

Don't Go to HELL!

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By Winifrid Herbst, S.D.S.

I CANNOT conceive of a God of love and mercy torturing His children in hell." How often we hear that statement from people, Catholics among them.

Catholic dogma teaches that there is a hell, or state of eternal punishment. Thus we read in the Athanasian Creed: "And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire." The proof of this doctrine is found in the clear texts of Holy Writ and in the constant witness, from its very beginning, of the Church established by Jesus Christ.

Without any knowledge of Christian principles, it would seem at first sight that infinite goodness and mercy are incompatible with eternal punishment. Though it is true that after all explanations the element of mystery must remain when finite man considers the infinite counsels of God, still reason likewise has an answer.

These people say that they "cannot conceive," etc. Can they, then, con-

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ceive how a just God, who is the Law-giver and the Lord of men, can give His kingdom to one guilty, for instance, of unrepented murder, adultery, seduction, or drunkenness? Can they conceive of a just God who can give eternal happiness to one who all his life long has despised and set at naught His mercy and who has died obstinate in evil? They are forgetting that God is not only infinitely loving and merciful but also infinitely just.

Willful Rebellion

Man, you must remember, is not a mere automaton, nor a mere animal of sense and instinct, nor an independent, self-ruling being, but a creature created after God's image and likeness, with intellect to know the good and free will to choose it; and with sufficient grace always to know God's revelation and to do God's will. If such a being deliberately refuses these gifts and graces, refusing to acknowledge his dependence on God his Creator and Lawgiver, freely choosing mere creatures in place of his God, and dies insolently refusing to fulfill his destiny—what else can God do to

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this adorer of self than to leave him to his choice for all eternity?

It is easy to see how utterly out of place the unrepentant sinner would be in heaven. A son has rebelled against a father; a friend has turned traitor against a friend; a creature has proved false to a Creator; and yet, they say, Jesus Christ, the God of all justice, must say to the rebel creature that still hates Him: "Come, you blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom!" This is only thoughtless sentimentality, which, having altogether lost the conviction of the malice of sin, refuses to see God's justice in punishing the sinner.

Catholic Teaching

Justice, we see, demands punishment for the unrepentant sinner. What form does this punishment take?

The Catholic Church teaches that there is a hell, and that hell in primarily the permanent deprivation of the Beatific Vision, everlasting separation from God, inflicted on those who die in mortal sin. This greatest pain of hell is called the pain of loss. God is the end of man; and to have lost this

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end through one's own fault constitutes the very nature of hell. The word "damnation" comes from the Latin word *damnum*, which means simply "loss."

Eternal Punishment

It is well to try to understand that the punishment is necessarily everlasting. One overtaken by death in mortal sin is found preferring a created good to God; and he abides in his final choice, can no longer change his mind, continues to reject God. After death there is no chance for merit. The damned is eternally punished because he is eternally in the state of sin. The Catholic Church teaches that the human soul remains in that state in which death finds it; if death finds it averted from God, it will remain so forever.

The damned at the judgment do not for a moment see God; but some flash of light must pierce their darkened minds so that they realize the tremendousness of their loss; and every instant of their eternity they want God and at the same time feel a disgust, a hatred, which turns them from what

they want; theirs is a never-ending life of appalling aimlessness, an eternal knocking at the gate eternally closed. They are truly "the lost." The journey will never end; home and rest—God and His heaven—will for them never be; they are lost with a darkened mind and a perverted will.

Pain of Sense

The Church teaches that in addition to the pain of loss, which is a negative punishment, there is also a positive punishment, the pain of sense, commonly referred to as hell-fire.

The reality of hell-fire as an instrument of the sense of pain has never been solemnly defined as an article of faith, though it is said that if the Vatican Council had not been interrupted, it would have been so defined; but meanwhile it is clear that no one may doubt the reality of hell-fire without grievous sin. It would not be formal heresy to deny it, but willful error and temerity; and no Catholic can deny it without grave sin against the faith. It is not the fire we have on earth, but only analogous to it. Our word "fire" expresses most nearly this

instrument of pain, wherefore it is referred to in the New Testament no less than thirty times by the word "fire." By God's omnipotence hell-fire will also act directly on a pure intelligence, causing it to suffer a pain to which the only parallel we possess on earth is the sensation of burning. Thus this fire can burn not only bodies, but also spirits.

