

THE
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An Exploration of an Often-Rejected
Doctrine of the Church

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The Hell There Is: An Exploration of an Often-Rejected Doctrine of the Church
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*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.*

—Matthew 7:13–14

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Preface

Of all the theological errors commonly held today, the most popular is surely the denial of the doctrine of hell. Even among the more devout, such as those who go to daily Mass, the teaching that God would send or consign anyone to hell is routinely dismissed. If it exists at all, for many, it is largely empty, except perhaps for a few serial killers or genocidal maniacs like Hitler. But for the vast majority—Catholic, non-Catholic, and atheist—hell is a very remote possibility. Never mind that Jesus taught just the opposite, say that “few” are on the narrow road of Salvation and that “many” prefer the darkness (Jn 3:19) and are on the wide road that leads to hell (see Mt 7:13; Lk 13:24). Never mind that twenty-one of Jesus’s thirty-eight parables feature scenes of judgment where some are saved and others are lost. There are sheep and goats, wheat and tares, those on the right, those on the left, wise virgins and foolish virgins, and so forth. Indeed, most of the teachings on hell come right from the mouth of Jesus. But for most people, none of this matters.

Some years ago, I was preaching on heaven and hell since the Gospel for that Sunday was of the wide and narrow roads just mentioned. Afterward, a woman approached me, angry that I had mentioned hell at all, and said, “Father, I didn’t hear the Jesus I know in your words today.” I replied,

“But Ma’am, I was quoting Him directly.” She didn’t miss a beat and simply replied, “Well, we know He never really said that.” Her rejection of hell signals a deeper problem: her rejection of the Scriptures as the inspired and inerrant word of God. The Second Vatican Council affirmed clearly: “Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven” (*Dei Verbum* 19).

So she, and none of us, are free to declare that what the Gospels clearly and repeatedly tell us Jesus actually said, He did not actually say. We must affirm the historicity and accuracy of these accounts as the Church requires (see also CCC 126).

Her retort also signals another part of the problem: that the “Jesus I know,” the “god of my understanding” just wouldn’t warn of hell or permit souls to end up there. In our time, God has largely been refashioned and trivialized. The Father has become a doting grandfather, and Jesus has become a harmless hippie. Gone is the God of Scripture, and He is replaced by the “Jesus I know,” and the “god of my understanding” who just wouldn’t do such a thing. In the past, imagining your own God and worshiping it was called idolatry. Today, most people think they have a perfect right to imagine a god of their own, the “god within” who almost always happens to agree with them. This refashioned “god” is a benign sort of fellow or power who isn’t too worked up

about the things said by the God of Scripture or the God described by the Church. Hence, at best, God is trivialized and His revealed word is set aside. At worst, God is wholly replaced by another self-fabricated god.

In addition, we have underestimated the seriousness of sin and what it does to harden our hearts against the True God, His kingdom, and its realities and virtues. Sin also darkens our minds, making it difficult to endure the glorious bright light of truth. We fail to comprehend that only those rendered perfect can enter into His holiness or endure His presence. It just doesn't occur to us that our sins render us unfit and incapable of withstanding the awesome and bright glory of God and the temperature of His love.

And hence today, with the widespread trivialization of the divine and a diminished sense of sin, the true God and His teachings revealed in Scripture seem too hard and harsh for the "loving and merciful" god of my understanding. Is God love? Yes! Is He merciful? Yes! But too often today, love is reduced to mere kindness, and mercy is preached without the repentance that opens its floodgates. Hence, appeals to God's love and mercy are not meant in the biblical sense where mercy presupposes sin and our acknowledgment of it as such, and love is not some cheap grace that only affirms but a strong godly love which seeks as its goal that we be "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The work to render us perfect and to attain "the holiness without which no one may see the Lord" is not an easy work. It requires extensive conversion for us wherein the Lord, by the power of His cross, puts sins to death and raises grace to life. We must die to sin so that Christ may live in us. And there

are many who simply do not want to follow this path since it involves giving up some of their favorite sins. They reject the kingdom of God because they love the world too much. The process of conversion from the things of this world to God is arduous at times and involves substantial effort. Many, knowing this implicitly, reject the call and the promise that grace can make all things possible. The road to heaven is narrow because it is the way of the cross, and too many do not want to hear about crosses or sacrifices of any sort.

