Running head: HOLY SATURDAY IN EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Holy Saturday in Existential Psychology:

Prolegomenary Integration of Von Balthasar's Theology of Christ's Descent Into Hell

with Meaning Making in Logotherapy in a Christian Context

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Logotherapy asserts that in the experience of unavoidable suffering, the meanings we choose can help us rise out of hopelessness. Christians often utilize the resources of their faith to make sense of suffering and a seemingly meaningless existence. A potentially overlooked aspect of the Biblical Passion narrative is Christ's descent on Holy Saturday into the abyss of human mortality and hell. Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar succeeds in opening up the import of Christ's death and our own. Brief overviews of Viktor Frankl and his Logotherapy and Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday are presented with germinal observations of the relationship between these sources. It will be shown that von Balthasar's presentation provides a beneficial framework to help Christians contemplate affliction and mortality within the psychological scaffolding of Logotherapy.

*Viktor Frankl and Logotherapy*

Viktor Frankl was born into a Jewish family in 1905 in Vienna, Austria and remained there for most of his life. He studied medicine at the University of Vienna and practiced as neurologist and psychiatrist. Frankl's Logotherapy emerged largely out of his experience as a prisoner/psychological observant in the hellish conditions of the Nazi death camps in Eastern Europe. In his seminal work, *Man's Search for Meaning,* Frankl reflects on how the torturous Holocaust shaped prisoners' humanity and his own, specifically how meaning can be found in the midst of unimaginable suffering (Frankl, 1996).

Logotherapy is influenced by existential philosophy and psychoanalysis. Frankl cites the work of philosophers Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, Arthur Schopenhauer, and modern

existential psychologist Rollo May in his theoretical development of Logotherapy. He had

formative conversations about his work with Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Binswanger, and

Gabriel Marcel (Frankl, 1996). Frankl articulated his indebtedness to two major figures of

Viennese psychology, Freud and Adler, with whom he had personal correspondence (Frankl,

1969, 1996). He departed from the two main Viennese schools, Sigmund Freud's "will to

pleasure" and Alfred Adler's "will to power" with his "will to meaning" in existential analysis

(Frankl, 1969, p. viii, 1996, p. 64).

Frankl's Logotherapy focuses on meaning. Three pillars of Logotherapy therapy are the

freedom of the will, will to meaning, and the meaning of life (Frankl, 1969, p. 16). Noögenic

neuroses[1] transpire when we experience suffering which seems meaningless, and our primary

motivation, the will to meaning becomes frustrated (Frankl, 1984, p. 121, 1969, p. 125, 2000, p.

139). Frankl's "tragic optimism" maintains, when faced with the unavoidable "tragic triad" of

human existence of guilt, pain, and death, transformative meaning can still be found. (Frankl,

1984, p. 135, 1969, p. 73, 119, 1957, p. 130). Life presents a question, a demand upon us, for

which we are responsible. In our freedom we must rise to reshape our circumstances by choosing

meanings and values (Frankl, 2000, p. 141).  Life is transcendent and our focus is on meanings

that are other/greater than ourselves (Frankl, 1969, p. 50, 60). Our suffering ceases to be

suffering and comprises a moral achievement, "at the moment it has meaning, such as the

meaning of a sacrifice" (Frankl, 1984, p. 135, 1957, p. 129).

Logotherapy, while not a religious therapy, sees authentic religion as valuable in the

search for meaning and ultimate meaning. Frankl is open to working with clients' religion, yet

attempts to keep Logotherapy unassociated exclusively with a particular religion and maintains

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[1] Noögenic neuroses are meaning based, distinct from psychogenic and somatogenic neuroses.

major distinctions between psychological and religious disciplines (Frankl, 1969, p. 143;

Tweedie, 1979, p. 144).[2] Religion is desirable in Logotherapy when it is authentic, existential,

and freely chosen (Frankl, 1957, p. 38, 2000, p. 77). Clients can draw meaning from the

wellsprings of their religion.[3] The spiritual dimension is primary and indispensable for humanity.

