question is ‘why’ God chose the Passion as a means of salvation for man. Aquinas probes this mystery in Question 46. In Article 3, Aquinas states that Christ's Passion was most suitable to man's salvation because the ‘means employed’ themselves were ‘helpful’ to the end.<sup>51</sup> He continues: “[I]t redounded to man's greater dignity, that ... as man deserved death, so a man by dying should vanquish death.”<sup>52</sup> Man was doomed to be defeated by death; now, through Christ, he is victorious over it. As Aquinas himself notes, there were other possible means of redemption.<sup>53</sup> But redemption through reversal<sup>54</sup> is fitting because it enhances man's dignity by making him the victor. Man is thus both redeemed and, in a sense,

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<sup>48</sup> *ST III*, q. 48, art. 3, ad 1. Aquinas also stresses suffering in ad 2: “Augustine is speaking there of visible figurative sacrifices: and even Christ's Passion, although denoted by other figurative sacrifices, is yet a sign of something to be observed by us, according to 1 Peter 4:1: ‘Christ therefore, having suffered in the flesh, be you also armed with the same thought: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sins: that now he may live the rest of his time in the flesh, not after the desires of men, but according to the will of God.’”

<sup>49</sup> It's also worth noting that after much back and forth, Aquinas seems to settle on this theory. Although Aquinas does not force himself to pick one soteriological theory over another, it's clear that the satisfaction theory of atonement takes priority in his thought. The next article, Article 5, further probes why it was fitting for Christ to be our Redeemer and the next question, Question 49, elaborates on the concept of redemption, examining our freedom from sin (Article 1), deliverance from the devil (Article 2), and freedom from the debt of punishment owed to God (Article 3).

<sup>50</sup> *ST III*, q. 48, art. 3, ad 3.

<sup>51</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 3, co.

<sup>52</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 3, co.

<sup>53</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 2.

<sup>54</sup> This phrase is an adaption of the title, of G.K. Beale's book, *Redemptive Reversals and the Ironic Overturning of Human Wisdom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

the redeemer, since he was redeemed by a man (Christ, who was fully man). This point is underscored by Aquinas' citation of 1 Corinthians 15:57, "Thanks be to God who hath given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." This image of *Christus Victor* is inclusive: the victory of Christ over death and sin (1 Corinthians 15:56) is not His alone but is shared with, or 'given' to us.

Redemption does not just involve a gift; something is also 'taken' from us: the burden of the penalty for sin. Aquinas makes this clear in Question 46, quoting 2 Corinthians 5:21, which states that Christ was 'made sin' 'for us.'<sup>55</sup> Aquinas clarifies that this is due to the 'penalty of sin.'<sup>56</sup> Likewise, Aquinas notes that Galatians 3:13 says Christ was 'made a curse for us.'<sup>57</sup> Aquinas repeats the point, stating that Christ "took the curse upon himself."<sup>58</sup>

Redemption therefore involved not just a reversal, but an exchange: we are given victory and Christ takes our penalty upon himself.<sup>59</sup> In patristic terms, this is known as the *admirabile commercium*, or "the marvelous exchange,"<sup>60</sup> in which God becoming man so that we might become more like God.<sup>61</sup> It also entails God-as-man taking on our 'sadness' so that we might take on his 'joy,' as St. Ambrose put it. It is worth quoting Ambrose here to illustrate the point:

He would have given me less, had he not taken on my emotions. Thus he suffered affliction for me, he who did not have anything to suffer for himself. Setting aside the enjoyment of his divinity, he is afflicted with the annoyance of my weakness. He took on my sadness so that he might bestow on me his joy.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 4. ad 3.

<sup>56</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 4. ad 3.

<sup>57</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 4. ad 3.

<sup>58</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 4. ad 3.

<sup>59</sup> Roch A. Kereszty, *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*, revised and updated third Edition, Communio Book (New York City: The Society of Saint Paul, 2011), 274.

<sup>60</sup> Kereszty, 212-214.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> St. Ambrose, *Commentary on Luke*, 10:56, as cited in Kereszty, 214.

It follows that, for this redemption to be complete, Christ's taking on the penalty must be complete; anything less means that man's vicarious victory through Christ would be just a partial triumph. Just as Christ defeated death on the cross for the sake of man, so also did He conquer hell in His descent. The fittingness of the descent, as a sort of 'completion' of the work of the cross, comes to the fore in Aquinas' commentary on the creed:

There are four reasons why Christ together with His soul descended to the underworld. First, He wished to take upon Himself *the entire punishment* for our sin, and thus atone for its entire guilt. The punishment for the sin of man was not alone death of the body, but there was also a punishment of the soul. ... [emphasis added].<sup>63</sup>

Aquinas is suggesting that just as Christ's death in the body on the cross was fitting for the atonement, so also was His soul's descent to hell. The descent 'completes' the atonement, which can be understood in the sense that it is a consequence of Christ's death on the cross: the descent is not something 'added' to the cross but rather is included with it as its consequence.

Aquinas seems to adhere to this principle of total atonement in the earlier questions in the *Summa*. For example, in Question 46, Aquinas states that Christ endured all sufferings, generically speaking:

Human sufferings may be considered under two aspects. First of all, specifically, and in this way it was not necessary for Christ to endure them all, since many are mutually exclusive, as burning and drowning; for we are dealing now with sufferings inflicted from without, since it was not befitting for Him to endure those arising from within, such as bodily ailments, as already stated (III, q. 14, art. 4). But, speaking generically, He did endure every human suffering.<sup>64</sup>

Aquinas identifies three classes of suffering. First, there is the suffering caused by men.<sup>65</sup> Within this class, Christ suffered rejection from the Gentiles and Jews, men and women, and from the

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in Symbolum Apostolorum*, translated by Joseph B. Collins (New York, 1939), edited and formatted by Joseph Kenny, O.P., <https://isidore.co/aquinas/Creed.htm>, accessed June 24, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> *ST* III, q. 46, art. 5. co.

<sup>65</sup> *ST* III, q. 46, art. 5. co.



upper and lower classes.<sup>66</sup> The second class of sufferings is complementary to the first: it is subdivided not according to the sources of suffering but the kinds of effects. These include: loss of social connections, damage to social standing, deprivation of possessions, distress in the soul, and bodily pain.<sup>67</sup> For Christ this means the abandonment of friends, insults and mockeries, the ripping away of His garments, sadness and fear in His soul, and bodily harm due to His wounds.<sup>68</sup> The third class of sufferings overlaps with one of the previous categories: it concerns the members of Christ's body, such as the head which was pierced with thorns, or His hands and feet, which were punctured by nails.<sup>69</sup> Aquinas' notes that Christ experienced all three categories of suffering, but not necessarily every individual instance of suffering within each category. So, for example, He suffered harm to His bodily members in the crucifixion, but He did not also experience a beheading or death by a firing squad.<sup>70</sup> The point is that Christ relieved us from all types of suffering, even if He did not experience every possible form of suffering. If this is the case, then it means that in order to redeem us from both dying and going to hell, Christ had to both die and go to hell (without necessarily undergoing all the possible pains of dying and being in hell). This is essentially Aquinas' argument in Question 52:

He came to bear our penalty in order to free us from penalty, according to Isaiah 53:4: "Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows." But through sin man had incurred not only the death of the body, but also descent into hell. Consequently since it was fitting for Christ to die in order to deliver us from death, so it was fitting for Him to descend into hell in order to deliver us also from going down into hell.<sup>71</sup>

Aquinas constantly stresses the parallels between Christ's death and descent: both are due to the consequences of sin, both involve delivering us from those consequences, and both achieve that

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<sup>66</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5. co.

<sup>67</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5. co.

<sup>68</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5. co.

<sup>69</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5. co.

<sup>70</sup> Setting aside the fact that this would have been a historical anachronism.

<sup>71</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 1, co.

end by ‘bearing’ a penalty that entails taking on our infirmities and sorrows. At every key point Christ’s descent to hell parallels His death, including the element of suffering. This does not necessarily mean that Christ suffered every pain of hell—just as He did not experience every single suffering possible on the cross.

This chapter has chronicled the development of Aquinas’ doctrine of Christ’s descent to hell, culminating in his statement in the *Summa*, Part III, Question 52 that Christ went to the underworld in order to bear our penalty. Christ did so without undermining the sufficiency of the cross or providing further atonement for our sins. The descent fittingly involved some kind suffering, in light of the analysis of Christ bearing our *poena* in Question 52. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrated that just as Christ did not experience every single suffering possible on the cross, so also He could have endured some of the sufferings of hell, without having to experience *all* of them. Ultimately, the objective of this chapter has been to establish a fundamental point: that Aquinas argues in the *Summa* that Christ suffers in His descent to hell. This chapter has not endeavored to say anything yet about the character or extent of those sufferings. That will be the task of the last two chapters. Chapter 3 will examine the types of sufferings that the soul experiences when separated from the body in death. It will also discuss why Christ as fully man would have had these pains. Then, Chapter 4 will address the different types of afflictions present in hell and which ones are applicable to Christ. But first, in the next chapter, we must complete the discussion, started in this chapter, for why it was fitting for Christ to suffer in hell.

## Chapter 2: Why It Was Fitting for Christ to Suffer in Hell

The first step in our inquiry was establishing that Aquinas does, in fact, teach in the *Summa* that Christ suffered in His descent to hell. Now we move to the next question: *Why* did Christ suffer in hell? In seeking an answer we will be guided by Aquinas' criterion of fittingness, as opposed to necessity. This criterion recognizes that Christ's Passion and death was by choice; it was not necessary. To claim otherwise would impinge upon God's freedom, which would be contrary to His omnipotent nature. Aquinas defines something as fitting as that "which belongs to it by reason of its very nature; thus, to reason befits man, since this belongs to him because he is of a rational nature."<sup>72</sup> Thus, secondarily the criterion of fittingness recognizes that some things would be fitting – and others not – based on Christ's full humanity, dignity, and sinlessness. In all, seven arguments will be adduced below for why it was fitting for Christ's suffering in His descent into hell, building upon Aquinas' theologies of the redemption, the Incarnation, and the Passion. Three are presented as primary theories of the descent that will be fully fleshed out. The other four are offered as supplementary reasons that will be briefly introduced merely to demonstrate the extent to which it can be said that Christ's suffering in hell was fitting. These arguments based on fittingness will become the template according to which the next two chapters define the nature of Christ's pains and sorrows in hell.

The first reason it was fitting for Christ has already been alluded to in the previous chapter in our treatment of Aquinas' theology of atonement. Now we will formally reintroduce and frame the prior argument as one of fittingness. As discussed in the previous chapter, in Question 52 Aquinas states that it was fitting for Christ to descend to hell in order to bear our penalty.<sup>73</sup> Since this penalty would normally entail pain and sorrow over the loss of the body it

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<sup>72</sup> *ST III*, q. 1, art. 1, co.

<sup>73</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 1, co.

would have been fitting for Christ to share in these sufferings as part of his decision to bear our penalty by going to hell: Christ therefore just did not suffer death in a metaphysical sense as the separation of the body and soul, He also endured the ‘psychological’ pain in His soul over the loss of His body. Aquinas himself, in quoting Isaiah 53:4 (“Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows”), has again left us a textual clue that points us in the direction of this conclusion. The text from Isaiah describes two aspects of death – its objective reality (the “infirmities”) and one’s subjective ‘experience’ of that reality (“sorrows”).<sup>74</sup> That bipartite structure is consonant with the argument that Christ’s decision to submit Himself to death and the separation of the body and soul included the psychological pains associated with that state. Because the relationship between Christ’s descent to hell and the atonement was thoroughly addressed in previous chapter, we will not repeat that discussion here. Instead, we will turn to the next reason why Christ’s suffering in hell was fitting.

In addition to the soteriological argument for the fittingness of Christ’s sufferings in hell, a second one, which will be fully developed in the third chapter, is suggested by the ontological realities of death and its associated psychological pains: it would have been fitting for Christ to also take on the pains of death in order to share in the common lot of men. The task of the next chapter will be to lay the Christological and anthropological foundations of this position and to define the pains of death that Christ had. In this chapter, we will focus our attention on the why it was *fitting* for the pains of death to afflict Christ. Whereas the previous argument was

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<sup>74</sup> Two senses of “experience” are operative here: the above sense of “having an experience” and also the sense that Aquinas uses it in *ST* III, q. 50, ad 1, ad1, which will be explained and explored shortly below. ‘Experience’ is not intended to be used with the other Thomistic sense in mind – that of experience as data gained through physical sensory inputs.

soteriological and substitutionary,<sup>75</sup> this one highlights Christ's Incarnational solidarity with all men. Because Christ was fully human it was fitting for Him to share in the human experience of death<sup>76</sup> ("in fact"), including its pains and sorrows, since He had assumed a human nature in its fullness that was "mutable, corporeal, and subject to penalty" with the only exception of the evil of fault, which He did not take on. Death was one of the penalties levied on all men on account of the original sin of our first parents.<sup>77</sup> Death is defined as consisting of a twofold corruption of the body: corruption in the sense of the dissolution of the union body and the soul and, secondly, in the sense of the putrefaction of the body.<sup>78</sup> Christ was exempted from corruption in the second sense since His death was by choice, not due to the weakness of His nature,<sup>79</sup> but He was subject to corruption in the first sense. Otherwise, "Christ's body would not be consubstantial with us, nor truly dead."<sup>80</sup> For this reason, it would have been fitting for Christ to undergo both the metaphysical separation of the body and soul in death as well as the psychological pains that occur when a soul is without a body.

Aquinas does not state this explicitly; however, he does suggest it in Question 50 in a manner that at least lends weight to the argument presented above:

Christ is the fountain of life, as God, and not as man: but He died as man, and not as God. Hence Augustine [Vigilius Tapsensis] says against Felician: "Far be it from us to suppose that Christ so felt [*senserit*] death that He lost His life inasmuch as He is life in Himself; for, were it so, the fountain of life would have run dry. Accordingly, He experienced [*sensit*] death by sharing in our human feeling [*affectus*], which of His own accord He

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<sup>75</sup> This thesis aims to use the word "substitutionary" only in the sense in which it can be understood in the context of Aquinas' thought. It is maintained here that this word is appropriate given Aquinas' own language, e.g. "It was fitting for Him to descend into hell in order to deliver us also from going down into hell," *ST III*, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>76</sup> See *ST III*, q. 50, art. 1, ad 1.

<sup>77</sup> *ST II-II*, q. 164, art. 1, co.

<sup>78</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 5, co.

<sup>79</sup> *ST III*, q. 51, art. 3, co.

<sup>80</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 5, co.

had taken upon Himself, but He did not lose the power of His Nature, through which He gives life to all things.”<sup>81</sup>

Aquinas states that Christ “experienced” death in quasi-psychological terms –“by sharing in our human feeling.” This language is markedly different than the objective, forensic-style terminology abundant elsewhere in Articles 50 and 51, such as Aquinas’ analysis of the issue of corruption and putrefaction cited above. The English word ‘feeling’ connotes the notion of death not just as a metaphysical condition but also as a psychological experience,<sup>82</sup> which, as discussed above, involves the ‘pain of loss’ for those undergoing it. An examination of the underlying Latin text appears to confirm this reading.

*Feeling* in Latin is *affectus*,<sup>83</sup> which Lewis and Short define as a “state of body, and esp. of mind produced in one by some influence, a state or disposition of mind, affection, mood.”<sup>84</sup> *Affectus* can denote both an objective state and one’s subjective experience of that state.<sup>85</sup> Both meanings seem to apply here: Christ chose to die in order to both share in the common human condition and the common psychological response to that condition.<sup>86</sup> The word ‘experience’ is also noteworthy. The corresponding Latin word is *sensit*, defined by Lewis and Short as “to discern by the senses; to feel, hear, see, etc.; to perceive, be sensible of.” Without the body, the soul would have been deprived of its normal sensory inputs; thus, Aquinas seems to be

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<sup>81</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 1, ad 1. Aquinas says he is quoting Augustine but a note in the text states that the source is actually Vigilius Tapsensis, also known as Vergil of Tapso, a bishop and theological writer in North Africa in the fifth century.

<sup>82</sup> Two senses of “experience” are operative here: the above sense of “having an experience” and also the sense that Aquinas uses it in *ST III*, q. 50, ad 1, ad 1, as discussed above in n. 74.

