The sacraments (52): Not only here, but also in the beyond!

The dead are not truly dead—at least not for God. For God there is no dividing line between life on earth and life in the hereafter. That is what Christians believe, and that is also what the Bible states. Here is an overview of how sacramental acts are dispensed for the dead.



We read in the Apostolicum that Jesus “descended to the dead”. The “harrowing of hell”, which describes Christ’s descent into Hades (Latin *descensus Christi ad inferos*), occurred for one reason alone, namely to bring the gospel to those who had not been able to believe during their lifetime. A special rite developed from this notion in the early church: “Otherwise, what will they do who are baptised for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptised for the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15: 29).

Performed on the living for the benefit of the dead

While this is an exegetically controversial passage, it should not be rejected entirely. Some Bible scholars assume that this was a Gnostic practice, in other words, a sectarian custom. For others, the passage is positive evidence of a practice attested in Corinth, which belongs in the same theological context as the account of Christ’s descent into the realm of the dead. Christians in Corinth practised baptism for the dead, that is, they baptised living individuals on behalf of the dead. The way this vicarious baptism is described theologically is very interesting: the fundamental notion is that of “representation”, whereby the salvific credit is not applied to the person actually receiving the act, but the person on whose behalf the act is performed—much in the same way that prayers of intercession are offered up to this day. The New Apostolic Catechism shares this view.

Visible and invisible

And since the church of Christ has an invisible side, in which this world and the hereafter are interwoven—and in the visibly manifest form of which the activity of the Apostles is of great significance—the Apostles of the New Apostolic Church dispense the sacraments in their full form, that is, even for those in the realms of the departed: “The proper administration of the sacraments is incumbent upon the Apostles. They have been commissioned by Christ to make the sacraments accessible in proper fashion. Although not all sacraments need to be dispensed by the Apostles or commissioned by them, sacraments nevertheless exist in an apostolic relationship” (CNAC 8).

Here and there

Just how closely New Apostolic congregational life reflects the doctrine of the visible church and the invisible church of Christ is attested in CNAC 9.6.3: “Jesus Christ is Lord over the dead and the living. His gospel is equally valid for all. It is the desire of God that all men be saved (1 Timothy 2: 4–6). This means that God’s will to save is universal. Salvation is offered through the proclamation of the word, the forgiveness of sins, and the sacraments. All of these are likewise intended for the departed. For them as for the living, belief in Jesus Christ is indispensable for attaining salvation. Redemption occurs solely through Jesus Christ.” However, and this is a fundamental assumption that applies to all sacraments, sacramental acts can only be performed in the realm of the visible. The dead are thus commemorated in a representative manner, and yet the effect of the sacraments, as essential elements for imparting salvation, is the same for both the living and the dead.

Three times a year

CNAC 12.1.13 describes the liturgical sequence of this practice: “Divine services for the departed take place three times a year, on the first Sunday of March, July, and November respectively. With this in mind, New Apostolic Christians also pray that souls who have died in an unredeemed state may find salvation in Christ.” In divine services for the departed conducted by the Chief Apostle and the District Apostles two ministers receive the sacraments on behalf of the dead. “The sacraments are performed in the same manner as usual. In the other congregations, the departed are commemorated in a special prayer after the celebration of Holy Communion.”

In a nutshell

- The dispensation of the sacraments to the departed is based on God’s universal will to save.
- Along with the rite referenced in 1 Corinthians 15: 29, the descent of Jesus into the realm of the dead in order to preach the gospel there is the theological starting point for the New Apostolic practice.
- In addition to the Apostle ministry and the hope in the imminent return of Christ, the dispensation of the sacraments to the departed is among the unique characteristics of the New Apostolic Church. It is therefore necessary to bring this teaching to expression in a responsible manner.

