

ETERNAL DAMNATION

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I



HE teaching of the Catholic Church concerning the existence, nature and the punishment of hell has been a hurdle so difficult to surmount by those outside her portals, that very many refuse flatly to undertake the leap and are content to stay on their side of the fence until Holy Mother Church becomes "liberal" as the rest of the world, and lowers these obnoxious dogmatic barriers which bar so many upright, self-convinced Christians from her enrollment. Their number increases daily, and with the spirit that is permeating the world today, hell and its punishments will soon be but another "superstition" still tenaciously upheld by the Church of Rome and her adherents. Her doctrine on hell has not faltered one iota during the recent surge towards "Modernism". Though the Catholic Church has been accused of having a pessimistic outlook on the life to come, nevertheless, the wails and cries of the world for her to drop the barriers of intolerant doctrine has had little effect on the wisest of all mothers, and she still goes on her constant course and solemnly defines that the "wicked will receive eternal punishment together with the devil, while the good will receive everlasting glory with Christ."¹

II

As the last weeks of Christ's life on earth were slowly closing in upon Him, His final messages and parables to the people were almost fruitless attempts to pierce the pharisaical veil which enshrouded the hearts of this flint-hearted people. Speaking of the judgment of the wicked on the last day, Christ declared that the King would say to them: "Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels".² Another time, while caution-

¹ *Conc. Lat. IV*, Cap. Denzinger-Bannwart, n. 429.

² *Matt. xxv*, 41.

ing them on the sin of scandal, He said: "If your hand scandalize you, cut it off; it is better for thee to enter into life, maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into unquenchable fire."³

Not long after the Jews descended the Hill of Golgatha murmuring, "Indeed, this man was the Son of God," the beloved Disciple, St. John, wrote from his isle of solitude: "The fearful, and unbelieving and the abominable . . . and all liars, they shall have their portion in the pool burning with brimstone, which is the second death."⁴ There is no doubt about the meaning of the language employed by these holy men when talking of those who face God on the last day barren of His grace. When St. Paul said: "They that trouble you . . . shall suffer eternal punishment in destruction,"⁵ we find no figurative language, no vain threats, but a warning to the wicked and consolation for the just. Where need we seek any further to find proof for the reality of a Hell? What more response is necessary for those who say that when weighed in the balances of candid investigation, the doctrine of endless misery is seen to be without any support from the Bible? From these excerpts, then, of Sacred Scripture, the truth and reality of hell is so vivid that it has been said that no other Catholic dogma of belief has such a solid Biblical basis. Numerous other texts could be mentioned to substantiate the argument, but it is unnecessary to add proof upon proof in view of the words of Jesus Christ who repeatedly warned of "the hell of unquenchable fire . . . where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not extinguished."⁶

III

The early Fathers not only accepted the constant tradition of the Church and the Scriptural texts, but as scholars and philosophers of keen mental powers, sought to approach the pagan philosophers on a rational basis. The philosophers boasted of their intellectual powers and their methods of reasoning, and they demanded rational arguments to clear the ground for the faith that should be in them. St. Justin, speaking of the justice of God towards unrepenting sinners told them: "I will briefly reply that if the matter be not thus, (i. e. eternal punishment for the wicked) either there is not God, or if there is, He does not concern Himself with men; virtue and vice

³ Mk. xi, 42.

⁴ Apoc. xxi, 8.

⁵ II Thess. i, 19.

⁶ Mk. ix, 3.

mean nothing; and they who transgress the important laws are unjustly punished by the lawgivers.”⁷ Moreover, those who admitted the existence of society and a moral order could hardly deny the existence of a place of torture for those who deliberately corrupt that order. St. Thomas leaves no loophole of escape in his principle that “whatever rises up against an order, is put down by that order or by the principle thereof. And because sin is an inordinate act, it is evident that whoever sins, commits an offence against an order; wherefore he is put down, in consequence, by that same order, which repression is punishment.”⁸ Therefore, call it Hell, or Gehenna, or what you will, the fires of eternal punishment and everlasting damnation have existed since the fall of Lucifer and his legions, and will endure forever and ever.