<sup>83</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, ad 1, ad 1, *Textum Leoninum Romae*, accessed May 4, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> “Affectus,” *A Latin Dictionary*, founded on Andrews’ edition of Freund’s Latin dictionary, revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), Perseus, accessed May 4, 2021, *ad loc.*

<sup>85</sup> Again, “experience” in this context refers to an interior experience, not an exterior one based on sensory inputs.

<sup>86</sup> It’s also interesting to note that although ‘affectus’ is not synonymous with ‘passion’ the two are related: in fact, Lewis and Short identify the Greek term pathos, as one of two species of affectus. (The other is ethos.) “Affectus,” Lewis Short, *ad loc.*

suggesting that Christ’s soul interiorly perceived or apprehended the reality of His death. From the immediate context of the Reply to Objection 1, it is clear that Aquinas is referring to Christ’s death “in fact” as the question of how Christ could still be the fountain of life loses its acuteness if He is still alive (death “in becoming.”) This is reinforced by the overall context of Article 1, **where** the emphasis lies on Christ’s death in fact,<sup>87</sup> reflecting the focus of Question 50, which is clearly posterior to the questions about Christ’s process of dying in the Passion (Questions 46 to 49). Indeed, it is in Question 50, Article 6 where Aquinas draws the distinction between Christ’s death “in fact” and “in becoming” and clarifies that now he is dealing with the topic of death in fact.<sup>88</sup> *Sensit* is a conspicuous choice in terms since the patristic author whom Aquinas is citing did not need to use this word, as there are several other Latin terms and idioms for death, such as *morior*, meaning “to pass away,” and *expiro*, “to expire or breathe out one’s last.” Likewise, Aquinas employs *morior* numerous times over the course of Questions 46 to 50 and, with construction *mortuus fuit* – the noun for *death* combined with the verb *to be* – when referring to the death of Christ.<sup>89</sup> The use of *sensit* instead of the conventional alternatives suggests that the original author – and Aquinas in citing it – meant to call attention to Christ’s subjective ‘experience’ of death, instead of merely just acknowledging its objective facticity. (Again,

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<sup>87</sup> The Answer in Article 1 outlines several reasons for why it was fitting to Christ to die. Each one either directly addresses Christ’s death “in fact” or mentions both His dying and His death, with the emphasis on the later. The first concerns Christ’s taking on our penalty, which is death itself, not just the process of dying. The second is clearly about death itself since Aquinas discusses Christ’s state after His dying, noting that had Christ not undergone the separation of the body and the soul the truth of the Incarnation would have been in doubt. The third refers to dying and the fear of death itself, which Christ, by taking on *both*, relieved us of our fear. The fourth reason, which is more allegorical, mentions Christ’s dying but emphasizes the state of death in drawing the analogy of being “dead to sin.” The fifth point, which looks forward to the resurrection, clearly presumes a state of death, not the process of dying. While there is some mention of “dying” in these points, it is evident that the focus of the discussion has shifted from Christ’s dying to the reality of His death (“in fact”).

<sup>88</sup> *ST* III, q. 50, art. 6, co.

<sup>89</sup> Based on the author’s own survey of the Latin text, conducted on May 4, 2021. Textum Leoninum Romae.

Aquinas, along with his patristic source, does not say what that subjective experience would have been, which will be the task of the next chapter.)

Thus far, two major arguments for fittingness have been presented, one soteriological and one Incarnational. The first is put forth by Aquinas himself, but is not fully developed. The second is suggested by his overall anthropology and theology of the Incarnation, and His statement in Question 50. There is a third major reason for why it would have been fitting for Christ to suffer in hell that draws upon the correspondence between His Passion and His descent, which has been framed in this thesis in terms of the distinction between death “in becoming” (the Passion on the cross) and “in fact” (His body’s burial and soul’s descent to hell). This formulation suggests that there should be some complementarity between the two. In other words, it seems fitting that death “in fact” should resemble Christ’s dying (death “in becoming”). This most obvious common element, highlighted in this and the previous chapter, is suffering. Part of this suffering involved the anticipation of more to come. Specifically, the anticipatory sorrows and fears that Christ exhibited over His impending death on the cross presupposed a painful state of being dead. Therefore, it would have been fitting for Him to be sorrowful in death in fulfillment of these preemptive pains.

On the cross, Christ endured not only the “sensible pains” of the crucifixion; He also had “internal pain” “caused from the apprehension of something hurtful, and this is termed ‘sadness.’”<sup>90</sup> (Earlier in the *Summa* Aquinas appears to use sorrow and sadness interchangeably, so that convention will be followed here.)<sup>91</sup> In addition to this sadness, Christ also had fear in His soul.<sup>92</sup> Earlier in the Third Part, Aquinas distinguishes between sorrow and fear in chronological

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<sup>90</sup> *ST* III, q. 46, art. 6, co.

<sup>91</sup> See especially *ST* III, q. 15, art. 6, arg. 1, ad 1 and ad 2.

<sup>92</sup> *ST* III, q. 46, art. 5, co.



terms: sorrow concerns a present evil while fear arises over future ones.<sup>93</sup> However, when a future event, such as Christ's death, is certain, then it can become a source of anticipatory sorrow as well as fear, according to Aquinas.<sup>94</sup> This interpretation is consistent with Aquinas' treatment of Christ's sadness in Article 46. Aquinas identifies multiple causes of this sadness, including both present pain due to the "wounding of His body" as well as the future "loss of His bodily life."<sup>95</sup> Aquinas' account of sorrow and fear in Christ suggests two conclusions. First, if Christ while dying (death "in becoming") had sorrow over future pain, does this not presuppose that there was something to be sad about, including the pains of death itself (death "in fact")? Second, if Christ sorrowed over the future loss of life in His body, would He not have sorrowed over the absence of life in His body when it had actually occurred?

As to the second question, Aquinas suggests an affirmative answer without being explicit about it. Strikingly, Aquinas does actually say that Christ would be greatly grieved over the loss of His life, but he phrases this as a hypothetical in Article 46, before his articles on Christ's death and descent to hell:

But such was the dignity of Christ's life in the body, especially on account of the Godhead united with it, that its loss, even for one hour, would be a matter of greater grief than the loss of another man's life for howsoever long a time. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. iii) that the man of virtue loves his life all the more in proportion as he knows it to be better; and yet he exposes it for virtue's sake.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *ST III*, q. 15, art. 7, co.

<sup>94</sup> This interpretation is based on these lines: "Hence fear may be considered in two ways. First, inasmuch as the sensitive appetite naturally shrinks from bodily hurt, by sorrow if it is present, and by fear if it is future; and thus fear was in Christ, even as sorrow. Secondly, fear may be considered in the uncertainty of the future event, as when at night we are frightened at a sound, not knowing what it is; and in this way there was no fear in Christ, as Damascene says (*De Fide Orth.* iii, 23)," *ST III*, q. 15, art. 7, co.

<sup>95</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, co.

<sup>96</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, ad 4.

Although the wording is slightly vague,<sup>97</sup> it is clear by the phrase “life in the body” that Aquinas is referring to Christ’s death, understood as the separation of the body and soul.<sup>98</sup> To paraphrase him, Aquinas is saying that Christ would grieve over His death (“in fact”) were it to last for just one hour. However, the hypothetical scenario that Aquinas presents became a reality: Christ did die and He abided in death not just for an hour but for three days. Based on the context, Aquinas appears to consider Christ’s death in hypothetical terms in order to emphasize His anticipatory grief over the impending loss of His life while dying (death “in becoming”) on the cross. But the principle he lays down clearly applies to Christ’s descent as well. The fact that Aquinas drew a similar conclusion out of his own theology confirms that the interpretation being advanced here is a valid one, even if it is one that Aquinas did not explicitly put forth himself.

The above argument for fittingness, based on the connections between Christ’s sorrows on the cross and those in hell, is based on the premise that there are some similarities between His death “in becoming” and “in fact.” Now we will build on that premise by showing that the factors that exacerbated Christ’s pains on the cross, also would have had a similar effect on those pains in hell. Already, we have seen several other ways in which Christ’s process of dying is mirrored in the reality of His death. Both His dying and death: 1. involved metaphysical and psychological suffering,<sup>99</sup> 2. entailed taking our penalty upon Himself,<sup>100</sup> 3. were conducive to our salvation,<sup>101</sup> and 4. were freely undertaken by Christ.<sup>102</sup> In addition to these commonalities, an analysis of the Passion articles, in particular, Article 46, reveals several pain-intensifying

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<sup>97</sup> It does not occur any other time in the *Summa* itself (based on the author’s own survey of the text).

<sup>98</sup> It is clear from repeated references to it in Question that 50 that Aquinas understands death to mean the separation of the body and the soul.

<sup>99</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>100</sup> *ST* III, q. 46, art. 1, co.

<sup>101</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 6, co.

<sup>102</sup> *ST* III, q. 50, art. 1, ad 1, ad 2; *ST* III, q. 51, art. 3, co.

factors and conditions that also would apply to Christ's descent to hell. The first two follow from the dignity of Christ's "life in the body":

But such was the dignity of Christ's life in the body, especially on account of the Godhead united with it, that its loss, even for one hour, would be a matter of greater grief than the loss of another man's life for howsoever long a time. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. iii) that the man of virtue loves his life all the more in proportion as he knows it to be better; and yet he exposes it for virtue's sake.<sup>103</sup>

First, Christ's grief over His death would have been greater due to its object: the "dignity" of His body, especially due to its union with the Godhead.<sup>104</sup> If Christ grieved over His impending death on the cross, it seems likely he would have also sorrowed over it after it had occurred. His grief was also greater due to the subject "because it flowed from a greater wisdom and charity."<sup>105</sup> Third, Christ's perfections in body and soul made His suffering more intense, according to Aquinas:

The magnitude of His suffering may be considered, secondly, from the susceptibility of the sufferer as to both soul and body. For His body was endowed with a most perfect constitution, since it was fashioned miraculously by the operation of the Holy Ghost; just as some other things made by miracles are better than others, as Chrysostom says (Hom. xxii in Joan.) respecting the wine into which Christ changed the water at the wedding-feast. And, consequently, Christ's sense of touch, the sensitiveness of which is the reason for our feeling pain, was most acute. His soul likewise, from its interior powers, apprehended most vehemently all the causes of sadness.<sup>106</sup>

Christ's human perfections intensified both His capacity for pain (His body's sensitivity) and His soul's ability to be aware of that pain, which Aquinas describes as its interior power to "apprehend [...] most vehemently all the causes of sadness." It would have been fitting for His

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<sup>103</sup> ST III, q. 46, art. 6, ad 4.

<sup>104</sup> ST III, q. 46, art. 6, ad 4.

<sup>105</sup> ST III, q. 46, art. 6, ad 4. In context, Aquinas is talking about Christ's grief over the sins of men and His grief over the loss of life in His body. Both could apply to the descent but this chapter is focusing on the likelihood that Christ grieved over the loss of His body.

<sup>106</sup> ST III, q. 46, art. 6, co.

soul to ‘vehemently apprehend’ what we could speak of as one of the greatest pains there is for a soul: the pain of not having a body.

Fourth and finally, Christ’s pains would have been exacerbated by the fact that He chose them. In Question 50, Aquinas reminds us of the voluntary nature of Christ’s sufferings: “He experienced death by sharing in our human feeling, which of His own accord He had taken upon Himself.”<sup>107</sup> Aquinas twice alludes to Christ’s free choice in the phrases ‘of His own accord’ and ‘He had taken upon Himself.’ Because Christ chose it, it was not necessary; Aquinas suggests this made it that much more painful:

[T]he magnitude of the pain of Christ's suffering can be reckoned by this, that the pain and sorrow were accepted voluntarily, to the end of men's deliverance from sin; and consequently He embraced the amount of pain proportionate to the magnitude of the fruit which resulted therefrom.<sup>108</sup>

Christ’s pain and sorrows were voluntary; He did not deserve them. Again, this adds to the pain of the sufferer, according to Aquinas: the pain of the innocent man, he writes, “is more intensified by reason of his innocence, in so far as he deems the hurt inflicted to be the more undeserved.”<sup>109</sup> In a way, Christ’s decision to bear His pains added to them in a double manner. In addition to the overall choice to suffer, there is a derivative decision to permit each of His parts to undergo the pains that He has elected for Himself:

[T]he magnitude of Christ’s suffering can be estimated from the singleness of His pain and sadness. In other sufferers the interior sadness is mitigated, and even the exterior suffering, from some consideration of reason, by some derivation or redundancy from the higher powers into the lower; but it was not so with the suffering Christ, because "He permitted each one of His powers to exercise its proper function," as Damascene says (*De Fide Orth.* iii).<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 1, ad 1.

<sup>108</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, co.

<sup>109</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, ad 5.

<sup>110</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, co.

While Christ was dying on the cross (death “in becoming”) He permitted each one of His powers to exercise its function. It seems fitting that He would have done so in death (death “in fact”) as well. The foregoing discussion about factors that would have exacerbated Christ’s suffering in hell contributes to the overall argument of this chapter, which is that Christ’s soul, in having its body taken away in death, was in pain, grieving this loss. If it can be demonstrated that such pain could have been intensified, it is hoped at the very least this makes us take the reality of Christ’s pains in death seriously.

At this point, this chapter has presented three arguments for why it was fitting for Christ to suffer in hell based on soteriological substitution, Incarnational solidarity, and the inner psychological coherence between the pains of the cross and the descent. At this juncture, it is worth noting that there are four more conceivable reasons for why Christ’s pains in death were fitting, based on Article 46. Space does not permit a full treatment of each one; rather, we will briefly identify and explain each one below, in the hopes that this adds additional context and credibility to the arguments that have already been presented.

In addition to the above three reasons, four additional reasons can be given for why Christ’s suffering in hell was fitting. First, Christ’s pains in hell would have been fitting as a further expression of God’s love. In Article 46, Aquinas states that it was fitting for Christ to bear the cross because it showed how much God loves man and invites them to a reciprocal response.<sup>111</sup> The descent to hell, by adding to these pains and sorrows in a distinct and significant manner, would further impress upon men the depths of God’s love. Christ’s pain over the loss of His body in death could only occur in the descent to hell after His body had been shorn from His soul. Before that point, His grief over the loss of His life in the body could only have been

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<sup>111</sup> ST III, q. 46, art. 3, co.

anticipatory. That Christ took on suffering to the maximum extent possible – into death, in the bowels of the underworld – serves as a further testament to His maximum love for us. Therefore, it was fitting for Him to suffer the soul’s pains and sorrows over the actual loss of His body, in addition His sufferings on the cross.

Second, Christ’s sufferings in death also would have set an example of virtue. This is another reason why Aquinas says Christ’s crucifixion was fitting.<sup>112</sup> Aquinas enumerates several virtues, but one seems particularly applicable to the descent: obedience. Philippians 2:8 highlights obedience as one of the main virtues Christ exhibited on the cross: “He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross; for which cause God also exalted Him.”<sup>113</sup> This verse clearly plays a role in Aquinas’ thoughts on the Passion, as he cites it twice (in Questions 46 and 49).<sup>114</sup> In context, both Philippians and Aquinas’ use of it seem to concern Christ’s death (“in becoming”) on the cross. However, the principle espoused carries over to the descent: taking on the pains of death itself (death “in fact”) serve as a further fitting demonstration of the total fullness of Christ’s obedience to God: Christ’s obedience knew no limits as His submission to pain did not stop at the cross, but continued into His death and descent. By taking on every possible pain that was feasible and fitting for Him,<sup>115</sup> Christ’s obedience was carried out to the maximum extent possible.

A third basis for the fittingness of Christ’s pains in the descent is as an additional deterrent for living men to sin. In Question 46, Aquinas says that the “great price” Christ paid on

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<sup>112</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 3, co.

<sup>113</sup> As cited by Aquinas in *ST III*, q. 46, art. 4, s.c.

<sup>114</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 4, s.c. and *ST III*, q. 49, art. 6, s.c.

