

**‘Lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy.’**

Looking at Catholic dogmas on the world to come, we conclude by turning – with reluctance, yet with gravity and responsibility – to the teachings on hell. We’ve already quoted infallible Church teachings on hell’s existence and eternity. Today we reflect on this fearful reality more deeply – all the more to motivate us with the help of God’s grace to avoid hell for ourselves, and to do all we can to help others do the same.

‘Following the example of Christ, the Church warns the faithful of the sad and lamentable reality of eternal death, also called hell.’ (*Catechism* n. 1056) Sometimes people claim to follow the teachings of Jesus, yet don’t believe in hell. But hell’s existence, and the real possibility of going there, were clearly taught by Jesus himself. He is the reason we have these teachings. The supreme Christian motive is indeed love, not fear; (cf. *1 Jn* 4:18) but Jesus’ pastoral example shows us that fear – to a degree and in its place – nevertheless has a vital motivational role.

The accusation is sometimes heard that it is ‘unloving’ to teach the danger of hell – as though the Church *wanted* people to go there. On the contrary: the Church urgently warns us all, precisely because she so much wants the salvation of every person. It is counterfeit love that stays silent, or gives false reassurances.

People themselves might reject this doctrine simply because they do not *want* it to be true. But our ‘not wanting’ something is not a good guide to whether it is true in reality. There are many hard things even on earth that we would *want* not to be true; yet sadly that does not show that they are *not* true. We need to deal with reality as it is – but always with Jesus at our side.

We recall his words: ‘[The king] will say to those at his left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”...And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’ (*Mt* 25:41, 46)

‘If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ (*Mk* 9:47-48)

‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.”’ (*Mt* 7:21-23)

‘Strive to enter by the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able...Then you will begin to say, “We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.” But he will say, “I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity!” There you will weep and gnash your teeth...’ (*Lk* 13:24, 26-28)

‘Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.’ (*Mt* 7:13-14; cf. *Mt* 8:12; 13:40-42; 22:13-14; 24:50-51; 25:30; *Lk* 12:4-5; 16:22-26; *Jn* 5:28-29; 15:6)

So those claiming a ‘more loving’ Christianity by not believing in hell are really saying they have a more loving Christianity than Jesus, the one who truly taught us about God’s love.

The question ‘How can there be a hell if God loves us so much?’ remains a commonly-felt objection. We need to speak of hell in such a way that confidence in God’s infinite love and mercy is not diluted. Hell does not come from any lack in God’s mercy; rather, it is a consequence of the reality of human freedom. Those in hell are separated from God by their own free choice, and God respects their freedom: he will not force his love on us.

We can only be united with God in heaven if we freely choose to love him, and by mortal sin we freely refuse to love. Mortal sin destroys supernatural charity whereby we love God above all things, because if we choose our own will over God’s will in an important matter we no longer love him ‘above all things’.

God’s love has no limit and never changes, but by refusing to be sorry, we close ourselves off, so that the mercy he is always offering does not reach us – just as the sun always shines, yet we can go into a dark room and shut the door. At death we pass beyond this world of change, and our wills are fixed in our final choice: the door is locked from within and the key thrown away.

When we reach death, either we’ve made *God’s will* the supreme rule of our actions by supernatural charity; or otherwise, we’ve made *our own will* the decisive factor (following God’s will, if at all, only in the parts that suit us). And those two opposite wills cannot unite together: they cannot both be supreme. Union with God would itself be intolerable to the soul that rejects his lordship. Yet it remains the very thing that we were created for, that would bring supreme happiness, that we yearn for in our depths. Sin places in our souls the contradiction of rejecting this true fulfilment; and hell is that contradiction made eternal. Those entering hell have already planted its seed in their hearts, which in the next life comes to its natural fruition.

Although someone can repent and be forgiven until the last moment of their lives, no one knows when their death will be, or if they will have time to prepare for it. And so, Vatican II urged upon us the advice of Jesus to ‘watch...for you know neither the day nor the hour.’ (*Mt 25:13*)

The Council tells us: ‘We strive therefore to please God in all things and we put on the armour of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil and resist in the evil day. Since however we know not the day nor the hour, on Our Lord’s advice we must be constantly vigilant so that, having finished the course of our earthly life, we may merit to enter into the marriage feast with him and to be numbered among the blessed and that we may not be ordered to go into eternal fire like the wicked and slothful servant, into the exterior darkness where “there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth”.’ (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 48)

So with deep concern, but turning to God in confident trust, we urgently and persistently pray: ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’. ‘Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.’ ‘O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy.’