

Why It Is Important to Teach Clearly about Hell

BY RALPH MARTIN

“How clear it is from numerous Scriptures that Jesus is a sign of contradiction! He will reveal the secrets of hearts and be the cause for the rise and fall of many; he will seriously divide families; he will be loved by some and hated by many.”



FOR A LONG TIME NOW, there has been a growing sympathy in the Catholic Church, on both theological and popular levels, for the doctrine of universalism: the belief that no one or perhaps very few will actually find themselves in hell. Whether the ideas come from esteemed theologians, well-known bishops, or even comments and documents from Rome that seem to be sympathetic to universalism, I think it is likely that perhaps the majority of Catholics have come to assume this belief.

Many people subscribe to the view that God is so merciful that perhaps nobody will be lost, or, if so, only a particularly

evil few. For example, the ambiguity that is characteristic of *Amoris Laetitia* (“On Love in the Family”) on this issue, not to mention other similar comments by high-ranking Church leaders, seems to inculcate doubt about whether hell is really a relevant



consideration for most people today. In *Amoris Laetitia*, there is the startling but vague statement that “No one can be condemned forever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel! Here I am not speaking only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in

whatever situation they find themselves” (no. 297).

Whether the document is addressing Church penalties or the ultimate penalty of hell is not clear. Even with ecclesiastical penalties, such as excommunication, it is entirely possible that if the person does not repent before he dies, what is bound on earth will be bound in heaven, with “forever” consequences. Whatever is meant by the “logic of the Gospel,” it certainly can’t mean that those who reject faith or die in unrepentant grave sin will be saved, which would be clearly contrary to the “logic of the Gospel.”

The Testimony of Scripture

All of this has insinuated doubt and then presumption into the hearts and minds of many Catholics today. If I were to describe how very many of our fellow Catholics think about the world today, I would say this: Broad and wide is the way that leads to heaven and almost everybody is heading that way. But narrow is the way and difficult the path that leads to hell and hardly anybody is going that way.

This, of course, is the exact opposite of how Jesus describes the situation in Matthew 7:13–14: “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.”

How clear it is from numerous Scriptures that Jesus is a sign of contradiction! He will reveal the secrets of hearts and be the cause for the rise and fall of many; he will seriously divide families; he will be loved by some and hated by many. This will result in a final separation of the just and the unjust on the day of judgment, when the believers and unbelievers—the good grain and the weeds, the good fish and the bad fish, the sheep and the goats—will be definitively separated: the unjust into eternal fire and the just to eternal life.¹

Of course, not being fundamentalists, we need to consider the whole scriptural

testimony concerning salvation. And we know certainly that God wills the salvation of the whole human race (see 1 Tim 2:4). We also know, though, that the freedom given to humans to accept or reject salvation is very real. And the testimony

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of Scripture seems to overwhelmingly witness to the fact that there will be a significant division in the human race over Jesus, and that many will be lost and many will be saved in proportions known only to God.

This has been the unbroken belief of the Church through most of her history. It has not been seriously challenged, except by occasional theologians who, if they gained any credence, were

¹ Cf. the Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:18–23); the Parable of the Net (Mt 13:47–50); and Jesus’ description of the Final Judgment (Mt 25:31–33).

condemned for views to the contrary. As Cardinal Avery Dulles sums up his reading of Church history, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that sympathy to universalism began to spread. Until that time, he asserts, there were no significant challenges to the traditional two-outcome views of the Catholic Church. The prevailing theological consensus was that more were lost than were saved, a view held by both Augustine and Aquinas. “As we know from the gospels, Jesus spoke many times about hell. Throughout his preaching, he holds forth two and only two final possibilities for human existence: the one being everlasting happiness in the presence of God, the other everlasting torment in the absence of God. . . . Taken in their obvious meaning, passages

“ . . . hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.”

such as these give the impression that there is a hell, and that many go there; more, in fact, than are saved.”²

For our catechetical purposes, it is absolutely essential to know what God has revealed to us about the reality of hell, starting with Sacred

Scripture, which has a power and clarity in its expression that nothing else can equal. Then, we need to see what the Church has said to us about this reality over the centuries, especially how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses these truths today. And this is not abstract, “ivory tower” theology: these are urgent words of warning trying to save us from eternal destruction. If we really love people, we need to tell them these most important truths—or we will be held accountable.