<sup>115</sup> Some pains would not have been feasible or fitting, such as death by drowning or beheading since Christ instead elected for crucifixion. Likewise, the pain of damnation and the loss of the beatific vision that entails would not have been feasible since it would have been contrary to Christ’s continued enjoyment of the beatific vision. But the pains described here are not contrary to the beatific vision, just as Christ’s pains on the cross weren’t, and they were fitting for Him to take on.

the cross could move men to refrain from sin.<sup>116</sup> Aquinas does not specify which motive would be at play here, but, based on context, two suggest themselves: either a kind of holy awe over the extent of Christ's sufferings or grief over what it took to atone for mankind's sins. Either way, the principle applies to Christ's descent: knowing that the price Christ paid included the pains of death would add to men's holy fear – or sorrow – leading them abstain from further sin.

A fourth argument for fittingness stems from Aquinas' claim in Question 46, Article 5 that Christ "endure[d] all classes of sufferings."<sup>117</sup> But the pains of bodily loss in death ("in fact") is one class of pain that Christ could not have endured on the cross which is restricted to those pains associated with dying (death "in becoming"). Therefore, to take on all classes of suffering, it would have been fitting for Christ to also assume the pains of death. Aquinas does not actually articulate why suffering all classes of pain is fitting, but one suggests itself, the principle of completism. On the cross, Christ was inflicted with every conceivable category of pain and sorrow. Aquinas groups them into three categories: the agents inflicting the pain, which encompasses multiple races, genders, and social classes; the types of pain inflicted, which includes the loss of friends, damage to His reputation, insults to His honor; the deprivation of His possessions in being stripped; the passions in His soul like sadness and fear; and His many bodily wounds.<sup>118</sup> Aquinas further subdivides those bodily pains according to Christ's bodily members which received His many pains and His bodily senses which perceived those pains.<sup>119</sup> In sum, Christ Passion incorporated every conceivable pain possible in a crucifixion. Aquinas does not provide an explanation in this article for why it was important for Christ's sufferings on

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<sup>116</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:20: "You are bought with a great price: glorify and bear God in your body," as cited in *ST III*, q. 46, art. 3, co.

<sup>117</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5, ad 3.

<sup>118</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5, co.

<sup>119</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5, co.

the cross to have this character of completism, but one clue comes in the next article. While Article 5 describes Christ's Passion in terms of its extensiveness, Article 6 probes its intensity.

There, the final reply includes a fuller articulation of fittingness of maximal completeness:

Christ willed to deliver the human race from sins not merely by His power, but also according to justice. And therefore He did not simply weigh what great virtue His suffering would have from union with the Godhead, but also how much, according to His human nature, His pain would avail for so great a satisfaction.<sup>120</sup>

While Christ could have saved us with just a single pain, Aquinas seems to be saying, He decided to redeem us with all of them, or at least every class of pains. In an earlier question, Aquinas draws an analogy with nature, noting that using several means in order to do something is more fitting, just as nature uses two eyes to see when one could have achieved the same end.<sup>121</sup> Based on this principle, adding the sufferings of death itself to those of the cross would have been that much more fitting.<sup>122</sup>

To summarize, seven reasons have been presented above for why it was fitting for Christ to suffer the sorrows and pains of death in His descent to hell. They were: 1. Christ's decision to bear our penalty in our place, which included death as the metaphysical separation of the body and soul *and* the psychological pains associated with that condition; 2. Christ's desire, as one

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<sup>120</sup> *ST* III, q. 46, art. 6, ad 6.

<sup>121</sup> "Even nature uses several means to one intent, in order to do something more fittingly: as two eyes for seeing; and the same can be observed in other matters," *ST* III, q. 46, art. 3, ad 1.

<sup>122</sup> The Reply to Objection 6, cited above, links the fittingness of multiple sufferings to Christ's satisfaction. In his article on the descent, Aquinas does stipulate that it was "not satisfactory" (q. 52, art. 8, ad 2). However, this stipulation comes with a qualification: Christ's descent "operated in virtue of the Passion, which was satisfactory." Therefore, the additional pains of the descent could have contributed to the fittingness of Christ's multiple pains on the cross as a satisfactory act on the cross because they were anticipated as its ultimate consequence (they "operated in virtue" of it). Even if this argument is wrong, there is still an argument for fittingness that could be made in this way: Christ, as Aquinas makes abundantly clear, suffered every class of pain on the cross. Since death ("in fact") is one class of pain He could endure only after the cross. Therefore, it was fitting for Him to also take on these additional pains based the principle that it is more fitting to achieve one end through multiple means than one. In this case, the end in question need not be the specific end of making satisfaction, but the other ends discussed in this chapter – Christ's overall mission of redemption and intent on bearing our penalty. In this way, the additional sufferings of pain over the loss of body would have been fitting.



who was fully human and died a truly human death, to share in solidarity with the common human experience of death; 3. the fulfillment and completion of Christ's anticipatory fear and sorrows on the cross, which presumed a painful death "in fact"; 4. the further demonstration of God's superabundant love for us; 5, to set an example of total obedience for us; 6. to provide a yet further instance of a fearful event that would deter men from further commission of sin; and 7. to complete Christ's sufferings since it was fitting for Christ to endure all possible classes of suffering and death "in fact" constituted a class of sufferings possible only after the cross during His descent. This thesis is presenting the first three reasons as the main arguments in favor of the view that Christ suffered in hell; the latter four are included in order add further support and credibility to that claim.

### **Chapter 3: Christ and the Pains of Death**

The previous chapter demonstrated why it was fitting for Christ to suffer in His descent to hell, according to Aquinas' theologies of the redemption, Incarnation, and Passion. Next, our inquiry turns to the content of this suffering. About this, Aquinas says little, but he does provide us with an important framework to guide our search. About the penalty Christ bears in hell, Aquinas cites Isaiah 53:4, "Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows." This verse indicates that there are two dimensions to the penalty Christ bore: a metaphysical one (the 'infirmities') and a psychological one (the 'sorrows'). This distinction, which will be more fully developed and defended below, will shape the discussion in this chapter and the next. As will be shown, there are two primary infirmities, or defects, that Christ assumes in hell: that of death, and that of being in a lowly place like hell. Christ's death will be the focus of this chapter; the next will address the suffering associated with hell. For each defect, this thesis will argue that Christ not only bore the defect itself, but that He also took on the corresponding interior pains and sorrows.

The main claim of this chapter can be summarized as follows: that in submitting to death, Christ, like all men before and after Him who were in this condition, suffered the separation of His body and soul, along with the psychological sorrow that afflicts a soul after the loss of the body. The argument will proceed in five steps. First, this chapter will briefly review Aquinas' teaching on Christ's true, full humanity, including the assumption of both a body and a soul, with an intellect, will, and the capacity for human emotional states like sorrow, joy, fear, and wonder. The second and third steps examine the goodness of the body for all men and the pains that likely arise when a soul is deprived of this good. Then the argument circles back to Christ,

summarizing the *Summa*'s statements on the truth of His human death. These premises set up the final stage of the main argument – that it is likely that Christ, in undergoing a true death, also experienced the pains of death, thus providing an answer to the question of what sufferings visited Christ in His descent to hell.

This chapter's main argument ultimately rests on the Catholic dogmatic teaching regarding Christ's humanity. Although it hardly needs to be proven that Aquinas, as one of the preeminent doctors of the Church, believed in Christ's true, full humanity, a brief synopsis of some of his key statements on this subject will still be helpful in laying the groundwork for the rest of the argument. One of Aquinas' earliest expressions of this dogma comes in Question 2 of the Third Part:

I answer that, Christ is called a man univocally with other men, as being of the same species, according to the Apostle (Philippians 2:7), 'being made in the likeness of a man.' Now it belongs essentially to the human species that the soul be united to the body, for the form does not constitute the species, except inasmuch as it becomes the act of matter, and this is the terminus of generation through which nature intends the species. Hence it must be said that in Christ the soul was united to the body; and the contrary is heretical, since it destroys the truth of Christ's humanity.<sup>123</sup>

Aquinas emphasizes Christ's full humanity as consisting of the human nature common to all men. He was 'univocally' one among the human species. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the human species is the union of the soul to the body, as form to matter. In Question 2, Aquinas retraces the early Church's conciliar journey to its final dogmatic definition of Christ as fully human in body and soul while also fully divine, summarizing the heresies of Eutyches that Christ's human and divine natures were fused into one nature, and of Nestorius, that there were separate persons.<sup>124</sup> In sum, Aquinas offers a full-throttled defense of the

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<sup>123</sup> ST III, q. 2, art. 5, co.

<sup>124</sup> ST III, q. 2, art. 6, co.

traditional dogma that Christ was one person with one human nature in its fullness, hypostatically united to His divinity in its fullness.

Aquinas' conviction in the reality of Christ's humanity is evident in the vivid details He adds about the ways in which Christ suffered in both body and soul:

But, as Augustine says (Qq. lxxxiii, qu. 80), the Evangelists relate how Jesus *wondered, was angered, sad, and hungry*. Now these show that He had a true soul, just as that He *ate, slept and was weary* shows that He had a true human body: otherwise, if these things are a metaphor, because the like are said of God in the Old Testament, the trustworthiness of the Gospel story is undermined [emphasis added].<sup>125</sup>

Aquinas has laid down a key principle that will prove crucial later in this chapter: that suffering in the soul and the body verify that Christ possessed a true human soul and body. Given that it is Christ's soul that is in focus in the descent it is important to note that He had a fully human soul, with all of its power and proper operations, including, for example, an active intellect:

But if in other things God and nature make nothing in vain, as the Philosopher says (De Coel. i, 31; ii, 59), still less in the soul of Christ is there anything in vain. Now what has not its proper operation is useless, as is said in De Coel. ii, 17. Now the proper operation of the active intellect is to make intelligible species in act, by abstracting them from phantasms; hence, it is said (De Anima iii, 18) that the active intellect is that 'whereby everything is made actual.' And thus it is necessary to say that in Christ there were intelligible species received in the passive intellect by the action of the active intellect—which means that there was acquired knowledge in Him, which some call empiric.<sup>126</sup>

Aquinas' argument goes something like this: God creates nothing that is without usefulness, much less in Christ's soul. In order to not be useless, Christ's active intellect must have had its proper operation, which is to sort through the raw data of phantasms and reconstruct them into intelligible species.<sup>127</sup> In addition to His discursive, active intellect, Christ had a truly free human will, which was ordered to the good.<sup>128</sup> Aquinas defines free will as the ability of reason to

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<sup>125</sup> ST III, q. 5, art. 3, co.

<sup>126</sup> ST III, q. 9, art. 4, co.

<sup>127</sup> ST III, q. 9, art. 4, co.

<sup>128</sup> ST III, q. 18, art. 4, ad 3.

choose,<sup>129</sup> in contrast with the will of nature which “naturally shrinks from sensible pains and bodily hurt.”<sup>130</sup> The rational will can nonetheless override what the passions incline one to do by choosing pain and hurt as a means to an end.<sup>131</sup> While Christ’s passions recoiled from suffering, His rational will chose it, voluntarily accepting God’s providential plan out of obedience to the Father.<sup>132</sup> The Father, in turn, infused Christ’s human soul with charity, reinforcing His decision to suffer for our sake.<sup>133</sup> This led to the ultimate sacrifice on Christ’s part, His death, which entailed the separation of His soul from His body. The pain that this separation caused presupposes the goodness of the body, so it is to that point that we next turn.

At the most obvious level, the body is good because it is among the things that God created, which are all good. Aquinas quotes Genesis 1:31, “God saw all things that He had made, and they were very good.”<sup>134</sup> Aquinas then reframes this biblical teaching in metaphysical terms: all nature is good, in contrast with evil, which is not merely a negation, but the privation of some good that is due by nature.<sup>135</sup> It follows that the body, as one of God’s creations, is good. Aquinas’ belief that the goodness of creation includes corporeal natures is clear from his rejection of Origen’s position that the corporeal was a form of punishment for spiritual creatures that had sinned.<sup>136</sup> Aquinas counters “that less honorable parts exist for the more honorable, as the senses for the intellect.”<sup>137</sup> So the corporeal may be ‘less honorable’ yet it still exists for the

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<sup>129</sup> *ST III*, q. 18, art. 4, co.

<sup>130</sup> *ST III*, q. 18, art. 5, co.

<sup>131</sup> *ST III*, q. 18, art. 4, co.

<sup>132</sup> *ST III*, q. 18, art. 5, co.; *ST III*, q. 47, art. 3, co.

<sup>133</sup> *ST III*, q. 47, art. 3, co. As outlined in the previous chapter, Christ’s decision to suffer and die for man included all the consequences that came with it, including the condition of being dead with the body separated from the soul and being in hell. Based on the above discussion, we could note here that Christ’s decision to undergo a true human death arose from his true humanity in that it freely chosen. The main purpose of this section, however, has just been to demonstrate and delineate the fullness of Christ’s humanity in general.

<sup>134</sup> *ST I*, q. 65, arg. 2.

<sup>135</sup> *ST I*, q. 48, art. 1, s.c. and co.; q. 48, art. 5 ad 1.

<sup>136</sup> *ST I*, q. 65, art. 2, co.

<sup>137</sup> *ST I*, q. 65, art. 2, co.

sake of the spiritual.<sup>138</sup> Ultimately, everything created, corporeal and spiritual, is ordained towards God as its end.<sup>139</sup> Because of this, they have an intimation of the end to which they are destined, imitating and showing forth its goodness.<sup>140</sup> The body's goodness also derives from man's particular goodness, as one created in the 'image and likeness' of God.<sup>141</sup> While all creation is in some fashion reflective of God's goodness in terms of its extensiveness and diversity of being, man, as an intellectual creature, is more "intensively and collectively" like God and therefore has a "capacity for the highest good."<sup>142</sup>

The body's indispensable importance is apparent in Aquinas' definition of a man. A man, he says, is not a soul, but one who is composed of both a body and a soul.<sup>143</sup> The body is a part of man's identity, belonging to him essentially, not accidentally.<sup>144</sup> The relationship between body and soul is one of matter to form, respectively.<sup>145</sup> Aquinas is drawing upon Aristotelian metaphysics. Put simply, a form is what makes matter into "a particular type of thing."<sup>146</sup> Take a wooden table: the wood is the matter, the table is its form. Understood this way, the body seems to need the soul more than the other way around. But the relationship between matter and form is a reciprocal one – the soul still has "an aptitude and a natural inclination" for the body when it is separated from it:

To be united to the body belongs to the soul by reason of itself, as it belongs to a light body by reason of itself to be raised up. And as a light body remains light, when removed from its proper place, retaining meanwhile an aptitude and an inclination for its proper

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<sup>138</sup> *ST 1*, q. 65, art. 2, ad 2.

<sup>139</sup> *ST 1*, q. 65, art. 2, co.

<sup>140</sup> *ST 1*, q. 65, art. 2, co.

<sup>141</sup> *ST 1*, q. 93, art. 1, s.c.

<sup>142</sup> *ST 1*, q. 93, art. 2, ad 3.

<sup>143</sup> *ST I*, q. 75, art. 4, co.

<sup>144</sup> See *ST 1*, 76, art. 1, co.; art. 3, co.; art. 4, co.; art. 8, co.

<sup>145</sup> *ST I*, q. 75, art. 5, co.; q. 76, art. 1, co.

<sup>146</sup> Ryan Hubbard, "Unity of Form and Matter: Aristotle's Metaphysics in a Hylomorphic Nutshell," <https://medium.com/the-philosophers-stone/unity-of-form-and-matter-aristotles-metaphysics-in-a-hylomorphic-nutshell-8de5a929852c>, accessed May 2, 2021.

place; so the human soul retains its proper existence when separated from the body, having an aptitude and a natural inclination to be united to the body.<sup>147</sup>

The soul is not meant to be apart from the body: it is meant to be with it, united to it as form is to matter. As Aquinas puts it, being in the body is the ‘proper existence of the soul.’ Thus, when the soul is deprived of its body, it desires a return to the proper state, as “every nature desires its own being and its own perfection.”<sup>148</sup> This points to a second reason the soul desires the body: its desire for the perfection of its nature, which Aquinas identifies as a good and goodness is what all things desire.<sup>149</sup>

The above discussion raises a question: Why is the soul the proper existence of the body? Why, in Christian theology, is the soul’s perfection being in the body and not being free of it, as many ancient philosophers, such as Plato, held? According to Aquinas, the body performs a vital service in aiding the soul in its quest for knowledge. In contrast to angels, who have perfect knowledge “at once from their very nature”<sup>150</sup> humans acquire knowledge by “a kind of movement and discursive intellectual operation” in which they proceed from one thing to another.<sup>151</sup> This process was briefly alluded to above, in the manner in which Christ’s active intellect emulated that of other man by gathering up phantasms, from which it distilled intelligible species.<sup>152</sup> In order for the human intellect to perform this function, it requires a body:

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<sup>147</sup> *ST I*, q. 76, art. 1, ad 6.