IV

The query as to just where Hell is would be a difficult one to answer, due to the fact that the Church herself has refrained from any dogmatic definition as to the whereabouts of a localized receptacle for the souls of the damned. We say in the Creed that Christ “Descended into hell.” Again, in the Book of Numbers we read: “The earth broke . . . and they went down alive into hell.”⁹ But in this age of advanced physics and modern astronomy, it must be realized now that words such as “above the earth” and “under the earth” or “the bowels of the earth” ought to be taken with their broad relative value, and not interpreted literally. After all, such a question is irrelevant, and unimportant, and has no place in the dogmatic field. St. Chrysostom answered the question tersely enough by replying: “Do not inquire where hell is, but how to escape it.”

V

Man was made in the image and likeness of God. Moreover, man’s final destiny was to be the sight of God, or the beatific vision, forever. This was God’s wish. But Hell is constituted for those who turned aside from their ultimate end and sought their happiness in the world, the flesh and the devil. The stark realization of this fact dawns upon the sinner the moment his soul is swept aloft to the throne of his judge. It realizes poignantly what it has lost and descends despair-

⁷ *Apol. II*, no. 9.

⁸ *Summa Theol.* I-II q. 87, a. 1.

⁹ *Numb.* xvi, 33.

ingly into hell's fire, leaving behind forever the greatest of all goods, the very end of its existence. This is the essential nature of the punishment of hell, the pain of loss. This was St. Thomas' thought when he wrote:

"Punishment is proportionate to sin. Now sin comprises two things. First, there is the turning away from the immutable good, which is infinite, wherefore, in this respect sin is infinite. Secondly, there is the inordinate turning to mutable good. In this respect sin is finite, both because the mutable good itself is finite, and because the movement of turning towards it is finite, since the acts of a creature can not be infinite. Accordingly, in so far as sin consists in turning away from something, its corresponding punishment is *the pain of loss*, which also is infinite, because it is the loss of the infinite good, i. e. God. But in so far as sin turns inordinately to something, its corresponding punishment is the *pain of sense*, which also is finite."¹⁰

It would be difficult if not impossible to describe the psychological effects this loss produces on the souls condemned to hell. They realize that God, their creator and ultimate end, is now to be their enemy forever, and they in turn, will hate Him with such a venomous hate never felt upon earth. That innate desire for happiness which every man naturally has, is still with them, yet their chance for eternal happiness is lost; an eternal kingdom, an incomprehensible joy is lost forever as their Judge banishes them from His sight for all eternity.

But this pyramid of hate, humiliation, bitterness and despair is finally capped by the burning thought that all this disaster, their hateful surroundings, has been brought about by their own deliberate folly. They purposely turned off the thorny and difficult road upon which all just men travelled, and sought the broad deceptive highway, illuminated by the dazzle of the world and the allurements of its prince, Lucifer. They journeyed its length, regardless of warnings, advice and threats. Having reached the end of their foolish ways, they now face the God who created them, only to be accosted by the words: "Depart from me, ye cursed."

VI

St. Thomas mentioned *the pain of sense*. This is the second of the two principal punishments of hell. Theologians differ as to the nature of the fire continually burning in this inferno of lost souls. The majority hold for a real material fire, with all the consequences which follow it. Some hold that the fire in hell can not be a material fire, as we know and sense fire, but is incorporeal, since it deals with

¹⁰ *Summa Theol.* I-II q. 87, a. 4.

spirits or souls, i. e. incorporeal subjects. Still others say that now the fire is an incorporeal one, but after the last judgment when the souls will again abide in their proper receptacles, the fire assumes a corporeal aspect. St. Thomas wrote:

"The souls of the damned shall suffer from corporeal fire by a sort of constriction (*alligatio*). For spirits can be joined to bodies, either as their form, as the soul is joined to the human body to give it life; or without being the body's form, as magicians by diabolic power join spirits to images. Much more by divine power may spirits under damnation be joined to corporeal fire; and it is an affliction to them to know that they are joined to the lowest creatures for punishment."¹¹

This opinion seems to be the most favored by the theologians. However, the Church has given no final dogmatic decision as to the nature, quality, composition and mode of action of the fires of Hell.