A Place

Though no one could say that it is a part of revelation, yet it has always been held within the Church that hell is a place as well as a state. This is a most natural inference from the texts of Scripture.

Where in the universe hell is, no one can say. It has not pleased God to reveal this. However, Holy Writ seems to indicate in many passages that hell is within the earth. Nor need we look upon these passages as merely metaphors to illustrate the state of separation from God, of being hidden away from high heaven above in the dark abysses of the earth. Hence, some theologians accept the opinion that hell is really within the earth.

The Church has decided nothing on this subject; and so we may say that hell is a definite place; but where it is we do not know. St. John Chrysostom reminds us: "We must not ask where hell is, but how we are to escape it."

Worse Than We Can Imagine

What is hell? It is beyond our power to answer this properly, for hell exceeds in horror all that men can imagine.

Just south of the ancient city of Jerusalem was Gehenna, "The Valley of the Groans of Children." There the idolatrous people were wont to sacrifice innocent babes to Moloch, a brazen idol with the form of a man and the head of an ox. A furnace was erected beneath the figure in such a way that unnatural worshippers of the Prince of Darkness would flock to the spot, place their children in the red-hot arms of the hideous idol, and drown the agonizing shrieks and cries of the little ones by the discordant music of timbrels and other harsh instruments. The tender babes would writhe in agony in the monster's fiery clutch and then drop into the roaring furnace beneath. Later on, that valley

was used as the receptacle of the city's sewerage and all foul filthiness. Was that hell? No.

After the Jamaican earthquake in 1907 the city of Kingston was littered with the bodies of the dead. It was found necessary to burn them. They were piled in heaps; oil and turpentine were poured over them; the torch was applied; and quickly a murky angry flame sputtered and crackled among the writhing corpses. "Oh, the odor of that sizzling flesh!" says one who witnessed the sight. "It stifled; nay, it sickened unto death." A passing quake shook the pile down. There lay a boy with an ugly gash across his face. "Even as I looked," says the eyewitness, "the figure began to writhe and squirm as if in agony. Shrinking back in horror I cried, 'Surely they have not cast a living child among the dead?' No, it was merely a contraction of the sinews and the muscles as the flames ate through the flesh." Was that sputtering, hissing pyre, that mass of sizzling putrefaction, hell? No.

After the earthquake at Messina in 1908 ravenous, starving dogs prowled

about gnawing at dead bodies like hyenas. A young man was so buried in debris that only his head protruded. While thus unable to defend himself three of the rabid dogs attacked him and savagely tore his eyes and face. Was that hell? No. In the Rocky Mountains, hundreds of miles from the nearest habitation, a solitary man fell over a precipice. With crushed bones and broken body he lay at the bottom of the abyss, crying in agony for the help that would never come. Was that hell? No!

What is hell? It is eternal separation from God, for whom the soul was made: "Depart from me . . ." It is eternal enmity with that God: "Depart from me, accursed ones. . ." It is eternal pain: ". . . into the everlasting fire. . ." It is the hateful companionship of the devils and the damned: ". . . which was prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). It is eternal remorse and despair: "Where their worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:43).

No doubt the pains of hell have sometimes been described with a crude realism that is revolting to the

mind. But it were well at all times to remember that the pains of hell exceed in horror all that men can imagine. We therefore say that it is right and just and sometimes even a duty to call in even the imagination to warn men against the supreme and last danger that awaits them all.

Degrees of Punishment

In heaven there are different degrees of happiness. So in hell there are different degrees of punishment, but the least degree will exceed in horror all that we can imagine on earth. Hence Dante's play of imagination in his *Inferno*, where he describes all kinds and degrees of sufferings, is not idle and useless. It keeps before the mind that for the lost, in some unique way, the punishment will always fit the crime.

