

## Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time B: September 29, 2024

### “The problem of hell... a *heck* of a problem?”

In the Gospel of last Sunday, we were instructed by the Lord Jesus about the necessity of becoming children. What is it to be a child in the Kingdom of God? Ultimately, to be a child in the Kingdom of God is to learn to have ultimate trust in God, our Heavenly Father; it is to learn to live, day by day, loving the Lord by loving our brothers and sisters in the Lord joyfully and trustingly, knowing that our Father-God will provide whatsoever we need. Looking as we did last week even briefly at the life of St. Thérèse, we begin to realize that spiritual childhood, as beautiful as the idea is, is a lofty goal and not easy to attain.

In today's Gospel, the Lord brings up a very difficult topic, one that in recent years is not often spoken about, at least in Catholic churches. What is that topic? That topic is hell – the reality of hell. It seems that St. John saw someone driving out demons in the Name of Jesus – but the man was not part of the ‘inner circle’ of the Twelve – and hence the Beloved Apostle said to Jesus: “*Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in Your Name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.*” (St. Mark 9. 38) St. John means no real harm. As Archbishop Goodier points out: John is overly enthusiastic, but sound at heart. He is impetuous, and has much to learn “but none were more quick to take lessons than he and Phillip.” (1) Thus, Jesus responds to St. John: “*there is no one who performs a mighty deed in My Name who can at the same time speak ill of Me. For whoever is not against us is for us.*” (St. Mark 9. 39-40)

It is at this point that Jesus broaches the difficult subject which no one wants to think about, that subject of hell. “*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea.*” (St. Mark 9. 42) And the Lord cautions us: if our hand, or our foot, or our eye causes us to sin, remove it, cut it off: better to be maimed than “*to be thrown into Gehenna, where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.*” (St. Mark 9. 48)

Several questions must be asked immediately! Does the Lord want us – literally – to begin removing limbs, hands, feet – and sinful eyes – from ourselves? No, of course not. The Lord, however, is speaking very strongly to illustrate a very strong point: scandal. Scandals arise from actions that are thought out, planned, and, more often than not, repeated over long periods of time. At least, scandalous actions *ought* to be thought out and thought about by the ones who do them, even though, very often, the ones who do them say, “It just happened.” This “It just happened” mode is often accepted in a society that prides itself on being tolerant. Unfortunately, what often passes for tolerance is usually moral cowardice and confusion, (a sort of ‘planned confusion,’ as it were) as the scores of hurt children can attest to us. But, let us be clear.

Now, when Jesus speaks about ‘cutting off’ and ‘casting out’ our sinful members (the hand, the foot, the eye), Fr. Breen explains that what really is at stake here is not so much the member that sins, (the foot, the hand, the eye) but *we* who sin and the *occasions of sin* which *we* place *ourselves* in. Thus:

With these occasions Christ allows no temporizing, no compromising, no half-measures. His words are, ‘cut it off,’ ‘cast it out.’ ... These strong expressions are chosen to illustrate how hard it is at times for a man to separate himself from occasions of sin... A man cannot separate himself from such occasions unless he is resolved to do something hard, a thing that seems like **tearing out a part of his heart.** (2, emphasis my own)

Perhaps the real key to this passage of sin and retribution is Our Lord's use of the word *Gehenna* and its unquenchable fire. What is that about? The Protestant scholar, William Barclay is very helpful here:

There are in this passage repeated references to *Gehenna*...The word is regularly translated *Hell*. It is a word with a history. It is a form of the word *Hinnom*. The valley of Hinnom was a ravine outside Jerusalem. It had an evil past. It was the valley in which Ahaz, in the old days, had instituted fire worship and the sacrifice of little children in the fire...The valley of Hinnom, *Gehenna*, therefore, was the scene of Israel's most terrible lapses into heathen customs. In his reformations Josiah declared it an unclean place...When the valley had been so declared unclean and had been so desecrated it was set apart as the place where the refuse of Jerusalem was burned. The consequence was that it was a foul, unclean place, where loathsome worms bred on the refuse, and which smoked and smouldered at all times like some vast incinerator. The actual phrase about the worm which does not die, and the fire which is not quenched, comes from a description of the fate of Israel's evil enemies in *Isaiah* 66. 24. (3)

Where are we, then, at this point? It is interesting to note that Our Divine Lord spoke almost three times as much about the reality of hell than He spoke about Heaven. In other words, Jesus was and is concerned about hell. Thus, it seems to me, that we ought to be at least somewhat concerned about it, as well.

Some years ago, our Holy Father Emeritus, Benedict, preaching in a parish in a northern suburb of Rome, said that “in the modern world many people, including some believers, had forgotten that if they failed to admit blame and promise to sin no more, they risked eternal damnation – the Inferno.” (4) The term His Holiness uses is striking, *the Inferno*: taken from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the inference is that the eternal damnation could well include Dante's legendary hell fire.

What *does* the Church teach about hell and hell fire? The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as usual, is helpful here.