<sup>148</sup> “I answer that, One opposite is known through the other, as darkness is known through light. Hence also what evil is must be known from the nature of good. Now, we have said above that good is everything appetible; and thus, since every nature desires its own being and its own perfection, it must be said also that the being and the perfection of any nature is good. Hence it cannot be that evil signifies being, or any form or nature. Therefore it must be that by the name of evil is signified the absence of good. And this is what is meant by saying that ‘evil is neither a being nor a good.’ For since being, as such, is good, the absence of one implies the absence of the other,” *ST I*, q. 48, art. 1, co.

<sup>149</sup> *ST I*, q. 48, art. 1, co.

<sup>150</sup> *ST I*, q. 58, art. 3, co.

<sup>151</sup> *ST I*, q. 58, art. 3, co.

<sup>152</sup> *ST III*, q. 9, art. 4, co.

[T]he intellectual soul had to be endowed not only with the power of understanding, but also with the power of feeling. Now the action of the senses is not performed without a corporeal instrument. Therefore it behooved the intellectual soul to be united to a body fitted to be a convenient organ of sense.<sup>153</sup>

Compared to the angels, the human process of knowledge acquisition – with its reliance on the senses and corporeal organs – may seem inefficient, but that is the lot of man. As Aquinas puts it elsewhere in the context of grace and perfection: “Man was not intended to secure his ultimate perfection at once, like the angel. Hence a longer way was assigned to man than to the angel for securing beatitude.”<sup>154</sup>

Man’s discursive intellect is mirrored in his free will, which is likewise movable and changeable. As Aquinas puts it, again drawing a contrast with the angels, “man’s will adheres to a thing movably, and with the power of forsaking it and of clinging to the opposite; whereas the angel’s will adheres fixedly and immovably.”<sup>155</sup> According to Aquinas, the will and the intellect both move each other, depending upon one’s perspective. The intellect moves the will because the good that is understood moves the will as its end.<sup>156</sup> But the will also moves the intellect and all the other powers of the soul as an agent.<sup>157</sup> This need for movability is one of the reasons man was endowed with a free will.<sup>158</sup> According to Aquinas, man’s free will includes the freedom to choose the good that has been identified by reason over what the sensual appetite desires,<sup>159</sup> which are things apprehended through the bodily senses.<sup>160</sup> The actions of the will are linked to

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<sup>153</sup> *ST I*, q. 75, art. 5, co.

<sup>154</sup> *ST I*, q. 62, art. 5, ad 1.

<sup>155</sup> *ST I*, q. 64, art. 2, co.

<sup>156</sup> *ST I*, q. 82, art. 4, co.

<sup>157</sup> *ST I*, q. 82, art. 4, co.

<sup>158</sup> *ST I*, q. 83, art. 1, co.

<sup>159</sup> Aquinas states this point in negative form: “As we have said above (I, q. 81, art.3, ad 2), the sensitive appetite, though it obeys the reason, yet in a given case can resist by desiring what the reason forbids,” *ST I*, q. 83, art. 1, ad 1.

<sup>160</sup> “By saying that the sensual movement of the soul is directed to the bodily senses, Augustine does not give us to understand that the bodily senses are included in sensuality, but rather that the movement of sensuality is a



the intellect, which is ‘fed’ raw information by the body’s senses. The body is therefore connected to those ‘nobler’ powers of man’s soul – his intellect and will – that Aquinas says constitute him as an image of God’s goodness.<sup>161</sup> Thus the free will, like the intellect, is discursive, movable, and free. The will indirectly, then, also relies on a body, since it depends on the intellect to direct its desires towards the good and the intellect, in turn, harnesses bodily senses to aid it in this activity. Considered from this perspective, body is considered good due to the role it plays in the soul’s quest for the good. This is why the soul desires the body: it needs it in order for its active intellect, along with its free will, to exercise their proper operations.

The loss of the body is an evil since evil is a deprivation of the good<sup>162</sup> and the body’s goodness has been abundantly demonstrated above. In the First Part of the Second Part of the *Summa*, Aquinas says this defect occurs as punishment for original sin.<sup>163</sup> Due to original sin, our first parents forfeited original justice, the grace by which the body and soul were held together without defect.<sup>164</sup> In encountering its own death, the soul is in pain, since pain is the sensitive appetite’s response to evil things,<sup>165</sup> such as death.<sup>166</sup> When pain is apprehended by the interior senses it is also called sorrow.<sup>167</sup> (This thesis will follow Aquinas’ convention in understanding ‘sorrow’ as a ‘species’ of pain:<sup>168</sup> when ‘pain’ is mentioned here it is as a generic term that could include sorrow; when ‘sorrow’ is used, the specific meaning is intended, with the understanding

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certain inclination to the bodily senses, since we desire things which are apprehended through the bodily senses. And thus the bodily senses appertain to sensuality as a preamble,” *ST I*, q. 81, art. 1, ad 1.

<sup>161</sup> *ST I*, q. 93, art. 9, co. and art. 2 ad 3.

<sup>162</sup> *ST I*, q. 49, art. 1, co.

<sup>163</sup> *ST I*, q. 85, art. 5, co.

<sup>164</sup> *ST I*, q. 85, art. 5, co.

<sup>165</sup> *ST II-I*, q. 35, art. 1, co.

<sup>166</sup> *ST I*, q. 49, art. 2, co. This conclusion is unavoidable from the context of the Answer.

<sup>167</sup> *ST II-I*, q. 35, art. 2, co. and ad 3.

<sup>168</sup> *ST II-I*, q. 35, art. 2, co.

that it is a type of pain.) According to Aquinas, pain occurs as a result of the longing for a good that is not satisfied:

Pain at the loss of good proves the goodness of the nature, not because pain is an act of the natural appetite, but because nature desires something as good, the removal of which being perceived, there results the passion of pain in the sensitive appetite.<sup>169</sup>

Aquinas establishes a general principle: that the removal of something desired as a good results in the “pain of loss” in the “sensitive appetite.” Later in the *Summa*, Aquinas confirms that death itself results in the “pain of loss.”<sup>170</sup>

In addition to such interior pains, exterior pain, which is apprehended through the senses,<sup>171</sup> affects the soul in two ways. The first is indirectly: “[F]or since the soul is the form of the body, soul and body have but one being; and hence, when the body is disturbed by any bodily passion, the soul, too, must be disturbed, i.e. in the being which it has in the body.”<sup>172</sup> The second hinges on the distinction between hurt and pain: hurt is something done to the body,<sup>173</sup> while pain is the soul’s apprehension of an injury through its “sense of hurt.”<sup>174</sup> Aquinas invokes both Augustine, who noted that the “the body cannot feel pain unless the soul feel it”<sup>175</sup> and Sirach 25:17, which says that every wound saddens the heart.<sup>176</sup> The point might be illustrated by way of analogy with a modern-day comatose patient who suffers bodily harm yet is not actually in pain since he is not conscious. In Thomistic terms, pain occurs through the soul’s

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<sup>169</sup> *ST* II-I, q. 35, art. 1, ad 3.

<sup>170</sup> “Death may be considered in two ways. First, as the privation of life, and thus death cannot be felt, since it is the privation of sense and life. On this way it involves not pain of sense but pain of loss,” *ST* II-II, q. 164, art. 1, ad 7.

<sup>171</sup> *ST* II-I, q. 22, art. 7, co.

<sup>172</sup> *ST* III, q. 15, art. 4, co. and *ST* III, q. 15, art. 5, co. and ad 3.

<sup>173</sup> See *ST* III, q. 18, art. 5, co., discussed above.

<sup>174</sup> The distinction I am drawing here seems to be the only way to understand the text at hand. I’m especially relying on *ST* III, q. 15, art. 4, co. and *ST* III, q. 15, art. 5, co. and ad 3.

<sup>175</sup> *ST*, II-I, q. 35, art. 1, ad 1.

<sup>176</sup> “The sadness of the heart is every wound, and the wickedness of a woman is all evil” Sirach 25:17, as cited in *ST* II-I, q. 35, art. 7, s.c. (As an editor’s note observes, in the Dhoy-Rheims translation, “wound” is actually rendered as “plague.”)

apprehension of bodily hurt. Therefore, it is the soul, and not the body that is the seat of pain. As promising as this conclusion might initially seem for the argument of this thesis, one qualification must first be acknowledged: in the separation of the body and soul, exterior pain is, by definition, not applicable since the sensitive powers have the composite of the body and the soul as their subject. When the composite is “destroyed” the powers “do not remain actually.”<sup>177</sup>

While the soul may lose its sensitive powers with its body, it will retain its capacity for sorrow and joy. As Aquinas states in Article 77, “In the separate soul, sorrow and joy are not in the sensitive, but in the intellectual appetite, as in the angels.”<sup>178</sup> To the extent that sorrow and similar states are acts of the will, Aquinas confirms that the separated soul is still capable of them. As discussed earlier above, Aquinas has indicated that separated souls suffer the “pain of loss”<sup>179</sup> over the deprivation of their bodies, which presumably would include sorrow. The above disparate points on Christ’s full humanity, the goodness of the body, and the pain of death build towards a syllogistic argument: if Christ was fully human, then in dying and losing His body He too would have suffered sorrow over this loss. However, in order to effectively make this argument one additional point must be established: that Christ was not only fully human, but that He also died a truly human death.

Concerning the reality of Christ’s death, Aquinas is explicit: “It is an article of faith that Christ was truly dead: hence it is an error against faith to assert anything whereby the truth of Christ's death is destroyed.”<sup>180</sup> Because of this truth, Aquinas says that it would be “erroneous” to say that Christ is “a man” without qualification during His three days in hell; instead, one must

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<sup>177</sup> *ST I*, q. 77, art. 8, co.

<sup>178</sup> *ST I*, q. 77, art. 8, ad 5.

<sup>179</sup> *ST II-II*, q. 164, art. 1, ad 7.

<sup>180</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 4, co.

speak of Him as a “dead man.”<sup>181</sup> Aquinas again refers to Christ as ‘truly dead’ in the same question.<sup>182</sup> Aquinas sees Christ’s authentic human death as being connected to the truth of the Incarnation itself, citing it as one of four reasons that it was fitting for Christ to die.<sup>183</sup> This repeats a point made earlier in Question 5, in which Aquinas states that “if His body was not real but imaginary” Christ did not undergo a “real death.”<sup>184</sup> In death, as in life, Christ was truly human.

In Questions 50 to 53, two facts emerge as confirmations of the Christ’s death. The first is the burial of the body, which Aquinas says was fitting in order to validate faith in Christ’s death.<sup>185</sup> The second fact is the three-day duration of Christ’s stay in hell. This is because an instantaneous resurrection would have called the truth of Christ’s death into question:

But to confirm our faith regarding the truth of His humanity and death, it was needful that there should be some interval between His death and rising. For if He had risen directly after death, it might seem that His death was not genuine and consequently neither would His Resurrection be true. But to establish the truth of Christ's death, it was enough for His rising to be deferred until the third day, for within that time some signs of life always appear in one who appears to be dead whereas he is alive.<sup>186</sup>

In Question 52, Aquinas twice states that Christ chose to extend His time in hell despite having completed His other work in hell:

When Christ descended into hell He delivered the saints who were there, not by leading them out at once from the confines of hell, but by enlightening them with the light of glory in hell itself. Nevertheless it was fitting that His soul should abide in hell as long as His body remained in the tomb.<sup>187</sup>

Aquinas repeats the comment in the context of another redemptive activity:

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<sup>181</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 4, co.

<sup>182</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 5, co.

<sup>183</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 1, co.

<sup>184</sup> *ST III*, q. 5, art. 1, co.

<sup>185</sup> *ST III*, q. 51, art. 2, co. See also *ST III*, q. 52, art. 4, co.

<sup>186</sup> *ST III*, q. 53, art. 2, co.

<sup>187</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 4, ad 1.

By the expression ‘bars of hell’ are understood the obstacles which kept the holy Fathers from quitting hell, through the guilt of our first parent’s sin; and these bars Christ burst asunder by the power of His Passion on descending into hell: nevertheless He chose to remain in hell for some time, for the reason stated above.<sup>188</sup>

Both replies emphasize the extended nature of Christ’s time in hell: His soul abided there “as long as” His body was in the tomb. Likewise, He chose to be in hell “for some time.” The stated purpose is that it was fitting for His soul to stay in hell for as long as His body was in the tomb. This fittingness stems from the reality of Christ’s human death: in death, the body and the soul are separated, with body resting in the earth and the soul departing to another ‘location,’ be it heaven, the limbo of the fathers, purgatory, or hell. By extending His sojourn in hell by three days, Christ thus further demonstrated the reality of His human death. Question 52, which is entirely devoted to the topic of Christ’s descent, mentions “death” a total of 17 times, “died” 7 times, and “die” twice – almost all in relation to Christ Himself. It is clear that death (being dead “in fact”) is a major component of Christ’s descent to hell, in addition to His other purposes of liberating the holy fathers and manifesting His power in hell.<sup>189</sup>

Now we arrive at the final stage of this chapter’s overall argument. Thus far we have established the following premises:

1. The truth of Christ’s full humanity, including His body and soul;
2. The goodness of the human body;
3. The pain that occurs when a separated soul’s desire for its body is unfulfilled in death;
4. The reality of Christ’s human death.

Based on these premises, this chapter argues that, in dying a truly human death, it would have been fitting for Christ to suffer the interior pains and sorrows that are the common lot of all men who die.

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<sup>188</sup> ST III, q. 52, art. 4, ad 2.

<sup>189</sup> ST III, q. 52, art. 1, co.

Drawing upon parts of the *Summa* outside of the Passion questions, this chapter demonstrated that souls suffer the pain of loss when they perceive the removal of the body, a good which they desire for their perfection. This chapter has argued that it was likely that Christ, in fully assuming human nature, and undergoing a truly human death, was affected by this pain. This helped fill a gap in Question 52, in which Aquinas suggests that Christ did suffer in hell in a twofold manner, both metaphysically and psychologically (the “infirmities” and “sorrows” he cites from Isaiah) without specifying what Christ’s sorrows in hell were or explaining why they occurred. The argument presented is one that has been inferred from Aquinas’ theology; this thesis does not attribute these claims to Aquinas as an author. However, he has not only laid the groundwork for the argument but he has provided several textual clues that indicate that this chapter’s interpretations of his theology are valid (such as q. 46, art. 6, ad 4, and q. 50, art. 1, ad 1, discussed above). While the overall contention of this chapter is this author’s own, it rests on the foundation of some of the most established Catholic theological teachings – the truth of Christ’s full humanity, the reality of Christ’s death as a man, the goodness of the body, and the nature of evil and suffering – all of which are robustly defended and expounded upon in the *Summa*. It is hoped that this chapter has therefore illuminated in greater detail the suffering that it would have been fitting for Christ to bear as a ‘dead man’ in hell. But the defect of death is only one of two that Christ assumed in His descent to hell. The next chapter will turn to those pains specific to hell and its abodes, to see which ones, if any, apply to Christ.

#### **Chapter 4: Christ and the Sorrows of Hell**

The previous chapter addressed Christ's suffering due to the defect of death; now we turn to what suffering might have affected Him due to the 'defect of place' by being in hell. The overall development of the argument below is divided into two parts, based on the distinction, which will be explained shortly, between hell as a generic whole and the individual 'hells' or 'abodes' of hell. The first part will advance the claim that Christ did take on some of the sufferings of hell as a whole, specifically, the indignity of being in hell and sorrow over this humiliation. Then, the second part will turn to each abode, noting the sufferings characteristic of each and identifying which, if any, would apply to Christ. The outcome will be to circumscribe, rather than add to our delineation of Christ's sufferings in hell. But, far from undermining the objective of this thesis, this analysis supports it in two ways. First, it demonstrates the author's commitment to an honest appraisal of what Aquinas' text really says, and, second, it underscores one of the underlying stipulations of this thesis: that the claims presented here regarding Christ's sufferings have unfolded within, not outside, the limits of the traditional doctrine on the descent.