Timeless, Unending, Hopeless

A few disjointed remarks may still be made.

a) The expression "the undying worm" may be taken figuratively, as a symbol for remorse, for instance.

b) In hell the devils will exercise

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cruel tyranny over the damned forever. How, we do not know. The use of chains, pitchforks, pincers, etc., is a mere play of the imagination and a rather childish supposition.

c) There is no time in hell; both the blessed and the damned have entered a changeless world, eternity. When the hour of death strikes, the hands of the clock of time stop and move no more.

d) It is utterly useless and opposed to the spirit of the Church to pray for the lost; their state can in no way be changed after the judgment nor their punishment mitigated; they are "outside the bond of charity," says St. Thomas Aquinas, "by which the works of the living extend to the dead."

e) The lost will never have the least joy or satisfaction, even in evil. Dives was "tormented in this flame," but not even the petition that a finger dipped in water should be laid on his tongue was granted.

f) The guess that the pain of sense will sometime come to an end must be definitely rejected. "Everlasting" is the word most often attached to the word "fire."

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g) The devils roam through the world seeking the destruction of souls. Revelation tends to show that no such influence is normally granted to the damned. Also, if in a spiritistic seance an evil spirit presents itself, the presumption is that it is a devil and not a damned soul; and it is certain that it is not a soul in heaven or in purgatory.

We admit that the doctrine of hell is a mystery; but it is a lesser mystery than Bethlehem or Calvary. The human mind can more easily understand that God should punish sin eternally than that the Eternal God Himself should die upon the cross to save man from eternal punishment.

Witness of Logic

"There is no hell!" the spirit of the age, the purblind world of today cries out. And "There is no hell!" echoes insincerely from millions of souls to whom the wish is father to the thought, and who in their strange folly imagine that the denial of a thing must needs make that thing non-existent.

"There is no hell!" cry those who do not want one. But human reason

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rises up in all her majesty and calmly says, "Good and evil can never be placed on the same plane. Good must be rewarded, evil punished. In this world only too often there is no justice: the godless oppressor, the sinner who tramples upon the rights of God and man rolls in riches, lives in ease and luxury; whereas the godly man is oppressed, the just man who observes the laws of God and men languishes in poverty, ekes out a miserable existence in suffering and adversity. But since there is so often no justice in this world, it must come in the next. Therefore there is a hell. Who shall dare tell me that Nero and Paul, Judas and Peter, Lucifer and Michael, shall abide together?"

Universal Opinion

"There is no hell!" cries the spirit of the age. But the nations, of the world rise up in protest. "Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Mohammedans, Jews, Heretics, Christians — we all and at all times have believed in a life to come which, as surely as it must have its rewards for good must just as surely have its punishments for evil. Eternal retribution

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is written on every page of our history and imbedded in our literature. Search the *Iliad* of Homer and Greek drama, the *Aeneid* of Vergil, the *Inferno* of Dante, the epic of Milton, the tragedies of Shakespeare, and you will find everywhere our testimony that there is a hell. Behold here the universal consensus of opinion that begets certainty."

"There is no hell!" cried Count Orloff and General V., two freethinkers, rashly consoling themselves. It was at Moscow in 1812. Scoffingly they made a compact that the first to go there was to return and tell the other. Soon after, General V. set out with the Russian army to repel Napoleon. Some weeks later Count Orloff was lying awake in bed when suddenly the curtains were dashed aside and General V., pale as death, with his hand on his breast, appeared before him. "There is a hell," he gasped, "and, great God! I am in it!" Several weeks later word arrived at Moscow that General V. had been killed by a shell striking him in the breast on the day and at the hour when he was seen by Count Orloff.

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Christ's Testimony

"There is no hell!" cries the modern world. But the meek and forgiving Jesus proclaimed it in His Gospel no less than fifteen times. "Depart from me, accursed ones, into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). "Fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). And Jesus is God, who cannot deceive. And whoever believes not the Son of God maketh Him a liar! There is a hell. Such is the dogma of the holy and infallible Church, founded by Christ on His Apostles.

There is a hell. So teaches our holy faith. It is a real place of existence and not merely a state of being. It is a place of torments eternal, a place of everlasting fire. Christ the Lord has said everlasting fire. And Christ is God, and God is Eternal Truth.

Yes, there is a hell — a hell with eternal torments that should fill us with salutary fear of God.