Unfortunately, such widespread universalist sympathies, even though they do not rise to the level of heresy, certainly

² Avery Cardinal Dulles, “The Population of Hell,” *First Things*, May 2003, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/05/the-population-of-hell>.

influence teaching and pastoral approach. If hell is empty, there is a natural tendency to pay more attention to “improving the world” and to sympathize with the world’s causes than to focus on the bold proclamation that the name of Jesus is the only name that can save anyone (see Acts 4:12). Or that people need to “save themselves from this wicked generation” through repentance, faith, and baptism (Acts 2:40). Or that in order to escape the wrath that is coming—the final judgment—they need to join themselves to Jesus and the Church and obey his commands (1 Thes 1:10). If hell is empty (or nearly so), do we really need to insist that what Jesus and the apostles teach on the purpose of human sexuality and marriage must be obeyed in order to be saved? Or could we fudge it a little to better align ourselves with the spirit of the age? This is clearly the pastoral approach of many in the Church today, and it is, unfortunately, seriously imbalanced.

So, let’s consider: what does the Church teach about the reality of hell and the likelihood of going there? As we do so, let’s remember what Vatican II taught about how we as Catholics should approach the Sacred Scriptures.

Dei verbum, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, clearly states how the Church has always understood Sacred Scripture. The primary author of Sacred Scripture is God. He works through human authors and their mentalities and cultures, but “everything asserted by the sacred authors should be considered to be asserted by God.” Indeed, the Scriptures “teach faithfully, firmly and without error those truths God wished to consign to the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”³

What Does the *Catechism* Teach about Hell?

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, the *Catechism* clearly teaches that anyone who dies unrepentant in serious sin will go directly to hell, defining it as the “state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed,” reserved for those who by their own free choice “refuse to

3 Second Vatican Council, *Dei verbum*, no. 11.

believe and be converted” from sin, even to the end of their lives (CCC 1033–34).

The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, “eternal fire.” The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs (CCC 1035).⁴

The traditional teaching based on Scripture is that, since we are bodily creatures, our resurrected bodies will participate in the eternal joys or eternal horrors of our ultimate destinies.



In 1979, under Pope John Paul II, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith responded to some questions on eschatology. It made this statement: “In fidelity to the New Testament and tradition, the Church believes in the happiness of the just who will one day be with Christ. She believes that there will be eternal punishment [*poena aeterna*] for the sinner who will be deprived of the

sight of God, and that this punishment will have a repercussion on the whole being of the sinner.”⁵

This is not just an esoteric discussion on “dogma.” The truths concerning the ultimate destinies of human beings are the

⁴ See also CCC 1038.

⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter on Certain Questions concerning Eschatology,” May 17, 1979.

most important truths for people to know, and unfortunately, they are seldom spoken about anymore. Most frequently they are publicly doubted, or simply ignored, which, after a period of time, casts doubt concerning their importance or truthfulness.

I cannot emphasize enough how serious the situation is when the prevailing mentality is in direct contradiction to the words of Jesus and the whole picture of reality gifted to us in divine Revelation. The *Catechism* calls each Catholic to live their lives in the light of eternity with the biblical worldview controlling their understanding and decisions:

The affirmations of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church on the subject of hell are a *call to the responsibility* incumbent upon man to make use of his freedom in view of his eternal destiny. They are at the same time an urgent *call to conversion*: “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.”