Faith adds to human vitality and provides an existential anchor for which ultimately nothing is

meaningless (Frankl, 1957, p. 38, 1969, p. 144; 1979, p. 144).

*Hans urs Von Balthasar and Holy Saturday*

Hans Urs von Balthasar was a Swiss born, Roman Catholic priest and theologian. His

writings are predominantly literary and aesthetic, spanning systematics, dramatic theory,

spirituality, and the Saints (Oakes & Moss, 2004, p. 6). Balthasar's theology has elicited

controversy[4] regarding Christ's descent into hell and the hope for universal salvation.[5]

Nevertheless, he is considered one of the most important Catholic writers and intellectuals in the

twentieth century.[6] He died three days before he was to be made a cardinal by Pope John Paul II.

On the centenary of Balthasar's birth, theological collaborator Pope Benedict XVI referred to

him as an "authoritative guide" (Benedict, 2005).

Balthasar identifies the climax of God's love in the drama of Christ's Passion throughout

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[2] Frankl honors and calls for the separateness of psychotherapy and religion as disciplines and within Logotherapy. Psychotherapy and religion do not need to become servants of each other in order to be of mutual use. While the effects of religion and psychology may overlap, both have vastly separate intentions, such as salvation and mental health/inner equilibrium, respectively. If psychotherapy became a servant of theology, it would be stripped of the prestige of an independent science and impede the worth it could have for religion. In turn, religion provides more and demands more of persons than psychotherapy ever could. Religion is not a therapeutic tool or "insurance policy for a tranquil life" (Frankl, 2000, p. 80).

[3] "When a patient stands on the firm ground of religious belief, there can be no objection to making use of the therapeutic effect of his religious convictions and thereby drawing upon his spiritual resources" (Frankl, 1984, p. 141).

[4] Pitstick, A. L. (2007). *Light in darkness: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Catholic doctrine of Christ's descent into hell.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company.

[5] Balthasar extended hope that because of Christ's descent in hell we can hold out hope for the possibility of a final restoration, an apokatastasis, in his work, *Dare we hope "That All Men Be Saved": with a short discourse on hell*.

[6] www.ignatiusinsight.com/authors/vonbalthasar.asp

his writings. The topic of Christ's descent into Sheol is crucial in his soteriology, appearing extensively in *Mysterium Paschale* and volume IV of *Theo-Drama* (Lauber, 2004, p. 66). Balthasar cites an influential spiritual direction relationship with medical doctor, Adrienne von Speyr, as inseparable from his theology (Oakes, 2004, p. 5). Balthasar's experience of her solidarity with Christ's descent influenced his meditations on the Apostle's Creed, "He descended into hell"[7] evidenced in his, *Heart of the World* and *Credo* (Lauber, 2004, p. 42-43).

Balthasar views Holy Saturday in the Passion's entirety, characterized by Christ's passive obedience in going to Sheol as a substitutionary act of love in being God forsaken. Between Friday and Sunday lies the connection where Christ experienced the depths of "second death". His going to the hell of the righteous and wicked was a necessary "saving event", bringing the effects of the cross' redemption to humanity in the abyss (Balthasar, 1990b, p. 177). Balthasar critiques retrojections of a post-resurrected victorious Christ plunging into the depths.[8] Christ brought redemption for the dead through weak, defenseless kenotic "omnipotent powerlessness, becoming truly dead, and entering full solidarity with dead sinners," (Balthasar, 1995, p. 408, 411; Rev. 1:18, English Standard Version). Christ experienced the furthest reaches of hell specifically because He experienced the utmost alienation possible in Sheol where there is eternal darkness (Balthasar, 1995, p. 413, 1990, p. 162; Rom. 10:7, 2 Cor. 5:21). Christ's descent was a substitutionary love-death into damnation, forsakenness, and separation from the Trinity (2 Co. 5:21, Gal. 3:13). He went into death and hell for us (Lauber, 2004, p. 45; Heb. 2:9). Christ experienced solidarity with the dead and forlorn that could not say "Yes" to love (Balthasar, 1990a, p. 54, 1982, p. 153). His being dead was the supreme act of 'living love' as he identified