The arguments of this chapter fall into two categories – interpretations and inferences. An interpretative approach is possible when it comes to Aquinas' explicit teachings in the *Summa*. In other cases, a second type of argument is needed: claims about what would have been fitting for Christ to suffer in hell, based on what can be inferred from the *Summa* and other works by Aquinas. The interpretative approach will be utilized with two key texts. The first is Question 52 Article 1's Answer, where Aquinas clearly indicates, as has been argued earlier in Chapter 1, that Christ suffered in His descent to hell by bearing our 'infirmities and sorrows, citing Isaiah. While Aquinas is, in the view of this author, clear in his affirmation that Christ suffers in hell, he is not clear about the scope or nature of such suffering in Question 52. However, in Question 49 Article

6, Aquinas identifies the ‘humiliation’ of hell, as one of the sufferings of Christ in His Passion. This chapter will offer an interpretation of what this statement means. These two texts will serve as the touchstones for the rest of the arguments in this chapter, which will be formulated in terms of what would have been fitting – or not fitting – for Christ to suffer in hell based on the theology of the *Summa* and other relevant texts of Aquinas. While some of what follows is inferential, it rests on a foundation of two certitudes: Aquinas has stated that Christ suffered in His descent to hell, and he has pointed to the humiliation of being in hell as at least one form of infernal suffering Christ endured.

A key premise for the discussion that follows is the distinction between ‘hell’ as a whole, and individual ‘hells’ or abodes of hell. This distinction is introduced implicitly at the outset in Question 52:

On the contrary, It is said in the Creed: “He descended into hell”: and the Apostle says (Ephesians 4:9): “Now that He ascended, what is it, but because He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?” And a gloss adds: “that is—into hell.”<sup>190</sup>

Following the Apostles’ Creed, Aquinas affirms that Christ descended to hell, understood in the generic sense as a single place. After this initial affirmation, Aquinas cites Ephesians 4:9, which alludes to the “lower parts of the earth.” Hell, therefore, has just been defined here as a single place consisting of many parts, or, what traditional Catholic theology has termed ‘abodes.’ This definition contains an implicit distinction, between ‘hell’ in the singular sense as a whole place, and ‘hell’ in the plural, understood as comprising many parts. This distinction remains operative throughout Question 52. Article 1, for example, asks if Christ descended into hell while Article 2 raises the question as to ‘which hell’ He descended. Over the course of Question 52, Aquinas

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<sup>190</sup> ST III, q. 52, art. 1, s.c.



states five times that the fathers were detained in ‘hell,’ without stipulating which part.<sup>191</sup>

However, Question 52 is also replete with references to hell in its plurality: the ‘parts’ of hell are mentioned seven times<sup>192</sup> and “part of hell” four times,<sup>193</sup> along with near synonyms for ‘parts’ like ‘regions’<sup>194</sup> and ‘infernal mansions.’<sup>195</sup> Once, Aquinas directly speaks of ‘each of the hells.’<sup>196</sup>

Notably, this distinction applies directly to Christ in His descent to hell. Article 1 affirms Christ’s descent, without qualification as to a specific abode. Article 3 reiterates that He ‘was entirely in hell.’<sup>197</sup> In Article 4, Aquinas explains that Christ’s soul stayed in hell for the same three days that His body was in the tomb, indicating an analogy between Christ’s soul in hell and body in the tomb that is only valid if hell is taken in the singular, generic sense.<sup>198</sup> Aquinas is also insistent that Christ descended to each part of hell.<sup>199</sup> While His ‘Essence’ was in that part of hell where the fathers were, He visited the other parts through His ‘effects.’<sup>200</sup> As Aquinas puts it, Christ “penetrated to all the lower parts of the earth, not passing through them locally with His soul, but by spreading the effects of His power in a measure to them all.”<sup>201</sup> Thus, in terms of the

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<sup>191</sup> In *ST III*, q. 52 the references are: “the captives detained in hell,” in art. 1, co.; “the holy Fathers detained in hell” in art. 2, co.; “that part of hell wherein the just were detained,” in art. 2, co.; “the holy Fathers were detained in hell,” in art. 5 co.; and “Directly Christ died His soul went down into hell, and bestowed the fruits of His Passion on the saints detained there” in art. 5 ad 3.

<sup>192</sup> In *ST III*, q. 52 the references are: “the lower parts of the earth” in art. 1, s.c.; “lower parts of the earth” three times in art. 2, arg. 1; “the lower parts of the earth” in art. 2, ad 1, “the lower parts of the earth” in art. 2, ad 1; and “those parts of hell” in art. 2, ad 5.

<sup>193</sup> Three of the four are in Article 2’s Answer. Aquinas modifies “part” with three variations according to context: “that part of hell,” “one part of hell,” and “every part of hell,” *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 5. The fourth reference is in *ST III*, q. 52, art. 6, ad 1 (“any part of hell”).

<sup>194</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 3 and 5.

<sup>195</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 5.

<sup>196</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, co.

<sup>197</sup> “He was entirely in hell, because the whole Person of Christ was there by reason of the soul united with Him,” *ST III*, q. 52, art. 3, co.

<sup>198</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 4, co.

<sup>199</sup> With the possible exception of the limbo of the children.

<sup>200</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, co.

<sup>201</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 1.

‘location’ of Christ’s soul, Aquinas situates it in the limbo of the fathers, while simultaneously emphasizing Christ’s activity in the other parts of hell. The distinction between hell in the generic sense and hell as a set of individual abodes or ‘hells’ is significant here because the discussion of Christ’s suffering in hell in contemporary theological investigations is commonly shaped by the assumption that the question concerns the pains proper to the various abodes of hell.<sup>202</sup> The distinction between hell in the singular and plural sense, however, compels us to first ask what suffering – if any – is common to hell as a whole.

In Question 52 Article 1, Aquinas defines the suffering of hell in the generic sense in terms of ‘infirmities and sorrows’:

It was fitting for Christ to descend into hell. First of all, because He came to bear our penalty in order to free us from penalty, according to Isaiah 53:4: “Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows.” But through sin man had incurred not only the death of the body, but also descent into hell.<sup>203</sup>

The hell of infirmities and sorrows must be hell as a whole since Aquinas does not specify an abode. Indeed, it is this generic hell that is at the fore, as Aquinas refrains from referring to specific abodes in the other two reasons he gives for Christ’s descent in the same answer.<sup>204</sup> The structure of Question 52 reinforces this conclusion: Article 1 is clearly focused on hell in general, prior to questions about individual hells, which arise in Article 2.<sup>205</sup> Indeed, the next two questions shift back to the generic hell, addressing Christ’s ontological totality in hell in His divinity (Article 3) and the chronological totality of His soul’s stay in hell (Article 4). Only after that does the focus turn almost exclusively to the individual hells: the limbo of the fathers

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<sup>202</sup> Cf. Pitstick who states, “Christ did not suffer the pain proper to any of the abodes of hell,” a comment made in reference to the passage of the *Summa* that is being cited here (Pitstick, 18). Pitstick seems overly focused on the abodes of hell, minimizing the concept of a generic hell. She does acknowledge that hell can be “taken generically” in the context of Christ making His power and authority known throughout hell.

<sup>203</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>204</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>205</sup> See the title for Article 2, “Into Which Hell Did He Descend?”, *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2.

(Article 5), the hell of the lost (Article 6), the limbo of the children (Article 7), and purgatory (Article 8). The syntax of Article 1 also confirms that the ‘infirmities and sorrows’ alluded to in Isaiah are the penalty that Christ bore. The subordinate clause introduced by ‘because’ (*quia*), provides the proximate reason for Christ’s descent into hell – ‘to bear our penalty,’ followed by the ultimate purpose for it, which was ‘to free us from penalty.’ The prepositional phrase that comes next offers further information on what constitutes the penalty that Christ bore – ‘infirmities and sorrows.’

The infirmities of hell can be divided into at least two primary types. First, there is the infirmity of death as the separation of the soul from the body, a condition common to all in hell, regardless of abode. The infirmity of death was discussed at length in the previous chapter. The second type of infirmity follows from the first: it involves the destination of the separated soul. All human nature suffers from a fundamental defect: exclusion from the vision of God (‘exclusion from God’s glory’),<sup>206</sup> due to original sin.<sup>207</sup> The defect of exclusion is two sided: not being able to see God also means exclusion from heaven, and, consequently, descent to hell. Considered according to its consequences, the defect of exclusion becomes a defect of place.<sup>208</sup> Aquinas makes it clear that this general defect (of exclusion and place) applies to all in hell, as distinct from the personal defects (namely, mortal and venial sins) that determine in which abode souls will reside.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 8, ad 3. In using ‘infirmities’ and ‘defects’ somewhat interchangeably here this chapter is following Aquinas’ own usage. See *ST III*, q. 14, art. 1, co.: “It was fitting for the body assumed by the Son of God to be subject to human infirmities and defects; and especially for three reasons. ... Hence it was useful for the end of Incarnation that He should assume these penalties in our flesh and in our stead, according to Isaiah 53:4, ‘Surely He hath borne our infirmities.’” Below, in some sections, references to “glory” will be understood as referring to seeing God, not the glory of the general resurrection. In this, the author is following Aquinas usage in the texts that are being cited.

<sup>207</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 7, ad 3.

<sup>208</sup> The terms ‘defect of exclusion’ and ‘defect of place’ are this author’s own, introduced in an effort to clearly interpret Aquinas’ text and lay the foundation for the arguments of this chapter.

<sup>209</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 8, ad 3.

Just as Christ took on the defect of death, so also he bore the ‘defect’ of being in hell. Since Christ never lost the vision of God in His soul, He only took on the defect of place, not the defect of exclusion. In Question 49, Aquinas describes being in hell as a form of suffering for Christ:

Now in His Passion Christ humbled Himself beneath His dignity in four respects. In the first place as to His Passion and death, to which He was not bound; *secondly, as to the place, since His body was laid in a sepulchre and His soul in hell*; thirdly, as to the shame and mockeries He endured; fourthly, as to His being delivered up to man’s power, as He Himself said to Pilate (John 19:11): “Thou shouldst not have any power against Me, unless it were given thee from above”<sup>210</sup> [emphasis added].

From context, it is clear that Aquinas understands humiliation to be a form of suffering, since the other examples he adduces include Christ’s Passion, shame and mockeries, death, and burial. Aquinas also groups all of these examples collectively under the rubric of Christ’s Passion, as is evident from the sentence that follows after the above: “And, consequently, He merited a four-fold exaltation from His Passion.”<sup>211</sup> This classification of Christ’s descent to hell as a part of the Passion is consistent with the perspective of this thesis, which has argued that Christ’s sufferings in hell are a continuation and extension of the sufferings of the Cross, since they are its consequence. Aquinas identifies four types of humiliation based on: condition (Passion and death), place (burial in the ground and descent to the underworld), derogatory treatment by others (shame and mockeries), and power (which Pilate had over Him). In the second category, Aquinas states that Christ suffers humiliation from hell as a whole, prior to any consideration of the abode to which He descended (a question answered later in Question 52). Each of Aquinas’ four humiliations is associated with a corresponding exaltation and glorification that is its opposite. In the case of Christ’s descent to hell, it is His ascent to heaven:

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<sup>210</sup> ST III, q. 49, art. 6, co.

<sup>211</sup> ST III, q. 49, art. 6, co.

[H]ence it is written (Ephesians 4:9): “Now that He ascended, what is it, but because He also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended above all the heavens.”<sup>212</sup>

The pairing of opposites in terms of humiliation and exaltation further reinforces the degree to which Christ suffered humiliation by being in hell. The prepositions used in the English translation further underscore these two contrasting realities. In descending, Christ went ‘into’ hell, emphasizing His submission to its humiliations, while, in ascending to heaven, He rose above it – He did not go ‘into’ heaven – in keeping with His exalted supremacy. The translation seems to faithfully capture the nuances of the Vulgate Latin text Aquinas is citing, “Quod autem ascendit, quid est, nisi quia et descendit primum *in* inferiores partes terræ? Qui descendit, ipse est et qui ascendit *super* omnes cælos, ut impleret omnia” (Ephesians 4:9-10; emphasis added).<sup>213</sup> As the text indicates, Christ descended “into” (*in*) hell so that He might ascend “above” (*super*) all the heavens.

In Question 52, Article 1, Aquinas suggests that infirmities are accompanied by sorrow. The previous chapter argued that after death the soul sorrows over the loss of its body and that it would have been fitting for Christ, in dying a truly human death, to share in this feeling of death common to all men.<sup>214</sup> A similar argument is proposed here. The premise is that the defect of place – in which hell is understood as the place where souls are excluded from the beatific vision – is a source of sorrow for all those who are in hell, whether they are there eternally or temporarily. In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas confirms that one has joy or sorrow corresponding to the destination of one’s soul after death:

A separated soul received nothing directly from the physical places after the manner of bodies, which are maintained by their places. But the souls themselves, by the fact that

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<sup>212</sup> *ST III*, q. 49, art. 6, co.

<sup>213</sup> *The Clementine Vulgate*, edited by A. Colunga and L. Turrado (Madrid: La Editorial Católica, 1946), <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/vul/>, accessed April 15, 2021, *ad loc.*

<sup>214</sup> *ST III*, q. 50, art. 1, ad 1.

they know themselves to be assigned to such places, bear joy or sorrow within themselves; and this is how the place contributes to their punishment or reward.<sup>215</sup>

According to the principle outlined above, being in hell should engender sorrow. Although Aquinas does not explicitly speak of hell by name in the above, hell is implied through the contrast with the place of reward, heaven. In context, Aquinas is speaking generally of heaven and hell in general – not any specific infernal abodes.<sup>216</sup>

Sorrow does not just afflict the damned,<sup>217</sup> it even weighs on the fathers in limbo, further demonstrating that sorrow is a psychological condition characteristic of all in hell. The sorrows of the fathers become apparent in Aquinas’s discussion in the *Summa* of ways in which their abode can be considered a part of hell:

The expression “Abraham's bosom” may be taken in two senses. First of all, as implying that restfulness, existing there, from sensible pain; so that in this sense it cannot be called hell, nor are there any sorrows there. In another way it can be taken as implying the privation of longed-for glory: in this sense it has the character of hell and sorrow.<sup>218</sup>

The sorrows of the limbo of the fathers will be examined shortly below, but first we will take note of what this text says about hell as a whole. While the fathers of limbo are not afflicted with any sensible pain, unlike other parts of hell, they are deprived of “longed-for glory.”<sup>219</sup> In this sense, Aquinas says the limbo of the fathers has the “character of hell” which He associates with sorrow. The implication seems to be that the holy fathers shared in the general sorrows of hell to a limited degree, appropriate to their condition:

Sorrow is twofold: one is the suffering of pain which men endure for actual sin, according to Psalm 17:6: “The sorrows of hell encompassed me.” Another sorrow comes

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<sup>215</sup> *Sent.*, d. 45, q. 1, art. 1, resp. to qc. 1, ad 3 (Aquinas Institute edition, 2018), 161. Aquinas’ *Commentary on the Sentences* is being used as a source here to supplement the *Summa* since the sections on the afterlife were unfinished by Aquinas. (References to the *Commentary* will include page numbers to the Aquinas Institute published text after the in-text citations.)

<sup>216</sup> *Cf. Sent.* IV, d. 45, art. 1, q. 2, obj. 4 and qc. 3, obj. 1 (158 and 159).

<sup>217</sup> *Sent.* IV, d. 50, q. 2, art. 2, resp. to quaest. 1 (570).

<sup>218</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 2, ad 4.

<sup>219</sup> Understood here as the vision of God.

of hoped-for glory being deferred, according to Proverbs 13:12: “Hope that is deferred afflicteth the soul”: and such was the sorrow which the holy Fathers suffered in hell, and Augustine refers to it in a sermon on the Passion, saying that “they besought Christ with tearful entreaty.”<sup>220</sup>

In describing the tears of the fathers, Aquinas is invoking an image of sadness that is also associated with the damned, based on Luke 13:28<sup>221</sup> (“There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you shall see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out”).<sup>222</sup> For example, in the *Commentary*, Aquinas affirms that the damned will weep in the sense of “a kind of shaking and disturbance of the head and eyes” which “corresponds to the delight” in sinning and offending God prior to their deaths.<sup>223</sup> Aquinas is defending the biblical description of weeping against the argument that this would not have been possible since the damned would not have had access to food and other nourishment and therefore could not have been perpetually weeping.<sup>224</sup> While the sorrows and ‘tears’ of the fathers certainly did not have the same cause or intensity, they speak to the general sense of sorrow that pervades hell: even amid their joy<sup>225</sup> the fathers sorrowed because they had been deprived of the vision of God and, as a result, were still in hell. That they too had sorrow illustrates how ‘sorrow’ is a form of suffering that permeates all of hell, regardless of abode.