Since we know neither the day nor the hour, we should follow the advice of the Lord and watch constantly so that, when the single course of our earthly life is completed, we may merit to enter with him into the marriage feast and be numbered among the blessed, and not, like the wicked and slothful servants, be ordered to depart into the eternal fire, into the outer darkness where “men will weep and gnash their teeth.” (1036, emphasis added)

Sometimes people say we should not scare people into conversion. But fear of hell and the consequences of sin is an excellent start for the spiritual journey because it does not end there. It leads to “perfect love cast[ing] out fear” of punishment—

which is the journey of a lifetime (1 Jn 4:18). The reality is that hell exists, that it is very likely that many people go there, and that knowing about it is so important that Jesus and the apostles often warned about it. In parable after parable and in apostolic writing after apostolic writing, God is revealing to us that there will be a final separation of the human race at the end of time. The weeds will be thrown into the fire and burned; the wheat brought into the barn (Mt 13:30). The wise virgins will enter the wedding feast; the foolish virgins will not (Mt 25:1–13). The good fish will be kept and the bad thrown away (Mt 13:48). The sons of the devil will be excluded from the kingdom; the sons of God will enter (Mt 13:36–42).

Contemporary Saints: Two Examples

It is important also to note that both in the messages given by Our Lady of Fatima and in those given to St. Faustina there was presented a strong reaffirmation of the reality of hell. In the case of Fatima, the vision of hell given to Jacinta, Francisco, and Lucia, ages seven, nine, and ten, made a profound impression on them and led them to a life of prayer and fasting for the conversion of sinners and reparation for sin. Today, of course, if Mary were teaching similarly aged children in many of our Catholic schools she would be summarily fired. This should give pause to some serious reflection on how deeply we have been affected by “another gospel.”

In the case of St. Faustina, the main message of Divine Mercy is that the greatest of sinners are most entitled to mercy and that no one should hesitate to come to the Lord to receive that mercy. Unfortunately, what are often neglected are the frequent warnings given that indicate that those who don't respond to God's mercy will indeed experience God's judgment, which includes the reality of hell. St. Faustina recounts how an angel was sent by God to show her the reality of hell, which she describes in some detail in entry 741 of her *Diary*.⁶ Did the

6 St. Faustina Kowalska, *Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Kraków: Misericordia, 2019), 2nd notebook, no. 741, pp. 387–88.

Lord through Mary at Fatima and through St. Faustina remind us of the reality of hell in anticipation of the future wave of universalism that would infiltrate the Church?

There are numerous attempts to explain away the plain meaning of Scripture and its constant interpretation by the Church. Sometimes by sophisticated theological speculation,⁷ sometimes by just wishful thinking and foolish presumption, the result of darkened minds. One of the most common rejections of this hard but merciful teaching is found among those who speak of the “salvation optimism” of Vatican II and a supposed development of doctrine that leads in a universalist direction.

When our seminary, Sacred Heart Major Seminary in the Archdiocese of Detroit, wanted to increase the number of faculty who had pontifical doctorates, they asked me if I would be willing to go to Rome to get one. I told them I would if the Angelicum would allow me to work on a topic for my dissertation that would be useful for the Church. They agreed, and I was allowed to examine what exactly the Church teaches about the possibility of being saved without hearing the Gospel. It was published in 2012 under the title *Will Many Be Saved: What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*.

It is in section 16 of *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) that this teaching is most fully developed. In summary: It is possible for people to be saved without hearing the Gospel, under certain conditions:

1. The ignorance of the Gospel must not be culpable.
2. There is a sincere seeking of God.
3. There is a sincere attempt to live according to the light of conscience assisted by grace.

These conditions are cited as evidence for the “salvation optimism” of Vatican II. However, in almost every case where this

⁷ My book on the question of universalism has lengthy chapters examining the speculations of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar on this topic. See chapter 5, “Rahner and ‘Anonymous Christians,’” and chapter 6, “Balthasar: Dare We Hope That All Be Saved?,” in *Will Many Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012).

topic is treated, the last three sentences of *LG* §16 are ignored. In summary, they state: yes it is possible under certain very definite conditions for people who have heard the Gospel to be saved, but it is very difficult, and very often people do not fulfill the conditions.

But very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:21, 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. Hence to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all these, the Church, mindful of the Lord's command, "preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mk. 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions. (*LG* §16)

There is a worse virus in the world and Church today than Covid. It is the virus of universalism, which undermines holiness, true worship, vocations, and evangelization. Let us be clear and confident in our teaching and preaching that to transmit the teaching of the apostles and the Church on hell is to show the greatest mercy to souls—all of us—that really are in danger of damnation.

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