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[7] A 4th century addition that is questionable according to some. See Wayne Grudem, 'He Did Not Descend into Hell: A Plea for Following Scripture Instead of the Apostles' Creed', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991), p.103

[8] A critique of some Eastern icons and Hellenized views of a mythological protagonist being alive/active in a Middle Ages' kind of multi-stratified underworld (Balthasar, 1990a, p. 53; 1995, p. 405).

with a despairing humanity awaiting resurrection (Balthasar, 1990a, p. 54, 1995, p. 408).

In Balthasar's theology, Holy Saturday transforms death's meaning. In the face of death meaning is obscured, hence Christ's excruciating, "Why?" (Balthasar, 1990, p. 54). Death is changed from judgment to a redemptive sacrifice in Christ's archetypal death "of the most beautiful dying", the apex of not being for oneself.[9] Into Christ's "higher dying" our "wretched dying can be taken up and redeemed" (Balthasar, 1990a, p. 60, 1990b, p. 159). Christ's ignominious experience bestowed onto death the highest life-giving meaning of sacrificial[10] Trinitarian devotion (Balthasar, 1985, p. 57). In self-dying and "being-for-others", we receive the gift of life that peaks at death. Then we are faced with how much is demanded of us in order to enter into the communion of saints (Ibid, p. 63).

The people of God share in the Passion in discipleship through Christ's completed suffering and offer their suffering into union with his, for the redemption of the world. Christ's suffering is sufficient, yet in His sufferings a space is left for disciples to share in his redemptive work.[11] (Balthasar, 1994, p. 388; Lauber, p. 163). Balthasar sees Christ's suffering distributed in the Church as an extension of his body, which goes through aspects of the historical Christ-event, existing between the resurrection and the cross (Balthasar, 1983, p. 89, 93).[12] The Holy Spirit brings the Church into being-with Christ's weakness, dying, burial and resurrection (Balthasar, 1994, p. 384). The Church is in living union with Christ, the head of the body, as a

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[9] "The ability to abandon self is the principle underlying all achievement and all loving possession…In death we will forcefully be led from ourselves into total abandonment, because we will be commanded to abandon everything and ourselves" (Balthasar, 1985, p. 20-21).

[10] Rom. 8:36

[11] See Jn. 13:36. This suffering is characteristic for Christ's disciples, which brings with it the gift of participation in the Cross and Resurrection of Christ (Balthasar, 1994, p. 387). The disciples did not follow Christ in his way to the Cross, but Jesus said they would follow Him in His way to death afterward (Ibid, p. 384).

[12] He draws from passages in the Epistles such as 2 Co. 4:10-11, Gal. 2:19, Phil. 3:10, Rom 8:16, Col. 1:24.

sacrament of salvation, broken to bring wholeness to all[13] (Ibid, p. 407, 422). When individual suffering is offered up in Christ it becomes linked communally in which individuals can find meaning in being-with-others and being-for-others[14] (Balthasar, 1994, p. 421; 2 Cor. 1:3-6, Col. 1:24).

*Holy Saturday in Logotherapy*

Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday in Logotherapy provides a ripe religious horizon for distressed Christians. As depicted earlier, Balthasar's work illuminates the depth of meaning the Christian tradition offers to existential frustration surrounding suffering, death, and hell. The object of the Christian's faith is Christ who endured death and hell, fully identifying with the deepest isolation of human experience, showing the extent of his love.[15] In human loneliness, death-fear, and hells, the presence of Christ is already there, for death cannot separate us from His love.[16] When we fear death, we can remember that one has been able to die for us. He, "already assumed our death." (Ibid, p. 28) Christ transformed death's meaning, removed its sting,[17] and offers the Church a transformative purpose for its suffering. In our experience of Holy Saturday, as we reach out the Father guides us out of the forsaken abyss to resurrection (Balthasar, 1985, p. 30).