Ticket to Hell

Who is going to hell? "Which of you shall dwell with everlasting burn-

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ings?" (Is. 33:14). All who die with mortal sin upon the soul are going there. That is Catholic teaching. One mortal sin is enough. Unrepented of and unforgiven, mortal sin means hell.

As regards the wicked the Church has frequently defined "that according to the ordinance of God the souls of those who depart in actual mortal sin immediately after their death descend into hell where they are tormented with infernal pains." Pope St. Gregory the Great says: "As beatitude rejoices the elect, so we must believe that from the day of their departure fire burns the reprobate."

Mortal Sin

What is mortal sin?

"Sin," St. Augustine tells us, "is any transgression, in deed, or word, or desire, of the eternal law. And the eternal law is the divine order, or will of God which requires the preservation of natural order and forbids the breach of it."

The law of God is fourfold: The law of conscience, implanted deep in the soul at its creation; the decalogue, or ten commandments, given by God

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to Moses on Mount Sinai; the moral law of Christ, promulgated in the Gospels; the law of the Church, legislating in the name of Christ.

Now, mortal sin is a grievous offense against the law of God, committed with sufficient reflection and full consent of the will. It is a rebellion of dust against the omnipotent God; a despicable turning of one's back on God; a rude trampling on the image of God in one's soul. It is an injurious ingratitude toward God the Father, the Creator; an accursed ingratitude toward God the Son, the Redeemer; a frightful ingratitude toward God the Holy Ghost, the Sanctifier.

What is mortal sin? The greatest of evils, so great that the works of a million martyrs would not be sufficient to atone for one mortal sin. Go to an open grave; look down at the rotting, worm-eaten corpse — sin did that! Ascend in spirit into heaven; see its beauty — sin can rob you of that! Descend into hell; see the damned suffer—sin made hell. Go to Calvary; see the Savior dying on the

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cross in unutterable agony—sin nailed Him to it!

What is sin? It is that turning from God which has caused all the sighs that have ever agitated human breasts, and all the oceans of tears that have fallen, drop by drop, from the eyes of men; it is that which has caused tears to fall from the most sacred eyes of the Son of God!

What is mortal sin? It is purposely getting too near the devil, a chained dog, and letting him sink his yellow teeth into your heart. It is clasping a slimy black rattlesnake to your breast and letting it plunge its deadly fangs into your flesh. It is, for many, alas! the putting of the finishing stone to their house of eternity, to the house of their damnation. For who knows but that after the next such crime the moment appointed for your death will come and the thread of life will snap asunder?

Motive of Fear

Millions of souls, as we said before, to whom the wish is father to the thought, cry out, "There is no hell!" They deny its existence because they

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wish it did not exist. Then there are others who, while not denying the existence of hell, would rather not be reminded of it. "Why frighten us," they complain, "by telling us these things? Fear is man's enemy; it weakens the mind and body. Why disturb people by filling the soul with fear?"

Fear of death and purgatory and hell does not seem to disturb people overmuch, to judge from the fact that so many are not even enough afraid of these terrible things to refrain from committing grievous sin. An increase of a salutary fear of God is, indeed, much to be desired. Says the Savior: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

The love of God grows mighty weak at times, and only fear can save us then. No wonder holy men have ever prayed: "O God, if ever my love for you does not keep me from sin, grant that at least the fear of hell may do so!"

In this life men value the motive of fear very highly, as is evident from

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the punishments in every law code of the world. There are only too many who are law-abiding only because they fear the punishments resulting from the violation of the law. It is a simple matter of reason to apply this motive to the moral order.

Not Highest Motive

True, the fear of hell is not the highest motive on which to base our moral life; it is surely better to serve God out of love. "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). The highest motive is service of God out of pure love for Himself alone, but the motive of fear is not to be despised or called low and unworthy, even if a man were to say, "Were it not for the punishment, I would not restrain myself from evil, nor would I do good," his fear, though servile and imperfect, would nevertheless be substantially good; for it recognizes infinite justice. Still what we should strive after is filial fear. "Now you have not received a spirit of bondage so as to be again in fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons, by virtue of which we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Rom. 8:15).