74. What was the fall of the Angels?

This expression indicates that Satan and the other demons... were good Angels, created good by God. They were, however, transformed into evil because with a free and irrevocable choice they rejected God and His Kingdom, **thus giving rise to the existence of hell.**

212. In what does hell consist?

Hell consists in the eternal damnation of those who die in mortal sin **through their own free choice.** The principle suffering of hell is eternal separation from God in Whom alone we can have life and happiness for which we were created and for which we

long. Christ proclaimed this reality with the words, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire.' (St. Matthew 25. 41) (5, emphasis my own)

Two important ideas emerge at this point, one of which we have already alluded to. The first reality that is paramount for us is the reality of personal responsibility. In point 74, regarding the Angels Who fell, their fall was a fall of *free and knowing choice*, and that free and knowing choice resulted in a new reality – a horrible reality which we refer to as hell. In a certain sense we could say that the fallen Angels, themselves, built hell. I say this to counter the idea that some people have that God in some way made hell. No. God made the world, as the Book of Genesis so clearly points out, “*good – very good!*” The fall of the Angels was their own tragic choice, and part of that choice, part of that tragic consequence was the building, as it were, of their unhappy place where they exist in the horror of their hate-filled existence. This point is a counterpoint to the reality of the creation of the hell of Gehenna outside the city gates of old Jerusalem, which was the template/paradigm Jesus used to paint the picture of the reality of hell which exists for poor sinners, created by the sinful action of the sinners of old, feeding their children to the fire by a *free and knowing choice*. That is to say, just as the sinful Angels created hell long before the creation of time, sinful man created a hell on earth by their sinful actions.

Secondly, the chief horror of hell, which, more and more I begin to realise, we cannot really comprehend (because I do not think we have ever really experienced it) is the utter loss of God. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains:

The *poena damni*, or pain of loss, consists in the loss of the beatific vision and in so complete a separation of all the powers of the soul from God that it cannot find in Him even the least peace and rest. It is accompanied by the loss of all supernatural gifts, e.g., the loss of faith... The pain of loss is the very core of eternal punishment. If the damned beheld God face to face, hell itself, notwithstanding its fire, would be a kind of heaven. Had they but some union with God even if not precisely the union of the beatific vision, hell would no longer be hell, but a kind of purgatory. (6)

The pain of loss... to be without the sun, utter darkness, forever? Unimaginable. To be without love; worse still, where love once was, to have that place filled with unimaginable hatred, horror and loathing for all the things, and, for all the ones you once loved. And, most of all, for the One Who is most loveable. Unimaginable. And it would be forever. Unthinkable. May God preserve us in His Mercy.

There yet remains the nagging question about hell fire? Was Jesus just speaking like a man of His time? That is, is the fire of hell only metaphorical or is it real? The Church has never decisively ruled on the question. “According to the greater number of theologians the term *fire* denotes a material fire, and so a real fire.” But, you ask, how could a material fire affect spirits? Good question. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* poses the same question, and responds: “... if our soul is so joined to the body as to be keenly sensitive to the pain of fire, why should the omnipotent God be unable to bind even pure spirits [i.e., Angels] to some material substance in such a way that they suffer a torment more or less similar to the pain of fire which the soul can feel on earth? The reply indicates... how we may form an idea of the pain of fire which the demons suffer.” (7) In short, we are not bound by the Church to believe in hell fire, only the existence of hell, and, when we say the existence of hell, we understand that to mean the total separation from God. May I also add, like the sinful acts *we choose* in this world, hell is also *a choice* the sinner makes of his own free will, and that choice is made *and kept (!)* even after the continuous and repeated appeals of Mercy by the Lord have finally failed to move a heart made dead by sin.

Should we fear hell? No. Should we respect hell? By all means. St. Faustina was very clear on this point when she, on being taken to hell by the Lord, was commanded by Him to tell the world that most people inhabiting hell are those who did not believe in its existence while they lived on earth.

Perhaps the thing we ought to look at most carefully is our own actions and our intentions. What is the direction of our hearts? When was the last time we made a good confession? The old Litany of the Saints had a beautiful invocation: ‘From sudden and unprovided death, deliver us, O Lord!’ The little choices, the little sins (the venial sins) that go unconfessed year by year, can harden a man’s heart just as surely and completely as mortal sin freely committed. Those little sins pile up and lead to a condition that is called lukewarmness. Our Lord was very clear about that condition in the Book of Revelation: “*So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I shall vomit you out of My mouth.*” (Rev. 3. 16)

What are we to do? Personally, I think it would be foolish to discount the fires of hell, even though the Church has made no formal ruling. The fact of the matter is, there is a long, long history of tradition supporting the teaching regarding the fires of hell. It seems to me that we have one of two choices. We can choose the fire of love that binds the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, or... we can choose... another fire...the *choice* is ours.

1. The Most Rev'd. A. Goodier, *The Public Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, vol. 2 of 2, St. Paul Editions, pgs. 45- 46
2. Fr. A. E. Breen, *A Harmonized Exposition of the Four Gospels*, vol. 3 of 4, John P. Smith Printing Co., Rochester, N.Y., 1908, pg. 83
3. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark, The Daily Study Bible*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975, pgs. 231-232
4. Pope Benedict XVI, homily Sunday, March 28, 2007, [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au)
5. *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, USCCB, Washington, D.C., 2006
6. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Hell,” pgs. 7-8, <http://www.newadvent.org>
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 8