

**‘Fear Him who has authority to cast into hell.’**

We’ve looked at Catholic dogmas on the next world, last month reflecting on Jesus’ teachings on hell, and how his doctrine doesn’t contradict God’s infinite mercy. Of course, our paramount Christian proclamation *is* always of mercy and love. We always place any ‘negative aspects’ in that context – but not so as to actually *deny the reality* of those aspects, as sometimes happens. To deny hell is to deny the authority of Jesus who taught it. So in the face of mystery we hold to both sides of the picture, not trying to flatten everything into one category.

People sometimes empty Jesus’ warnings of power by thinking that even if hell is real, fear of punishment is an unworthy motivation. But that view also is contrary to Christ, who did use this motivation. Love is the ruling Christian motive; but that doesn’t mean there is no role for a certain fear (in its proper place). If we truly love, our will is for what is good, for ourselves and others; and that means we have appropriate concern about the danger of missing our ultimate good.

In many areas of life we rightly use fear as a motive: we’re taught not to run onto the road, or to drive safely, or to care for our health, from fear of what might happen. These balanced fears concerning genuine dangers are natural, normal and good, and are healthy and functional when they appropriately motivate us to avert the danger. Fear doesn’t rule our lives, but it has its place for any wise person, as part of the way God created us.

Jesus often tells someone whose fear is unfounded, ‘Be not afraid’; and we take this as broad guidance for our own life’s journey. The more we entrust ourselves to God’s providence, the more we’re freed from *deep fear*. Yet with his graphic warnings of hell, Jesus is hardly telling *those committing grave sin* to continue without fear. He distinguishes rightful from wrongful fear: ‘Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!’ (*Lk* 12:4-5; cf. *Mt* 10:28)

St Paul tells us, ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’; (*Phil* 2:12) and the Council of Trent infallibly proclaimed, ‘If anyone says that the fear of hell, which makes us turn to the mercy of God in sorrow for our sins or which makes us avoid sin, is a sin or that it makes sinners worse, let him be anathema.’ (DS 1558)

Does the motivation still work today? No motivation ever worked perfectly; but human nature doesn’t change. Fear still motivates us. An obstacle is that fewer people now *believe* in hell to start with, due to the spread of false teachings. But that doesn’t mean we surrender: we keep promoting Christ’s true teachings, all of them.

Warning of hell isn’t using ‘scare tactics’ as some claim. That would be a legitimate charge if Jesus knew that hell wasn’t actually going to happen and was just manipulating people using the ‘tactic’ of an invented threat. But as already seen, hell is far from a made-up story. When we follow Jesus’ example and warn people of hell, we’re no more ‘manipulating’ them than the fire brigade is manipulating people when it warns them to flee a bushfire. Some past preachers may have used the motivation of fear in a distorted way, but that doesn’t mean we irresponsibly go to the other extreme and not appeal to it at all.

For salvation we must die in the state of sanctifying grace, which goes hand in hand with charity, that loves God above all things. But to lead us on to that, *imperfect* contrition is also ‘a gift of God, a prompting of the Holy Spirit. It is born of the consideration of sin’s ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation and the other penalties threatening the sinner...[by itself] imperfect contrition cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes one to obtain forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 1453; cf. Council of Trent DS 1678; DS 1705)

Fear of hell has thus surely brought many sinners back from the brink; and God then gradually draws them deeper into love. Restored to grace and charity by Reconciliation, they will likely still find the danger of hell is an important motivation not to relapse. But with their supreme love for God now re-established, as holiness grows the focus moves to the simple wish not to offend him whom the soul loves. This is why Scripture tells us, ‘Perfect love casts out fear.’ (*1 Jn* 4:18) The more we approach perfect love, the more we just want to do God’s will anyway. The danger is reduced of committing a mortal sin and incurring hell if we die unforgiven.

Yet most of us are still some distance from ‘perfect love’, so until then, often enough we need the fear of hell also. Yes, it’s more perfect to avoid sin motivated directly by our love for God, but it’s better to avoid sin from fear of hell than not avoid sin at all. It’s a great error to assume that everyone has the charity of the saints already, and so can skip the ‘fear’ phase altogether. Lacking the fear of hell, and actually not yet that much aflame with the love of God, many Catholics don’t then find much motive *at all* to live the harder teachings. How many people have been ‘liberated’ from the fear of hell, only to be at greater risk of hell itself as a result?

These days we usually try to draw people using only ‘more positive’ motivations. Those are good and necessary. But if we limit ourselves to them, it’s like the fire brigade trying to get people to flee without mentioning the bushfire, just saying how nice the journey will be. People are denied their right to know, and the results fall well short. Just taking the more common serious sins – with the collapse of the motive of fear it’s unsurprising that compared to past times, numerous Catholics are unconcerned if they skip Sunday Mass (without grave reason or dispensation), break God’s laws concerning marriage and purity, or call into doubt a teaching of faith.

This is a catastrophe, because these things do remain gravely opposed to God’s will, as the Church teaches. True, we never judge the hearts of individuals, who may have little realisation of the gravity of their actions, and who in any case can still repent while life lasts. But everyone does have the responsibility to seek the truth, so we can only hope people’s ignorance is deep enough to excuse them from mortal sin. And even then, this is a disastrous situation: breaking God’s laws, even in ignorance, always harms us.

The *Handbook* guides our legionary way of drawing others: ‘For the legionary, there is only one way of doing God’s work – the way of gentleness and sweetness. Let him not depart from that way under any circumstances whatsoever.’ (p. 282) But knowing that salvation isn’t guaranteed makes us look carefully not only to our own salvation but also to the salvation of those to whom we’re sent on mission. And we feel more deeply the urgent call (*Handbook* p. 308) to make contact with every soul, offering ourselves to God and Our Lady as an instrument in helping each one on the path to heaven.