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Gift of the Holy Ghost

And yet how truly we should fear! Indeed, as you know, the fear of the Lord is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost. We receive this gift in order that we may be filled with a dread of sin. "The fear of the Lord driveth out sin" (Eccclus. 1:27).

We enlarge upon this subject because the ignorance shown by those who would have us refrain from reminding them of hell, is only too common—and a very successful trick of the devil in these days.

"A wise man feareth and declineth from evil," says Holy Writ (Prov. 14:16); and, "By the fear of the Lord every one declineth from evil" (Prov. 15:27). From this we understand that the first step by which the sinner is ordinarily converted from his evil ways is the fear of God, who, being all-wise and all-holy, punishes all sin in justice and truth, that is, according to His infinite justice and His infinite wisdom. But we must not conclude from this that anyone may abandon all fear of the Lord when he has abandoned a sinful life. The wise man

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continues to dread the great evil of sin, in order to expiate it the more, and to keep away from all danger of it. He knows full well that he is prone to evil; he is, therefore, diffident of himself; but the more he advances in wisdom, the more he confides in the goodness of God. And his fear of God is tempered by a firm confidence in his Savior's merits and by a sincere and consoling trust in God's mercy. The fear of the Lord is then what it should be: a reverential fear, by which we subject ourselves to the will of God and, as a consequence, dread sin, which He detests and abhors.

Such should be our fear of the Lord. Such fear leads us to hate and avoid the occasions of sin; deepens the consciousness of our frailty without rendering us pusillanimous; reminds us of past failures without lessening our hope; warns us of future dangers without impairing our spirit of holy enterprise; induces us to guard the senses, to mortify the flesh, to bridle the imagination, and to keep the affections of the heart first and last for God. No; there is no danger of arousing too much of this salutary

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fear of the Lord. On the contrary, there is not enough of it.

To Avoid Hell

What should you do to avoid hell and its eternal torments? In the words of Ecclesiasticus: "My son, hast thou sinned? Do so no more; but for thy former sins also pray that they may be forgiven thee. Flee from sins as from the face of a serpent; for if thou comest near them, they will take hold of thee. The teeth thereof are the teeth of a lion killing the souls of men" (Ecclesi. 21:1-3).

What shall you do? Make your peace with God if you are at enmity with Him through mortal sin. Begin anew today. Avoid mortal sin as you would a poisonous serpent. It makes the soul as odious in the sight of God as would be to us the sight of a man tied face to face, mouth to mouth, with a loathsome corpse. Avoid even all deliberate venial sins; for they are the rungs of the ladder that leads to mortal sin. Live a life of prayer and piety and Christian virtue. Rather suffer anything, rather die a thousand deaths, than commit one mortal sin.

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What shall you do? St. Paul tells us in the Epistle for the First Sunday in Advent. "It is now the hour for us to rise from sleep. Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences."

Be true to God! How He desires the salvation of us all! We turn from the dread thought of the land of darkness where everlasting horror dwelleth and look through the pages of Holy Writ, God's own word. There we read, "He will have all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4). "I am the Lord thy God showing mercy unto them that love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:26). "The Lord is sweet to all" (Ps. 144:9). "Is it my will that the sinner should die, saith the Lord, and not that he should be converted from his ways and live?" (Ezech. 19:23).

From the Holy Book we turn to the darkened hill of Calvary. We see the

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divine Savior suffering for us as never man suffered on earth before, and never man shall suffer again. Looking up into His agonized face, we dare not doubt His love for us, for all. The proof is written large in His Precious Blood.

From the cross we turn to the tabernacle. The Savior so loves our souls that He wants to be with us on earth until we can be with Him in heaven. How eloquent the tabernacle is with the silent pleadings of love, with the yearnings of the Sacred Heart for souls! How that Heart must bleed with anguish when it looks upon the sinner, upon the soul that doesn't care. How the Savior must exclaim in tears, "What more could I have done for thee that I have not done!"

"My blood, my life I gave for thee
That thou might'st live eternally.
I love thee still. Give me thy heart
And from thy sinful way depart!"

How often would the Savior have drawn you to His bosom in the infinite tenderness of His boundless love, "and thou wouldst not."