Just as it would have been fitting for Christ in His humanity to sorrow over its state of separation from the body, so also it would have been fitting for Him to sorrow over the lowliness of His soul’s ‘location,’<sup>226</sup> according to Aquinas’ theology. Many of the same reasons of fittingness adduced in the second chapter apply here as well. Since these reasons have already

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<sup>220</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 2.

<sup>221</sup> Aquinas alludes to this text without quoting it in *Sent.* IV, d. 50, q. 2, art. 3, qc. 3, obj. 1 (574).

<sup>222</sup> Luke 13:28 (the Douay-Rheims translation).

<sup>223</sup> *Sent.* IV, d. 50, q. 2, art. 3, resp. to qc. 3 (576).

<sup>224</sup> Aquinas alludes to this text without quoting it in *Sent.* IV, d. 50, q. 2, art. 3, qc. 3, s.c. (574).

<sup>225</sup> See *ST III*, q. 52, art. 5, ad 1.

<sup>226</sup> The lowliness of hell was discussed above in the analysis of *ST III*, q. 49, art. 6, co.

been described in detail, we will just briefly enumerate them here. First, in the Incarnation, Christ deigned to share in the common lot of men in all things save sin. Prior to His redemption, the common lot of men who die was to go to the underworld. Even though He had achieved His work of redemption on the cross, the fruits of that work had yet to be applied to men. Aquinas himself confirms this in Question 52, in noting that one of the reasons Christ descended to hell was to bestow its fruits on the fathers in limbo,<sup>227</sup> in a manner analogous to how the sacraments<sup>228</sup> would convey those fruits to future generations after Christ's resurrection. Second, it was fitting for Christ to take on some of the sorrow of hell in keeping with Aquinas' doctrine of atonement, in which Christ spares us the pains of future penalties by bearing them in our place. Again, this is the obvious import of Aquinas' statement in Question 52: "He came to bear our penalty in order to free us from penalty, according to Isaiah 53:4: 'Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows.'"<sup>229</sup>

The several ancillary reasons provided in the last chapter are also pertinent here. In addition to the two above, the third is Christ's anticipatory fear<sup>230</sup> on the cross. It would have been fitting for Him to fear being in a place of humiliation and sorrow, just as it was fitting for Him to fear the pains of His impending death. Fourth, bearing some of the sorrows of hell would have been a fitting further demonstration of Christ's love for us, already exemplified on the cross. Fifth, as part of His obedience,<sup>231</sup> Christ accepted death and all the consequences that come with it, including the separation of the body and the soul and the presence of His soul in hell. Therefore it would have been fitting for Him to also submit to the corresponding

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<sup>227</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 5, ad 3.

<sup>228</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 8, ad 2.

<sup>229</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 1, co.

<sup>230</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5, co.

<sup>231</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 4, s.c. and co.



psychological pains, such as sorrow over being in hell. Sixth, it was fitting for Christ to endure all classes of sufferings.<sup>232</sup> The sorrows of being in hell is one class of suffering that by definition is only possible by being in hell. Therefore, in keeping with His mission to bear all our suffering, it would have been fitting for Christ to suffer some of the sorrows of hell while he was there. Note that this principle does not require that Christ be afflicted with every individual instance of suffering. On the cross, he died by torture, but it was due to crucifixion, not hanging or being boiled alive.<sup>233</sup> Likewise, taking on just a part of the sufferings present in hell would have sufficed for it to be said that Christ also endured the sufferings of hell, without necessarily submitting to every form of suffering possible in hell, such as those torments associated with the hell of the damned or purgatory.

The previous chapter established that Christ's pain in death would have been exacerbated due to several factors related to Christ's virtues, perfections, and redemptive mission. These same factors apply to any of the pains He would have endured in hell. We will briefly review them now. While we cannot say these factors must apply out of necessity, we can assert that it would have been fitting for them to carry over to Christ's descent to hell, based on Aquinas' theology. First, just as Christ grieved over His death, both as He was dying and then after He was dead, so also it would have been fitting for Christ to sorrow over the humiliation over being in hell.<sup>234</sup> Second, such sorrow could have been further increased because it flowed from Christ's

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<sup>232</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5, ad 3.

<sup>233</sup> "I answer that, Human sufferings may be considered under two aspects. First of all, specifically, and in this way it was not necessary for Christ to endure them all, since many are mutually exclusive, as burning and drowning; for we are dealing now with sufferings inflicted from without, since it was not befitting for Him to endure those arising from within, such as bodily ailments, as already stated (III:14:4). But, speaking generically, He did endure every human suffering," *ST III*, q. 46, art. 5, co.

<sup>234</sup> *Cf. ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, ad 4.

surpassing wisdom and charity.<sup>235</sup> Third, Christ would have been more acutely aware of His sorrow due to the perfections, including His interior powers, which “apprehended most vehemently all the causes of sadness.”<sup>236</sup> Fourth, Christ’s “pain and sorrow were accepted voluntarily.”<sup>237</sup> There was a twofold aspect to Christ’s choice to suffer, die, and descend to hell for us: first, there was the overall decision to suffer and die, and, second, there was the concomitant choice to permit “each one of His powers” to feel the pain it was receiving.<sup>238</sup> In this secondary choice there were two aspects as well: unlike other men who suffer, Christ did not let His reason mitigate His interior sadness,<sup>239</sup> nor did He let the beatific joy overflow into the lower parts of His soul to drown out any awareness of pain and sorrow:

[I]f we take the whole soul as comprising all its faculties, thus His entire soul did not enjoy fruition: not directly, indeed, because fruition is not the act of any one part of the soul; nor by any overflow of glory, because, since Christ was still upon earth, there was no overflowing of glory from the higher part into the lower, nor from the soul into the body. But since, on the contrary, the soul's higher part was not hindered in its proper acts by the lower, it follows that the higher part of His soul enjoyed fruition perfectly while Christ was suffering.<sup>240</sup>

These four factors are a critical component to understanding Christ’s sorrows in hell. They mean that even if Christ’s pains had not been the greatest possible in hell, such as those of the damned, Christ’s own sufferings would still have been exacerbated if these four factors apply. It would have been especially fitting for the four listed to apply since: it would have been suitable for Christ to have sorrow while in a place defined by sorrow; Christ continued to possess surpassing

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<sup>235</sup> Cf. *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, ad 4. In context, Aquinas is talking about Christ’s grief over the sins of men and His grief over the loss of life in His body. Both could apply to the descent. Christ’s potential grief over the sins of others during His stay in hell will be explored below.

<sup>236</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, co. It’s worth noting the irony that affirming the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation as being applicable during Christ’s descent to hell makes possible an argument for an increase in His suffering during this event, in contrast to the approach of contemporary theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar, who make His case for Christ suffering in the descent be effectively arguing for the destruction of His humanity.

<sup>237</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, co.

<sup>238</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, co.

<sup>239</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 6, co.

<sup>240</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 9, co.

wisdom and charity in hell; retained all of the perfections of His soul in hell; and was in hell because He had chosen to be there. To affirm these points is not to deny any of the glorious aspects of Christ's descent to hell – just as His continued enjoyment of the beatific vision is not an obstacle to His Passion, so also His encounter with sorrow in hell is not incompatible with traditional accounts of the descent that stress it as triumphant event.

Now we turn to the specific abodes of hell. Our approach will be guided by a key principle laid down by Aquinas: while Christ visited all of the abodes of hell, the 'Essence' of His soul was in the part where the fathers were detained, while He was present in the other parts through His 'effect' on them.<sup>241</sup>

[I]n this way Christ descended into each of the hells, but in different manner. For going down into the hell of the lost He wrought this effect, that by descending thither He put them to shame for their unbelief and wickedness: but to them who were detained in Purgatory He gave hope of attaining to glory: while upon the holy Fathers detained in hell solely on account of original sin, He shed the light of glory everlasting.<sup>242</sup>

Aquinas' distinction has two key implications. First, according to essence, Christ's stay in hell was centered on the limbo of the fathers, so it is there that we should focus our study about whether Christ was afflicted with any of the pains of any of the abodes of hell. Second, Christ's interaction with the other abodes of hell was as an agent who wrought an effect, which makes it further less likely that He would have been affected by the pains proper to those places. Therefore, in our evaluation of the abodes of hell in the context of Christ's descent we will first turn to the limbo of the fathers.

While the limbo of the fathers did not have many of the pains that define the other abodes – such as the fire of the hell of the lost – it was still a place marked by suffering. Aquinas employs biblical language to describe the limbo of the fathers as a "pit" where "prisoners" were

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<sup>241</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, co.

<sup>242</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, co.

detained,<sup>243</sup> a place where “no mercy refreshed them,”<sup>244</sup> and a “kingdom of darkness.”<sup>245</sup>

Moreover, even though this part of hell was among the higher regions, when compared to heaven it was “the deepest hell”:

As Gregory says (Moral. xiii): “Even the higher regions of hell he calls the deepest hell . . . For if relatively to the height of heaven this darksome air is infernal, then relatively to the height of this same air the earth lying beneath can be considered as infernal and deep. And again in comparison with the height of the same earth, those parts of hell which are higher than the other infernal mansions, may in this way be designated as the deepest hell.”<sup>246</sup>

Based on the above, we can infer that the fathers in hell suffered from a sense of detention, ‘darkness,’ and the geographic ignominy of being in ‘the deepest hell’ when compared to the heights of heaven. These afflictions are the consequence of exclusion from the vision of God, which instilled sorrow among the fathers of limbo. Their sadness is evident from the vivid description from Article 2, where Aquinas is elaborating on the twofold nature of sorrow, which consists of sorrow for sin, which the fathers did not have, and sorrow over the longed-for vision of God, which they did have:

Another sorrow comes of hoped-for glory being deferred, according to Proverbs 13:12: “Hope that is deferred afflicteth the soul”: and such was the sorrow which the holy Fathers suffered in hell, and Augustine refers to it in a sermon on the Passion, saying that “they besought Christ with tearful entreaty.”<sup>247</sup>

The language Aquinas employs dramatizes their suffering: ‘besought,’ ‘tearful,’ and ‘entreaty.’

This is the language of deep and long-held sorrow. Such sorrow marked the suffering of the fathers in limbo, according to Aquinas. Later in Article 2, Aquinas acknowledges that, in a

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<sup>243</sup> “And this is what is written Zechariah 9:11: ‘Thou also by the blood of Thy testament hast sent forth Thy prisoners out of the pit, wherein is no water,’” *ST III*, q. 52, art. 5, co.

<sup>244</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 6, ad 2.

<sup>245</sup> And (Colossians 2:15) it is written that ‘despoiling the principalities and powers,’ i.e. ‘of hell, by taking out Isaac and Jacob, and the other just souls,’ ‘He led them,’ i.e. ‘He brought them far from this kingdom of darkness into heaven,’ as the gloss explains,” *ST III*, q. 52, art. 5, co.

<sup>246</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 3, ad 5.

<sup>247</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 2.

limited sense, the limbo of the fathers could also be called ‘Abraham’s bosom,’ when defined as a place where souls are deprived the vision of God.<sup>248</sup> In that sense, Abraham’s bosom, understood as the limbo of the fathers, has ‘the character of hell and sorrow.’<sup>249</sup> Like hell as a whole, limbo is therefore defined as a place bereft of the vision of God. To sorrow over the lack of that vision is essentially to sorrow over being in the limbo of hell, since both are defined as places where such beatific joy is absent.

Christ could have shared in the sorrows of limbo – but only to the limited extent of being sad over being in an abode of hell,<sup>250</sup> not grief over the deferral of the divine vision since He never lost it. It would have been fitting for Christ to suffer such sorrow, since, as Aquinas states in Article 1, in descending to hell, Christ bore our penalty in order to free us from it. By bearing the sorrow of being in limbo, Christ freed us from having to go there upon our deaths, as Aquinas Himself confirms in citing Gregory the Great:

On the contrary, Gregory says (Moral. xiii): “Since our Creator and Redeemer, penetrating the bars of hell, brought out from thence the souls of the elect, He does not permit us to go thither, from whence He has already by descending set others free.”<sup>251</sup>

This is a crucial point: Christ’s descent to hell didn’t liberate just the holy fathers from limbo, it freed future righteous souls from having to go there. In this context, an important observation needs to be made: the limbo of the fathers, as the place where souls went only due to the defect

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<sup>248</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 4.

<sup>249</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 4.

<sup>250</sup> Obviously, sorrow over being in hell and sorrow over being in an abode of hell are closely related. In this section, as will be seen shortly, this author is essentially arguing that it is in limbo where Christ ‘experienced’ the humiliation of being in hell. In this statement above, the author deliberately omitted mention of the ‘detention’ and ‘darkness of hell’ mentioned earlier as some of the sufferings of the limbo of the fathers. These two do not seem as applicable since Christ could move freely about in hell and since the darkness could have been potentially dispelled by the glory of the vision of God that He bestowed on the fathers.

<sup>251</sup> This is in the context of purgatory. The full quotation reads as follows: “On the contrary, Gregory says (Moral. xiii): ‘Since our Creator and Redeemer, penetrating the bars of hell, brought out from thence the souls of the elect, He does not permit us to go thither, from whence He has already by descending set others free,’ But He permits us to go to Purgatory. Therefore, by descending into hell, He did not deliver souls from Purgatory,” *ST III*, q. 52, art. 8, s.c.

of human nature, not personal sin, is most closely connected to hell as a whole, defined as the place where *all* souls went prior to Christ's redemptive descent. This concept of hell was known under the name of *sheol* in the Old Testament – equivalent to the Greek word for the underworld, *hades* – where all souls were believed to have gone after death.<sup>252</sup> In *Rationes Fidei* Aquinas states that Christ descended to 'sheol':

Not only are the wicked in hell for their own sins, but before the suffering of Christ even the just went down at death to the underworld for the sin of our first parent. Thus Jacob said (Gen 37:35): "I will go down to Sheol in mourning." Thus Christ himself at death went down to the underworld, as the Creed says, and as the Prophet [David] foretold (Ps 16:10): "You will not leave my soul in Sheol," which Peter, in Acts (2:25), applies to Christ.<sup>253</sup>

In the New Testament, hell becomes differentiated into various abodes, most noticeably in the distinction between *sheol*, or hell as a whole, and *Gehenna*, the Hebrew name for the hell of the lost.<sup>254</sup> Once the other abodes have been defined for those who endure either eternal punishment (the hell of the lost) or temporal punishment (purgatory), one is left with limbo.<sup>255</sup> Hence, Aquinas' statements in Article 1 that Christ freed us from having to go to hell and his observation in Article 8 that Christ delivered us from the abode of the fathers are fundamentally referring to the same redemptive reality: in descending to 'hell' Christ spared those united to Him in faith and charity from having to go to the generic hell, or underworld, of the dead. In terms of specific abodes one could likewise say that Christ saved future souls united to Him from the 'limbo of the fathers.' The same cannot be said for the hells of punishment, as will be explained below.

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<sup>252</sup> James Orr, "Sheol," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1915), <https://biblehub.com/encyclopedia/s/sheol.htm>, accessed May 13, 2022, *ad loc.*

<sup>253</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Reasons for the Faith Against Muslim Objections*, translated by Joseph Kenny, O.P. (Rome: Islamochristiana, 1996), <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/Rationes.htm>, accessed April 28, 2022, c. 9.

<sup>254</sup> Geerhardus Vos, "Gehenna," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1915), <https://biblehub.com/encyclopedia/s/sheol.htm>, accessed May 13, 2022, *ad loc.*

<sup>255</sup> Technically, one is left with two limbos, the limbo of the fathers and the limbo of the children.