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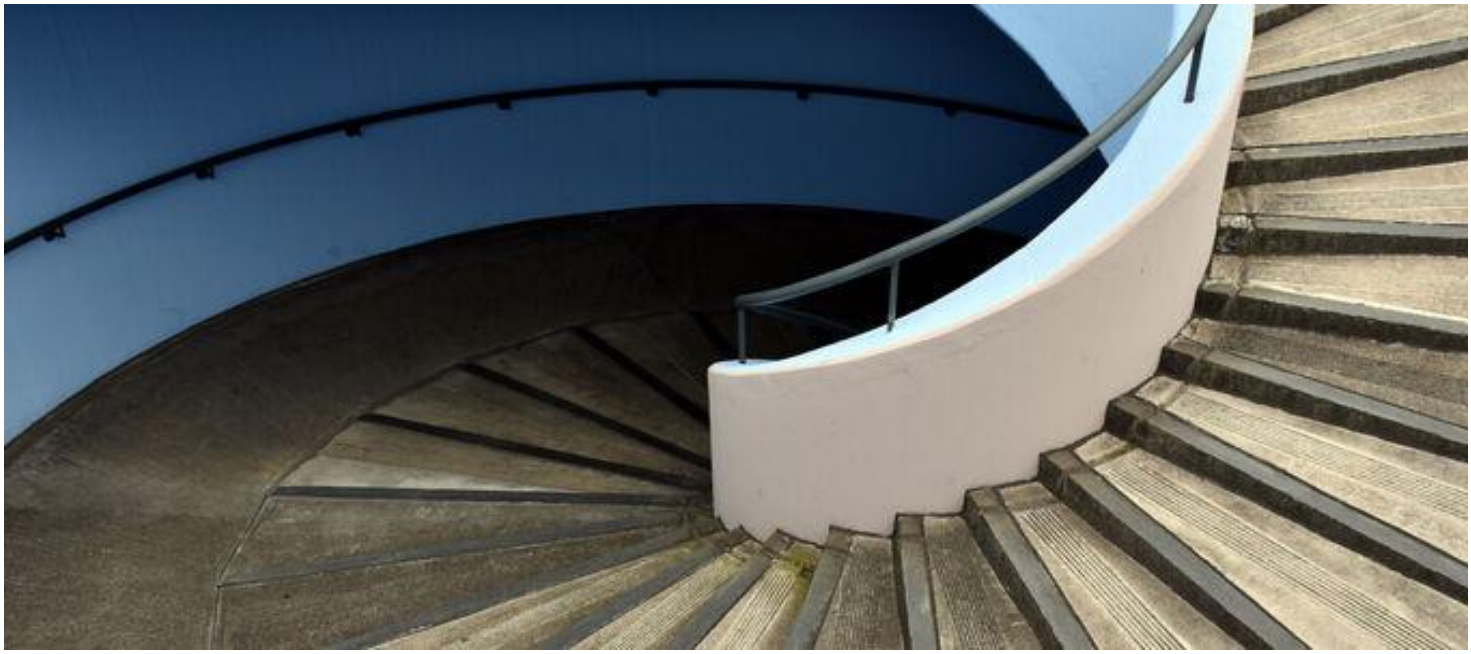
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The sacraments (56): The rise of Christ's descent into hell

God wants to help all human beings, both the living and the dead. This conviction can already be found among the earliest Christians and is confirmed by the biblical motif of Christ's descent into the realm of the dead—and corroborates the New Apostolic concept of the departed.



Christ's descent into hell, *Descensus*, descent into the underworld: there are many names for it. What is meant is the notion that Jesus spent the period between His death and His resurrection in the world of the dead to preach salvation there.

Traces in the Bible

The biblical key witness is the first epistle of Peter, according to which Jesus "went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient…in the days of Noah." So "the gospel was preached also to those who are dead". These are not the only traces, however, of the *descensus* in Holy Scripture.

According to Ephesians, Christ "descended into the lower parts of the earth". The gospel of Matthew speaks of the "sign of the prophet of Jonah", according to which the Son of Man was in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights (Matthew 12: 39–40). And John mentions the hour "when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God". These are just a few examples.

Older than Christianity

The Bible does not formulate a doctrine on the descent of Christ into hell. There are only a few isolated verses that stimulate in those addressed what they have known for a long time. For the idea of the descent of Christ into hell is older than Christianity. The notion already appears in Isaiah and Ezekiel and is further developed in early Jewish literature: there God remembers the dead who sleep in the graves, and descends to them "to bring them the glad tidings of His salvation".

Early Christian literature continues the story with Jesus Christ as the protagonist. The Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Nicodemus, the Odes of Solomon, or the Sibylline Oracles are apocryphal works from the second to the fourth century in which Christ not only descends into the realm of the dead to preach, but even to baptise and to liberate the dead from the underworld.

In theology and liturgy

At the same time, the Doctors of the Church examined the subject theologically: Ignatius of Antioch, Justin, or Irenaeus in the second century; Origen, Clemens, and Augustine from the fourth century on. The important thing for them was that Jesus really died and that He really conquered death. They were opposed to esoteric currents, which later were called Gnosticism.

The descent of Christ into hell became so important that it was incorporated into religious services. From 218 on at the latest, its commemoration constitutes the principal part of the Eucharistic prayer (anaphora). This is attested by the *Traditio Apostolica* (Apostolic Tradition), the mother of all church orders.

The descent of Christ into hell received the highest recognition in the fourth century in the synods of Nicaea and Constantinople, among others, and finally with its inclusion in the Apostles' Creed. It is still one of the most important creeds of Christianity. It speaks of Jesus Christ as having "descended to the dead".

The descent of Christ into hell really took off in the Roman West as well as in the Orthodox East of Christianity: the doctrine penetrated ecclesiastical poetry, music, preaching, and even further into the liturgy. Icon painting even developed its own genre of Christ's descent into hell.

A Church feast in the East

To this day, the descent of Christ into hell is an important dogma of the Catholic Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church deals with it in detail in articles 632 to 637. The Protestant Churches, on the other hand, have an issue with: "For many centuries, Christianity has managed without this statement of faith," it says in one of their catechisms with a slightly critical view of the Apostles' Creed.

The Orthodox Churches are very different. Here, Christ's descent into the realm of the dead is one of the central doctrines. It is part of every Eucharistic prayer. And it even has its own Holy Day: the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

For the New Apostolic Church, the descent of Jesus is another point of origin for our concept of the departed—in addition to God's universal will to save. "Thus the saving activity of Christ also encompasses the dead," it says in our Catechism in section 3.4.10: "Ever since Jesus brought His sacrifice it has also been possible for the dead to attain redemption."

Both Catholic and Protestant theologians see a close connection between the descensus verses of First Peter and a verse from First Corinthians. This is where vicarious baptism comes into the picture. What this is and what it means for the New Apostolic Church will be discussed in the next part.

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