

## Meditation 3: Hell as the definitive refusal of God

We have been walking towards Chartres for a few hours now, and this pilgrimage is a unique opportunity to concentrate on the essential: in the evening of our lives, when we appear before Christ, we will be judged. What will it be about, this judgment? It will be about love. If we have died in charity, if our soul is in a state of grace, we will hear these words of Jesus: *“Come, you blessed of my father, take possession of the Kingdom which has been prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”* On the other hand, if unfortunately we die in a state of mortal sin, without having repented and without welcoming the merciful love of God, this terrible sentence will be heard: *“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire”* And then, Jesus *“will send his angels, who will gather up all the perpetrators of iniquity [...] and throw them into the fiery furnace”*.

### Major ideas

- Many take the path to perdition
- Our faith contains a grace of conversion
- A man, in a state of mortal sin on the day of his death, is taken immediately to Hell
- The Church teaches that Hell is neither temporary nor empty
- God, through his abundant graces, does everything to encourage us to act well
- Some sins are mortal. But you can get used to them, absolve yourself and eventually be pleased by them.

### Introduction

Dear pilgrim, yes! Hell exists; and yes, if I do not take Christ's warnings seriously, if I persevere in my sin, if I refuse to go to confession, then this sentence from Jesus is directly addressed to me: *“for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.”*

But the good news is that we are not fatalists. In Hell, there are only volunteers! That is to say people who refused to welcome the grace of Christ. Every man is offered the possibility of taking the path that leads to eternal life.

Dear pilgrim, here you are at the crossroads; a choice is offered to you: with the grace of God, climb the steep path that leads to Heaven, or, by refusing this grace, embark on the highway of sin that leads to Hell. And since meditation on the great truths of our faith contains a grace of conversion, I suggest you meditate on what the Catholic faith teaches on the subject of Hell.

### What is Hell?

#### The teaching of the Church

You may perhaps know the famous song by Michel Polnareff, who sang, in the 1960s: *“We will all go to Paradise...”* The tragedy is that this opinion is now very widespread, and that



we sometimes find it taught by certain people, even theologians. You must therefore have clear ideas on the subject. Here is what the Catechism states: *“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””* (CCC §1035) To fully understand this teaching, I suggest that you engage with – and learn to refute - some false interpretations of this doctrine.

### Refutation of some heterodox doctrines

- Hell exists, but it is temporary

This idea dates back to the first centuries of the Church. It is found in Origen, a 4th century author. This is the doctrine of apocatastasis (a very fancy word to place at a dinner...): at the end of the world, God, by his omnipotence and his mercy, destroys Hell, and saves the damned from their eternal punishment. This doctrine was condemned by Pope Virgil in the 4th century. The eternity of Hell is a direct consequence of the gravity of mortal sin, *“our freedom having the power to make choices forever, with no turning back”*. (CCC §1861)

- Hell exists, but it is empty

This idea is unfortunately quite widespread, even among certain Catholic theologians. It is expressed in the slogan: *“hope for all”*. According to this opinion, the terrible words of Jesus about Gehenna, external darkness, eternal fire, are in fact educational threats to encourage us to act well, but, in fact, these latter would never be carried out. How to respond to this objection? The Church, it is true, has never carried out any sort of “reverse canonizations” by teaching that such a person is in Hell. But Jesus' warnings assume the reality of the danger. Otherwise, we reduce the Saviour's preaching to a simple process intended to frighten, a bit like a threat made by parents without the latter having the slightest desire to carry it out: *“If you are not good, I will leave you home alone for all of the holidays!”* This would mean that Jesus would have chosen to use a kind of “useful lie”, which is not worthy of the one who said: *“I am the Truth.”* No, in truth, the possibility of damnation is a real possibility, and the fact that some souls go to Hell is a truth that belongs to Catholic doctrine. This is also what the Holy Virgin confirmed to the seers of Fatima, allowing them to see the atrocious suffering of the damned souls: *“You have seen Hell where the souls of poor sinners go.”*

### How can you go to Hell?

Hell is this state of definitive separation from God. The only way to go to Hell is therefore to separate yourself from Him, and to die in this state of separation. Now, we are united to God by theological charity, deposited in our soul on the day of our baptism. This virtue allows us to love God above all things, and our neighbour as ourselves.