This close affinity between limbo and hell in the generic sense as the underworld, or *sheol*, is validated by the language Aquinas' chooses in Question 52. Aquinas states five times that the holy fathers' were imprisoned in 'hell' without qualifying that they were in a specific abode.<sup>256</sup> In fact, while it appears elsewhere in the *Summa*, the term 'limbo' does not occur in Question 52.<sup>257</sup> The other potential name for their location, "Abraham's bosom," is one that can be applied only to the limbo of the fathers in an equivocal sense, according to Aquinas.<sup>258</sup> He himself does not seem to adopt it, alluding to it only when he engages with Augustine's use of the biblical term.<sup>259</sup> The absence of a consistent place name for where the fathers were located is all the more notable since Aquinas does employ other place names: using 'purgatory' 23 times and 'hell of the lost' 16 times in Question 52.<sup>260</sup> Thus, while Aquinas goes at lengths to emphasize that Christ's soul was 'essentially' in the part of hell where the fathers were, he also constantly identifies their location with hell as a whole (as one of its constituent parts). In descending to hell Christ freed us from having to go there. Likewise, by being in the limbo of the fathers, Christ relieved us from having to be there. For this reason, it was fitting for him to bear the sorrows of limbo, on the principle outlined in Article 1 that Christ frees us from a penalty by bearing it for us.<sup>261</sup>

There are two additional reasons why it was fitting for Christ to suffer in the limbo of the fathers, based on Aquinas' theology. First, Christ was more fully present in the limbo of the

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<sup>256</sup> The references are: "the captives detained in hell," in art. 1, co.; "the holy Fathers detained in hell" in art. 2, co.; "that part of hell wherein the just were detained," in art. 2, co.; "the holy Fathers were detained in hell," in art. 5 co.; and "Directly Christ died His soul went down into hell, and bestowed the fruits of His Passion on the saints detained there" in art. 5 ad 3.

<sup>257</sup> Aquinas does employ the term "limbo" elsewhere, such as in *ST II-II*, q. 2, art. 7, ad 2.

<sup>258</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 4.

<sup>259</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, arg. 4, ad 4; art. 5, arg. 1, ad 1.

<sup>260</sup> Phrase counts based on the author's own text searches conducted on April 29, 2022. Note, the totals include article headings.

<sup>261</sup> Being in the limbo of the fathers can be understood as a 'penalty' that attaches to human nature, not to individual souls, since those in limbo did not have any mortal or venial sins for which they needed to be punished.

fathers because His soul was there ‘according to Essence,’ whereas His presence in the other abodes of hell was according to effect, rendering it improbable that those parts would have had an ‘effect’ on Him. In contrast, Aquinas repeatedly emphasizes Christ’s ‘physical’ presence in the limbo of the fathers, noting that He visited them both interiorly by grace and in an exterior manner ‘in place.’<sup>262</sup> If there was one abode whose sufferings Christ took on, it would be most fitting for it to have been the limbo of the fathers, where His presence was most concentrated. (One could argue that it was in the limbo of the fathers where Christ ‘experienced’ the humiliation of being in hell.) Second, in addition to the full presence of Christ’s soul, Aquinas also stresses its duration in limbo, noting that after Christ had delivered the fathers, He did not leave limbo: “Nevertheless it was fitting that His soul should abide in hell as long as His body remained in the tomb.”<sup>263</sup> Since Christ’s stay in hell was both metaphysically *and* chronologically centered in the limbo of the fathers, it would have been most fitting for Him to endure the sorrows associated with it.

A potential counterargument to this points out that Christ communicated the beatific vision to the fathers in limbo, erasing their sorrows.<sup>264</sup> If Christ removed the sorrows of limbo, would this not preclude the possibility of Him being affected by them? There are four reasons this is not necessarily the case. First, as discussed above, while on the cross and in the descent, Christ retained the beatific vision even amid His suffering.<sup>265</sup> Communicating this to the fathers changed their state – not Christ’s own. Second, while Christ changed the state of the fathers, He did not change limbo itself: while it could no longer be called a prison – since the Fathers were no longer confined there against their will – it remained a part of hell that Aquinas has described

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<sup>262</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, co.

<sup>263</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 4, ad 2.

<sup>264</sup> “Likewise He removed the sorrows caused by glory deferred, by bestowing glory,” *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 2.

<sup>265</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, co.



as the “deepest hell” when compared to heaven.<sup>266</sup> Third, while the fathers may have been delivered from the sufferings of hell that does not mean that Christ has excluded Himself from them. Fourth, Aquinas has made it clear that Christ’s extended presence in the limbo of the fathers is distinct from His act of liberating them from limbo and granting them their longed-for vision of God. In fact, Christ’s three-day duration in limbo is instead linked to His mission of bearing our penalty and being in a state of death:

I answer that, As Christ, in order to take our penalties upon Himself, willed His body to be laid in the tomb, so likewise He willed His soul to descend into hell. But the body lay in the tomb for a day and two nights, so as to demonstrate the truth of His death. Consequently, it is to be believed that His soul was in hell, in order that it might be brought back out of hell simultaneously with His body from the tomb.

Reply to Objection 1. When Christ descended into hell He delivered the saints who were there, not by leading them out at once from the confines of hell, but by enlightening them with the light of glory in hell itself. Nevertheless it was fitting that His soul should abide in hell as long as His body remained in the tomb.<sup>267</sup>

Although Christ’s soul was ‘essentially’ in the limbo of the fathers, Aquinas confirms that He visited the other abodes of hell, albeit in a more limited manner.<sup>268</sup> In order to complete our analysis we will briefly identify the pains characteristic to the other two primary abodes of hell, purgatory and the hell of the damned,<sup>269</sup> and then consider which of these pains, if any, are applicable to Christ. As an unfinished text, the *Summa* does not have sections devoted to the abodes of hell, so we will lean on supplementary material available in Aquinas’ other texts like the *Commentary on the Sentences* to fill this lacuna.

Purgatory is the abode of those souls who died with venial sin only. Unlike the fathers of limbo, the souls in purgatory are there due not only to the common defect of human nature, but

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<sup>266</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 3, ad 5.

<sup>267</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 4, co. and ad 1.

<sup>268</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, co.

<sup>269</sup> The limbo of the children is not covered here since Aquinas offers no indication in q. 52 that Christ visited this abode during His descent and stay in hell.

also due to their personal defects stemming from their sins.<sup>270</sup> In addition to those who died with the stain of venial sin, purgatory is also for those who died without completing their penances for mortal sins that have been forgiven.<sup>271</sup> In the *Summa*, Aquinas describes purgatory as a place ‘where men are tormented with sensible pain,’<sup>272</sup> existing ‘in a state of penal suffering.’<sup>273</sup> The souls in purgatory face two punishments: ‘the pain of loss,’ due to the delay of the beatific vision, and ‘the pain of sense,’ from physical punishment inflicted by the fire that purges them of their venial sins.<sup>274</sup> In the *Commentary*, Aquinas explains how the corporeal fire acts upon the souls in purgatory, “[A]s it is an instrument of divine justice exacting vengeance ... it so detains the spirit and in this way becomes penal, holding it back from carrying out what it wills, so that namely it cannot operate where it wills, and as it wills.”<sup>275</sup> The soul thus apprehends the fire as something harmful to it, causing it to have fear and sorrow.<sup>276</sup> Together, the two punishments of purgatory inflict suffering that exceeds that of any in this life.<sup>277</sup> However, of the two, Aquinas identifies the ‘lack’ of the divine vision as the ‘greater pain.’<sup>278</sup> In addition to these two forms of suffering, there is a third: sorrow for the sins that caused them to be there: “[T]hose who are in

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<sup>270</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 8, ad 3.

<sup>271</sup> “Another reason for purgatory is that some people did not finish making due penance for the [mortal] sins they repented of before death, and it would not befit God’s justice to let them off; otherwise those who die suddenly would be in a better position than those who spend a long time in this life doing penance. Therefore they suffer something after death. This cannot be in hell, where people are punished for mortal sins, since the mortal sins of these people have been forgiven by their repentance. Nor would it be fitting, as a penalty, to defer the glory due to them until the day of judgement. Therefore there should be some temporal purifying punishment after this life before the day of judgement,” *De Rationes*, c. 9.

<sup>272</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, arg. 1.

<sup>273</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 8, arg. 1.

<sup>274</sup> *Sent.* IV, d. 21, q. 1, art. 1, resp. to qc. 3 (482).

<sup>275</sup> *Sent.* IV, d. 44, q. 3, art. 3, resp. to qc. 3 (150). The above quotation is from a question on the conditions of the damned; however, elsewhere Aquinas expressly cites this explanation as also applying to the fire that afflicts those in purgatory (*Sent.* IV, dist. 21, q. 1, a. 1, resp. to quest. 3, (482)).

<sup>276</sup> *Sent.* IV, d. 44, q. 3, art. 3, resp. to qc. 3 (148 and 150) and ad 5 (151).

<sup>277</sup> *Sent.* IV, d. 21, q. 1, art. 1, resp. to qc. 3 (482).

<sup>278</sup> *De Rationes*, c. 9.

purgatory have sorrow for sin that is informed by grace, but not meritorious, because there are not in the state of meriting.”<sup>279</sup>

In Question 52, Aquinas confirms that in His descent Christ went to purgatory.<sup>280</sup> The manner of this presence was one of ‘effect,’<sup>281</sup> but Aquinas also characterizes Christ’s descent to purgatory as a ‘visit’<sup>282</sup> in which He ‘gave hope of attaining to glory’<sup>283</sup> and even could have delivered some of those inhabitants who either had already been freed by His Passion,<sup>284</sup> had already been sufficiently purged of their sins by that point,<sup>285</sup> or who during their lifetimes had displayed such faith and devotion towards Christ's death that they merited deliverance from temporal punishment upon Christ’s descent.<sup>286</sup> Interactions like these which suggest a more personal touch must be taken into account when seeking to interpret and fully understand Aquinas’ views of Christ present in purgatory. In giving the hope of glory to some and granting deliverance to others, Christ’s actions in purgatory bear some resemblance to his salvific presence in the limbo of the fathers.

However, it seems unlikely that Christ could have shared in the two primary pains of purgatory. First, He Himself could not have sorrowed over the loss of the beatific vision, since He never lost it. Second, it seems improbable that His soul, even though it was in a separated state, could have suffered in the fires of purgatory. There are two reasons for this. First, unlike all the other souls of all the abodes of hell, Christ’s soul was able to freely move. This is evident

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<sup>279</sup> *Sent.* IV., dist. 17, q. 2, a.4, resp. to qc. 3 (309).

<sup>280</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 2, co.

<sup>281</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 2, co.

<sup>282</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 6, ad 1.

<sup>283</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 2, co.

<sup>284</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 8, co.

<sup>285</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 8, ad 1.

<sup>286</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 8, ad 1. Aquinas elaborates on the conditions for the possible deliverance of those in purgatory in the third objection: “[T]here was nothing to prevent those detained in Purgatory being delivered by Christ from their privation of glory, but not from the debt of punishment in Purgatory which pertains to personal defect,” *ST* III, q. 52, art. 8, ad 3.

from the outset of the descent, in which His soul relocated to hell by its own motive power.<sup>287</sup> It is also confirmed by His activity in hell, in which Christ was able to traverse its various abodes,<sup>288</sup> suggesting that He was unaffected by the confining effects the purgatorial fire had on the souls there. Second, Aquinas makes a point of stipulating that Christ's soul did not pass 'locally' through purgatory,<sup>289</sup> further diminishing the likelihood that His soul could have been exposed to the fires of purgatory. However, it is possible that Christ could have shared in the third pain of purgatory, sorrow over sin. While Christ Himself had no sins of His own to grieve over, Aquinas has previously confirmed that He lamented the sins of mankind:

Christ grieved not only over the loss of His own bodily life, but also over the sins of all others. And this grief in Christ surpassed all grief of every contrite heart, both because it flowed from a greater wisdom and charity, by which the pang of contrition is intensified, and because He grieved at the one time for all sins, according to Isaiah 53:4: "Surely He hath carried our sorrows."<sup>290</sup>

It is possible that in addition to the grief on the cross, Christ, in seeing souls suffer for their sins in purgatory, would have again felt the pang of sorrow.<sup>291</sup> However, Aquinas has placed some encumbrances on this possible scenario. First, as was just mentioned, Christ descended only by 'Essence' to the limbo of the fathers; his presence elsewhere was indirectly by 'effect.'<sup>292</sup> Second, this presence by means of 'effect' undermines the possibility that Christ was a passive recipient of its pains. There is at least one additional reason that it would have been unfitting for

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<sup>287</sup> "Christ's soul descended into hell not by the same kind of motion as that whereby bodies are moved, but by that kind whereby the angels are moved, as was said in 1:53:1," *ST III*, q. 52, art. 1, ad 3.

<sup>288</sup> *Cf. ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, co. and art. 6, ad 1.

<sup>289</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, ad 1.

<sup>290</sup> *ST III*, q. 46, art. 4, co. One potential counterargument to this text is the mention of such grief being "one time." However, this "one time" could refer to the entire Passion, including Christ's burial and descent. The fact that Aquinas quotes Isaiah 53:4 here and then again in q. 52, art. 1 confirms that the process behind described is an extended event, or period of some duration, as opposed to a single point in time on the cross.

<sup>291</sup> This sorrow might be distinguished from that on the cross which had potentially satisfactory value. However, the absence of satisfactory value does not preclude sorrow itself in Christ's soul.

<sup>292</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 2, co.

Christ to take on any of the pains of purgatory: as Aquinas notes,<sup>293</sup> His descent did not spare future Christians from having to go there, so it would not make sense for Christ to bear a penalty that future members of His Church would still have to bear themselves. That Christ might have shared sorrow over their sins and the impact they had on the souls in purgatory must therefore be left as just a possibility.

The abode of hell in which the damned reside is for those who died in a state of mortal sin. Like those in purgatory, they suffer the pain of loss of the divine vision and of sense,<sup>294</sup> except in their case both these pains are eternal in their effects. The souls of the damned will be tormented by a corporeal fire in the same manner as described above for purgatory.<sup>295</sup> While fire is the main instrument of punishment in the hell of the lost, it is not the only one. As the damned turned away from God to material things, which are “many and empty” in number, so also they will be punished “in many ways and by many things.”<sup>296</sup> In addition to the fire, Aquinas mentions other physical afflictions like ‘storms of winds,’ ‘vehement’ heat and cold, and physical darkness.<sup>297</sup> On top of the corresponding physical pains, these physical torments elicit physical weeping among the damned.<sup>298</sup> Such punishments in the body accompany punishments in the intellect, of which there are also many. They sorrow over the good things they lost and

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<sup>293</sup> “On the contrary, Gregory says (Moral. xiii): ‘Since our Creator and Redeemer, penetrating the bars of hell, brought out from thence the souls of the elect, He does not permit us to go thither, from whence He has already by descending set others free,’ But He permits us to go to Purgatory. Therefore, by descending into hell, He did not deliver souls from Purgatory,” *ST III*, q. 52, art. 8, s.c.

<sup>294</sup> *Sent. IV*, dist. 44, q. 3, art. 2, resp. to qc. 2 (134).

<sup>295</sup> *Sent. IV*, dist. 44, q. 3, art. 3, resp. to qc. 3 (150). The above quotation is from a question on the conditions of the damned. Aquinas expressly cites this explanation as also applying to the fire that afflicts those in purgatory in *Sent. IV*, dist. 21, q. 1, a. 1, resp. to quest. 3, (482) as cited in n. 78 above.

<sup>296</sup> *Sent. IV*, dist. 50, q. 2, art. 3, resp. to qc. 1 (575).

<sup>297</sup> *Sent. IV*, dist. 50, q. 2, art. 3, quest. 1, on the contrary (573); resp. to qc. 1, ad 3 (575); and qc. 4, furthermore and resp. to quest. 4 (575 and 577). It seems apparent that some of these punishments will have physical effects on the resurrected bodies of the damned, as distinct from the fire, which also affects the spiritual substance of their souls.