VII

It has been mentioned that some men, well versed in the ways of the world, have absolutely denied the existence of Hell. There are many others who concede the existence of a place of torture for the souls who die is the displeasure of God, but refuse to admit that this "hell" is a place of everlasting punishment. They ascribe several reasons for their position. "There is no proportion" they say, "between the brief moment of sin and an eternal punishment." But this comparison is not correctly and justly drawn. The punishment does not have to be equal to the fault, in proportion to the amount of duration. This is well illustrated in the case of our human laws. A man, in a moment of despair or weakness, betrays his country. For punishment, that country banishes him from its shores for the rest of his life. And sin, although it is temporal in act, is eternal in the will of the lost, and hell's fires correspond to this constancy of the will.

Moreover, from the very fact that a man commits a mortal sin, he places his end in a creature; and since the whole of life is directed to its end, it follows that for this very reason he directs the whole of his life to that sin, and he is perfectly willing to remain in sin forever, if he could do so with impunity.

God has established an order whereby man's will is subject to Him. But when man deliberately sins and corrupts that order, the disorder which follows is, in itself, irreparable, although God by His almighty power is fully capable of repairing it. St. Thomas tell us:

¹¹ *Contra Gentiles* IV, 90.

"The principle of this order is the last end, to which man adheres by charity. Therefore whatever sins turn man away from God, so as to destroy charity, considered in themselves, incur a debt of eternal punishment."¹²

Again, it has been asserted by non-believers, that the sole purpose of a punishment must be to reform the criminal. But they err. A murderer dropped from the scaffold with a noose about his neck, sees little hope for a better life by this mode of reformation. No, justice demands, that whoever disrupts the order of God's justice, be punished until the order is restored, and since the damned in hell can not atone for their sins, the punishment they endure is eternal. There is no doubt in the mind of the Church on this matter of hell's eternity when she declares that "all men shall rise again with their bodies, and shall give an account of their works; and they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire."¹³

VIII

So far, the discussion has concerned itself with the soul alone suffering the torments of hell. But it is against the nature of a soul to be without the body, and so, even though the body had been in a state of corruption, it will come forth on that eventful day of the General Judgment to resume again its union with the soul. And the soul, without any surcease from its state of punishment, it too comes forth to again *inform* the body. How the soul must recoil with loathsome hate and disdain from that object with which it associated so familiarly in the long ago. It was created from slime, but it was also created to house something sacred. In what a condition is that sacred thing now! That body was known then as the temple of the Holy Ghost; an outward adornment of a spiritual thing, which was the image and likeness of its very Creator. Now the two are joined again; once more they make the composite of former days. Together they had developed into a synthesis of God's creation—a rational being; endowed with the greatest benefits given to any created earthly thing. Together they had learned the ways of the world and its pleasures. Together they had chosen the bad in preference to the good; together they had turned aside from their ultimate end, preferring immediate worldly enjoyments. Suddenly, all this had stopped. "The thief in the night" had come unexpectedly. The soul returned to the Being who created it; the body, because it was a ma-

¹² *Summa Theol.* I-II q. 87, a. 3.

¹³ *Athanasian Creed.*

terial thing, returned to the earth from which it had sprung. Then comes the last day. Strange phenomena seize the earth. And the earth, as on that afternoon when Christ died, gives forth this body. It is joined to the soul; both go forth to stand in judgment. Now he sees a just God, whereas before He had been so lenient and merciful. And He sees the soul, a thing that at one time was beautiful, now loaded with hate and opprobrium. And in this horrible condition, all the sins of life, even the most secret, are made manifest before all men.

"And when the Son of man shall come in his majesty, and all the angels with him, then shall he sit upon the seat of his majesty: And all nations shall be gathered before him and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left. Then shall the king say to them that shall be on his right hand: Come ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in. . . . Then he shall say to them also that shall be on his left hand: Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels. . . . And these shall go into everlasting punishment, but the just, into life everlasting."⁴

Without a doubt, this is a terrible doctrine; yet the gentle Christ Himself, Who came to save man, emphasized it repeatedly, and the Church can not change His doctrine. We have the word of God that Hell is a fact. We must face the fact and do all we can to avoid meriting such a punishment. It will not do to hide one's head in the sand or to tone down the inexplicable loss only to be rudely shocked and awakened with the reality in the world to come. Hell is not a trap set by God to catch the ignorant. Only those go there who deliberately defy His law and choose to be separated from the God of mercy and of justice eternally.

⁴ *Matt.* xxv, 31-35, 41, 46.