### Mortal sin

The only way for man to lose charity, and therefore to break this supernatural union with God, is to commit mortal sin. A sin that bears its name well: it causes the divine life of grace to die in us. Saint John Paul II defines it thus: *“We call mortal sin the act by which a man, freely and consciously, refuses God, his law, the alliance of love that God offers him, preferring to turn towards himself - even, towards some created and finite reality, towards something contrary to the will of God.”* Mortal sin is self-love to the point of contempt for God. Or, in less theological terms, *“enjoy without hindrance”*, rather than *“give without counting”*. For there to be mortal sin, three conditions must be met:

1. the act committed must be objectively serious;
2. it must be done with full knowledge;

3. it must be done voluntarily.

### **Hell or “eternalised” mortal sin**

Mortal sin is therefore a free act by which I place my final end, the goal of my existence, in a creature, generally myself. Now, by doing this, I create a sort of parallel world; for in truth, it is God who is my final end and ultimate goal, not me. We therefore understand that mortal sin carries with it an infinite, eternal penalty. For it is an offense to the infinite good, which is God himself.

By sinning, I become the centre of my existence, and therefore I close myself within myself. Saint Thomas Aquinas clearly perceived this infernal dynamic of sin: “*When sinning for the first time,*” he writes, “*we imagine that we will then be able to abstain from sin; but quite the opposite happens, because the first sin weakens us and makes us more inclined to sin.*” At first, we think we are smart enough to come close to the forbidden: just once, just one drink, just one click... But very quickly, the trap closes, and often with great violence: for the human will is made for the infinite good, for the ultimate end, for God. To sin is precisely to turn away from one's ultimate end to move towards a finite and limited good as if it were infinite good. As long as our love is not rectified, we become slaves to the things we love. Like Harpagon, Molière's miser, who places all his desire in the possession of money. Certainly, he has what he wants, in a sense, but at what price: he literally becomes possessed by money. Or, an even more eloquent example: Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*. The domination that the ring exercises over him is so profound that Gollum comes to lose his identity. He is, literally, alienated, other than himself. It's a good allegory of what sin does in us.

Certainly, as long as I live, I can convert. Under the influence of grace, I can repent my sin, confess it, and regain union with God through charity.

But with death, which consists of the separation of the soul and the body, any change is impossible: the soul is definitively fixed in its choice for or against God. And therefore the soul which dies in a state of mortal sin finds itself eternally fixed in this state of hatred of God. And this is the main cause of his suffering.

### **What are the sufferings of Hell?**

We distinguish two sufferings, two sorrows among the damned. The pain of sense, and the pain of damage. This distinction is not arbitrary, but arises from the very nature of mortal sin. Serious sin, as we have seen, consists of turning away from God, the infinite good [first aspect], to turn towards a creature, that is to say a finite good [second aspect].

### **The punishment of the damned**

Turning away from God corresponds to the penalty of the damned, from the Latin *damnum* which means “loss of God”. This is the main suffering of the souls who are in Hell. Indeed, man was created to be united with God, which corresponds to his deepest desire. As Saint Augustine writes: “*You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*” The damned therefore experiences, in the most intimate part of his being, a permanent tension between this desire for God, which remains inscribed in his heart, and his will eternally diverted from God by mortal sin. Yes, as Benedict XVI wrote, “*Hell is where God is not.*”

### **The pain of meaning**

The second aspect of sin, that is to say, turning in a disorderly way towards a creature,

corresponds to the punishment of the senses. This is what we call the fire of Hell. This pain arises from the disorder caused by the disordered attachment to the pleasures of this world. More spectacular in a sense than the pain of death, it is in fact less profound than the latter. After the resurrection of the flesh, the bodies of the damned will experience the punishment of the senses.

### **Conclusion**

Dear pilgrim, this is the doctrine of the Church concerning Hell. If I wanted to remind you of it, it is not to create a sense of fear, but because it is the truth. And the truth sets you free. The most important thing to remember is that the eternity of Hell, as well as the excruciating suffering of the damned, are actually the flip side of that other central truth of the faith: God is Love. If God is love, we can only live in God if we participate in this love. When I refuse the attentions of divine Love, I put myself in a “state of self-exclusion” from communion with God, and this self-exclusion can become permanent if I die in this state. So if your conscience reproaches you for something (perhaps this sin that you never had the strength to confess in confession, and that you have been dragging like a ball and chain for years), take advantage of this pilgrimage to go and lay down this burden with a priest in the confessional. You will get immense joy from it. For if mortal sin is a foretaste of Hell, the life of grace is a beginning of the joy of Heaven!