Viktor Frankl resonates with Holy Saturday-like existence, emphasizing a sacrificial, transcendent, love-imbued meaning for suffering. We live between the present painful reality and how things ought to be (Frankl, 1957, p. 124). Balthasar identifies Holy Saturday, as a passive

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[13] Balthasar recalls in referencing Nazarius in the context of a reformation dispute, "Christ has two modes of being: as a physical person and as the personal bearer of all the members of His mystical Body (Balthasar, 1994, p. 411).

[14] An additional theme of Holy Saturday emerges which space does not allow for, of Christ's example of an ethic of non-violent enemy love. Christ goes to the limits, experiencing loving solidarity being-with and being-for those who reject him, demonstrating an ethical example for extending radical peace and love to one's enemies (Lauber, 2004, p. 175).

[15] Rom. 5:8
[16] Rom. 8:38
[17] 1 Co. 15:56

enduring of utmost desolation, and for Frankl, "inactive passive enduring" of unavoidable suffering, "retains the immanent meaning of all suffering", constituting moral attainment (Ibid, p. 128-129). In Logotherapy, a person's searching for meaning points beyond to transcendence, community, and ultimately to love (Ibid, p. 80-81). Suffering can become a triumph and salvation through love, "which is the highest goal we can aspire to" (Frankl, 1984, p. 57). Suffering is envisaged as a potentially sacrificial act for the sake of loved ones (Tweedie, 1961, p. 145).[18]

In utilizing Logotherapy to help religious clients find meanings, therapists must guard themselves against prescribing or imposing meanings onto clients. Value is not given, but spontaneously discovered by the client working from their 'conscience' (Frankl, 1969, p. 66-67). The introduction of religion as a resource is the client's choice (Tweedie, 1979, p. 148). Christian psychologist, Donald Tweedie agrees the therapist should not impose values but draw out meanings with clients from their experience (Tweedie, 1961, p. 148, 150). He emphasizes Frankl's assertion that Logotherapy is not value-neutral, but therapists should not be making value judgments for clients, rather helping broaden their value horizons (Ibid, p. 124). The work of a Logotherapist is to persuade clients that there is a meaning to fulfill, but we cannot foreknow what meanings clients will realize (Frankl, 1969, p. 68). The therapist leads the client to the door of transcendence and the client must be free to decide to enter it (Tweedie, 1961, p. 151). Clients' meanings should be freely chosen, but therapists can help clients to investigate or entertain meanings from the client's faith context.

In conclusion, Balthasar's hearty theology of Holy Saturday sheds light on a portion of the Passion narrative whose riches may be untapped for many. I believe Christians often

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[18] Individuals in helping professions who work through their suffering often transform their pain into a sacrifice for others' benefit, which resounds with Balthasar's notion that particular suffering can be offered up for a collective (Frankl, 1996, p. 137).

contextualize their suffering with Biblical metaphors connected with Good Friday, and less so with Holy Saturday. While therapists do not give clients meanings, through techniques such as Socratic dialogue, clients who are seeking to make sense of their suffering from a Christian narrative and tradition, might benefit from asking if Christ's descent is meaningful or present for them (Lukas, 1979, p. 99). Frankl gives a consonant notion, "There are religious forms, and they wait to be assimilated by [people] in an existential way, i.e. to be made [their] own" (Frankl, 2000, p. 72). Balthasar's theology is a lush landscape of sacred meanings for the Christian therapist to hold implicitly and for a client to explore if they are reaching out for such meanings. In the work of journeying with clients' into their abysses, Christ's descent gives us a backdrop for hope. He is there and transcendence can emerge from Sheol.

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