<sup>298</sup> *Sent. IV*, dist. 50, q. 2, art. 3, resp. to qc. 3 (576).

loved as well as over the evils they did,<sup>299</sup> but not in the sense of remorse, which applies only when the sorrow is over having countermanded God's precepts.<sup>300</sup> The damned also have envy for the 'inestimable glory' of the blessed and sorrow and hate when they consider God's punishment of them.<sup>301</sup>

In Question 52, Aquinas confirms that Christ also 'visited' all parts of hell, which would include the hell of the damned;<sup>302</sup> however, the manner of His presence there would have been subject to the same limitations as purgatory.<sup>303</sup> It does not seem fitting for Christ to have shared in the intellectual pains of the damned, according to Aquinas' theology. This is based on three theological truths to which Aquinas adhered: Christ did not lose beatific vision, He did love God, and He did not harbor sinful envy for others.<sup>304</sup> As a separated soul, Christ could have been subject to the pain inflicted by the fires of hell, had His soul been in hell, but Aquinas stipulates that Christ's soul did not locally pass through it,<sup>305</sup> precluding this possibility.<sup>306</sup> The manner of Christ's interaction with the souls of the damned further diminishes the likelihood that He was touched by any of the pains of this abode. Aquinas tells us in His visit to the hell of the lost He put the souls of the damned "to shame for their unbelief and wickedness."<sup>307</sup> This effect of 'shame and confusion' stands in contrast to the 'deliverance and consolation' that Christ brought

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<sup>299</sup> *Sent.* IV, dist. 50, q. 2 art. 2, resp. to qc. 1 (570).

<sup>300</sup> *Sent.* IV, dist. 50, q. 2 art. 2, resp. to qc. 2 (571). Aquinas also calls this 'accidental repentance' due to the punishment of sin in *Com.* IV, dist. 50, q. 2 art. 1, resp. to qc. 2 (565)

<sup>301</sup> *Sent.* IV, dist. 50, q. 2 art. 2, resp. to qc. 3 (571-2) and *Com.* IV, dist. 50, q. 2 art. 1, resp. to qc. 5 (567).

<sup>302</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 6, ad 1.

<sup>303</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 2, co.

<sup>304</sup> Aquinas classifies envy as a mortal sin in *ST* II-II, q. 36, art. 3, co., noting that envy can also be "a passion of the sensuality" in *ST* II-II, q. 36, art. 3, ad 1.

<sup>305</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 2, ad 1.

<sup>306</sup> Since only Christ's soul was in hell, it does not seem possible that the other sensible torments mentioned by Aquinas would have been able to affect Him. Indeed, since there had not yet been a general resurrection of the body, it seems possible that they would not have affected that separated souls of the damned at that point either.

<sup>307</sup> *ST* III, q. 52, art. 2, co.

to the other abodes of hell.<sup>308</sup> This oppositional dynamic further militates against the idea that Christ would have also shared in some of the sufferings of the damned. One question does arise: Since Christ offered salvation from sin and its consequences, would it not have been fitting for Him to bear some of the pains of the hell of the lost, since He spared the elect souls from having to go there?<sup>309</sup> The answer is that it is Christ's Passion on the cross – not His descent – that saved souls from sin and damnation.<sup>310</sup> His descent saved them from imprisonment in the limbo of the fathers, as explained above.

This chapter has argued that it would have been fitting for Christ to suffer in His descent to hell in a limited manner. Such suffering would have consisted mainly of sorrow over the humiliation of being in hell. It also would have been fitting for Christ to share, to a degree, the sorrows of the limbo of the fathers, as a further expression of His overall sorrow of being in hell. At the same time, this chapter has endeavored to show how it would not have been fitting for Christ to share in some of the pains of the other abodes, such as purgatory and the hell of the lost. While the objective of this chapter has been to fully develop the argument that Christ suffered during His descent to hell, a secondary purpose has been to circumscribe the extent of this suffering, by delineating the pains proper to each abode that would apply – or not – to Christ's soul. Far from undermining the main thrust of the argument, this more circumspect analysis of hell's abodes actually strengthens it. From the outset this thesis has not attempted to follow some contemporary theological claims that Christ suffered all the pains of hell or the worst pains of hell. In defining and limiting which pains would have been fitting for Christ to assume, it is

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<sup>308</sup> *ST III*, q. 52, art. 6, ad 1.

<sup>309</sup> The same question does not necessarily arise in the previous section on purgatory since, as explained in that section, Christ did not spare souls united to Him from having to go there.

<sup>310</sup> This is made clear in *ST III*, q. 49, q. 3, co.

believed that a more credible case has been presented for an account of Christ's descent to hell that includes suffering, in addition to its glorious aspects.

The arguments that have been made take as their starting point Aquinas' clear affirmation in Question 52 Article 1 that Christ did suffer in hell. While Aquinas does not elaborate on this statement, previously, in Question 49 Article 6, he has provided a major clue as to what it involved: humiliation according to place. Aquinas has thus painted an incomplete picture and it has been the task of this chapter to fill it in, inferring the rest of it from what he has told us, drawing upon his broader theological writings in the *Summa* and other texts like the *Commentary* to articulate what would have been fitting for Christ to suffer in hell. It would thus be unfair to characterize the arguments of this chapter as merely speculative, as they do not seek to construct entirely new claims so much as to fully develop Aquinas' thought. That Aquinas held that Christ suffered in hell is certain; the question is how and where in hell Christ suffered. This chapter has offered what this author believes to be the most probable answer, based on Aquinas' teachings.

The arguments of this chapter could be summarized by first asking, Why did Christ suffer in His descent to hell? The answer is closely connected to the reason that Aquinas provides for why it was fitting for Christ to descend to hell: 'to bear our penalty' of 'infirmities and sorrows' in order to free us from it.<sup>311</sup> We can rephrase this as the answer to our own question: it was fitting for Christ to suffer in His descent to hell because, by assuming the penalty that we would have otherwise had suffered, He freed us from it. This penalty entailed both metaphysical infirmities, or defects, and psychological sorrows. The last chapter carved out the question of the defect of death and its corresponding sorrows, while this chapter directly addressed the topic of

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<sup>311</sup> ST III, q. 52, art. 1, co.



hell itself as a 'defect' of place over which souls grieve. Christ, in submitting to this defect and sharing in these sorrows, spared us from having to suffer them ourselves.

## Conclusion

The starting point for this thesis was Question 52 in the Third Part of the *Summa Theologica* where Aquinas states that it was fitting for Christ to descend to hell “because He came to bear our penalty in order to free us from penalty according to Isaiah 53:4: ‘Surely He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows.’”<sup>312</sup> Aquinas appears to be staking out a position that is generally not attributed to him: that Christ suffered in His descent to hell. Aquinas does not elaborate on this point, leaving readers to wonder why Christ came to “bear our penalty” in hell and what might have been the nature of His suffering there. Answering these questions has been the undertaking of this thesis, utilizing material elsewhere in the *Summa* to demonstrate why it was fitting for Christ to suffer in hell, according to Aquinas’ theology – albeit with some important qualifications and distinctions that limit such suffering.

We began by endeavoring to understand what Aquinas really meant in Question 52. Aquinas himself has provided us with the clues to guide our search, distinguishing between the ‘infirmities’ and ‘sorrows’ that Christ bore. Based on a close reading of the *Summa*, the first chapter defined ‘infirmities’ as referring to the physical and metaphysical defects of the human condition, such as sickness and death, and ‘sorrows’ as involving the inner psychological distress associated with these conditions. In bearing both our infirmities and our sorrows in hell, Christ’s sufferings thus had both a metaphysical and psychological aspect to them.

This leads to two questions. 1. What was the nature of Christ’s metaphysical and psychological distress in hell? and 2. Why did Christ endure such sufferings, especially after His Passion on the cross?

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<sup>312</sup> ST III, q. 52, art. 1, co.

In pursuing these questions, this thesis focused on two types of infirmities, the defect of death and the defect of place (being in a lowly place like hell), both of which Christ freely chose to assume, as part of his overall voluntary decision to suffer and die on the cross. The first defect was the subject of the third chapter, which delved into the metaphysical realities and psychological pains of death, showing that the soul in hell longs for its severed body – a yearning that manifests as pain when it goes unfulfilled. Christ took on this interior pain when He freely submitted to death and the separation of His body and soul.

The second defect, of place, follows from the first and was the focus of the fourth chapter. In death, souls not only are deprived of their bodies they also lose their standing in a geographical sense, descending to the underworld, viewed as a lowly or ignoble place. Through an analysis of Question 46, this chapter showed that being in hell in the generic sense entails a sort of ‘humiliation by place.’ Just as Christ freely chose to assume the condition and pains of death, so also did He endure both being in hell and the humiliation that comes with such a condition. When hell is understood in the specific sense as designating series of abodes the picture becomes more complicated. The fourth chapter offered a view of the descent in which Christ could have suffered some of the pains specific to the limbo of the fathers without being touched by those of the other abodes.

The second major question is why Christ suffered in His descent to hell. Chapter 2 laid out two primary reasons, based on Aquinas’ criterion of fittingness – that is, what it would have been ‘fitting’ for Christ to endure given His divinity, His humanity, His sinlessness, His redemptive mission, and His desire to share in the fullness of the human condition without the diminishment of His divinity. The criterion of fittingness recognizes that the crucifixion of Christ did not occur because it was necessary for it to happen, but instead arose from Christ’s free

decision motivated by love to suffer for us. First, in the fullness of His humanity and out of a desire to be in solidarity with the common human condition,<sup>313</sup> it would have been fitting for Christ to suffer all the classes of pain associated with death, both metaphysical and psychological, relating to both the defect of death and the defect of place. Just as Christ submitted to the metaphysical defect of death, so also would it have been fitting for Him to take on the psychological pains that afflict a soul that has been separated from its body.

While the above reason draws upon Aquinas' broader Christology, the second emerges out of his theology of Christ's descent to hell. According to Aquinas, Christ descended to hell to 'bear our penalty' (Question 52). If Christ's descent to hell involved bearing our penalty, then it is connected, in soteriological terms, to His redemptive mission that achieved its climax on the cross. The second chapter established that Christ's suffering in the descent was not due to any insufficiency on the cross, but rather was related to it as its consequence. Such suffering is distinct but not separate from the cross; it is chronologically and metaphysically posterior to it while also included within it as its consequence. The second chapter proposed that one way of understanding this relationship is through the distinction of death 'in becoming' and death 'in fact' (Question 50). The chapter closed by identifying four supplementary reasons for Christ's suffering in hell: to demonstrate His superabundant love for us to the fullest extent, to set an example of virtuous obedience, to deter men from sin by instilling fear in them (of the pains of death and hell), and to fully suffer all class of sufferings in His passion and death (understanding hell as constituting its own distinct class of sufferings).

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<sup>313</sup> Although presented as one these are two related yet distinct reasons. Taking on suffering that was due to His humanity is fitting based on Christ's nature as an individual person (who had a fully divine nature and a fully human nature). Suffering out of solidarity emphasizes Christ's relationship with all men.

It is hoped that this thesis has made contributions in several areas. First, and most immediately, it has enlarged our understanding of Aquinas' statement regarding the purpose for Christ's descent to hell in Question 52. Second, in the course of investigating the meaning of this article, this thesis has highlighted the importance of the intertextual interpretation of Aquinas' various works. In the case of the descent, this thesis showed how Aquinas' position on Christ's suffering in hell developed over the course of several texts, culminating in the one he reaches in the *Summa*. In theological terms it is hoped that this thesis has contributed to the further development of the traditional teaching on Christ's descent to hell. In addition to the traditional depiction of this event as a victorious manifestation of Christ's descent to hell, a proclamation of His victory over the devil, and a freeing of the holy fathers of limbo, this thesis has added another dimension, that of Christ's own continued suffering on the cross. Importantly, rather than challenging the traditional account, this thesis has endeavored to affirm its legitimacy, arguing that within the traditional view there is room for the position that Christ endured some suffering during His time in hell. In so doing, this thesis has also strengthened the connection between the crucifixion and Christ's descent to hell – demonstrating that the latter is a continuation of the former. The suffering of Christ's soul due to the separation from His body is also significant for the Christological idea of Christ's Incarnational solidarity with humanity, demonstrating the radical lengths He went to share in the fullness of the human condition.

As this thesis has penetrated into new territory in our understanding of Aquinas' theology of Christ's descent to hell, it has also highlighted several questions that warrant further exploration. One is a fuller investigation of the evolution of Aquinas' position on the possibility of Christ even suffering in hell. This thesis has offered merely a basis sketch of the doctrinal development, made possible by the distinction between hell as standing for the 'evil of place'

and not only the ‘evil of guilt.’ A second potential area of further study is the relationship between the descent and the cross. This thesis has presented Christ’s descent to hell as “an extension of His death on the cross because they were its consequence and included in Christ’s choice to offer Himself.”<sup>314</sup> In Thomistic terms this thesis appealed to Aquinas’ own distinction between death ‘in becoming’ and ‘in fact’ in order to more precisely describe the relationship between the cross and the descent. In the article on the descent, Aquinas offers another framework for understanding the relationship based on analogy with the sacraments. Just as the sacraments confer grace on the living, Aquinas notes that the descent brought the fruits of the Passion on the dead fathers in limbo.<sup>315</sup> Aquinas does not develop the theological implications of this analogy, nor does he offer a reconciliation between this paradigm for viewing the relationship between the cross and the descent and the one cited just above. Yet again, Aquinas has presented us with tantalizing theological clues as to where his thinking is going without directly taking us there, inviting further exploration and deeper study.

Of course, a deeper, Thomistic-grounded theology of the descent which recognizes that Christ underwent some suffering during His stay in hell likely has yet to be written. This thesis merely aimed to shed light on just one aspect of such a theological examination, the question of Christ’s suffering in the descent to hell. Once it is established that Christ suffered to some degree during His descent into hell, our understanding of the soteriological, Christological, and other theological areas needs to be revisited in light of this important fact. A complete theological study, which is beyond the scope of this thesis, would address the relationship of the descent to the cross, as well as its place in the theology of redemption, sacramental theology, Christology, Trinitarian theology, and eschatology, to name some of the main areas of examination. This

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<sup>314</sup> Chap. 1, para 6.

<sup>315</sup> ST III, q. 52, art. 1, ad 2.

thesis merely serves an example of an approach that is effective and fruitful while remaining faithful to Aquinas' text and Church teachings.

An overarching message of this thesis is that Christ's descent merits deeper reflection and further theological investigation by thoughtfully engaging with the sources of the Church's traditional teaching. In arguing for an account of Christ's descent which incorporates suffering, this thesis is implicitly challenging overly simplistic accounts of the descent which limit it to a celebration of the victory on the cross or a foreshadowing of the resurrection. While these views of the descent are valid and accurate, they are also incomplete. The true story of Christ's descent to hell is deeper, darker, and, ultimately, richer. It is hoped that this thesis has succeeded in shedding further light on that story.

**Appendix 1: Timeline of Key Works of Thomas Aquinas<sup>316</sup>**

1254/1255-1266	<i>Scriptum in Sententiis</i>
1265-1267	<i>Compendium Theologiae I: De fide</i>
Oct. 1265-1267	<i>Summa Theologica I: 1-74</i>
1267-1268	<i>Summa Theologica I: 75-119</i>
1271	<i>Summa Theologica I-I</i>
1271-1272	<i>Summa Theologica I-II</i>
1272-1273	<i>Summa Theologica III: 1-90</i>
1272-1273	<i>Compendium Theologiae II: De spe</i>

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<sup>316</sup> Adapted from Torrell, 328-329.



## Appendix 2

<b>Reasons Why It Was Fitting for Christ to Suffer in Hell</b>		
<b><i>Three Main Reasons</i></b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Section of Thesis</b>
Reason 1: The Atonement	Suffering in hell was part of Christ bearing our penalty.	Chs. 1 and 2
Reason 2: Incarnational Solidarity	In His humanity, Christ desired to share in the common lot of men.	Chs. 2 and 3
Reason 3: The Passion	Suffering in hell fulfilled the sorrow and fear of His death on the cross.	Ch. 2
<b><i>Four Supplementary Reasons</i></b>		
Reason 1: Divine Love	Suffering in hell serves as a further demonstration of God's love.	Ch. 2
Reason 2: Example of Virtue	In hell, Christ provided the ultimate example of total obedience.	Ch. 2
Reason 3: Deterrent to Sin	The pains and sorrows of Christ in hell instill fear, deterring men from sin.	Ch. 2
Reason 4: Completeness of Suffering	Christ chose to suffer all classes of suffering.	Ch. 2

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