It is in this context that the doctrine of hell makes the most sense. Hell exists because God respects the freedom of every individual to accept or reject His offer of the kingdom. For the reasons just stated and others we will explore in this book, many do not want to traverse the narrow road to the promised land of heaven. They are like the Hebrews in the time of Moses who preferred to remain in the desert rather than battle for the Promised Land. For them, it was too much trouble. Hence, God let them tarry in the desert. If they didn't want the Promised Land, God would not force them to enter it. Only those like Joshua and Caleb who desired it and were willing to take the narrow road lived to see it.

It is a caricature of the doctrine of hell to say that it exists because a mean and hateful God seeks to keep people out. No, hell exists because God respects our freedom to accept or reject Him and His kingdom. The nature of the judgment is this: that the Light has come into the world, but many prefer the darkness.

It may well be that many who reject the doctrine of hell today do so more as the rejection of the caricature of it than because they have thoughtfully reviewed the teaching. The

purpose of this book is to ponder the doctrine and explain why it makes sense and is, in fact, a necessary doctrine if human beings exercise free will. The approach here is not so much a heavy theological or historical approach that seeks to review what every council, pope, Church Father, or saint ever said about hell. Neither does it seek to directly sample and refute, point by point, every argument by those who say hell is empty. Rather, this book seeks to respond to the questions, misunderstandings, and doubts pastorally and biblically about hell that average people today are raising. Such an approach will necessarily focus on human freedom, taking seriously the dignity and responsibility that such freedom confers. We are free to choose, but we are not free not to choose. Choose wisely, dear reader, and courageously, realizing that while salvation is freely offered, discipleship is costly and traverses the narrow road of the cross. Ask for a heart that is so touched by the glory of God and the joys unspeakable of heaven that no sacrifice is too great to say yes to God, joyfully let Him go to work, doing whatever is necessary to prepare us for the glories untold that await us.

CHAPTER 1

The Most Widespread of Heresies

The Denial of the Dogma of Hell

*I would not be a sinner,
I'll tell you the reason why,
I'm afraid my Lord might call my name,
And I wouldn't be ready to die.*

—African-American Spiritual

Many people believe hell is incompatible with the idea of a loving God. But Jesus combines them! Here is an important truth: *No one loves you more than Jesus Christ, yet no one spoke of or taught on hell and judgment more than He did.* He gave urgent warning after warning in parable after parable about final judgment and the reality of hell.

No “heresy” of our day is more widespread or pernicious than the denial of hell, its existence, and the sad truth that many go there. Here, the word *heresy* is not used in a formal way but in a broad, more descriptive sense that simply means picking and choosing among revealed truths. Strictly speaking, heresy would be the claim that there is no hell at all. What is more common today, at least among the faithful,

is not the outright denial of hell but a kind of practical denial of it by concluding, contrary to Scripture, that very few, if any, go to hell. Confronted with truths that are in some tension (such as God's justice vs. His mercy or human freedom vs. God's sovereignty), the "heretic" chooses one truth and throws out the other to resolve the tension. While orthodoxy accepts both, heresy picks one and discards the other.

This book will not quote extensively from authors who argue that the vast majority are saved or that hell is largely empty. However, it will discuss three basic objections to the teaching of Matthew 7:13 that many are lost and few are saved. Some say it offends against God's love. Others say that human knowledge or understanding is too limited to make damnable choices. Still others argue that human freedom is too diminished to be fully accountable for choices made. Let's take a brief look at each claim.

Is Hell Irreconcilable with God's Love and Mercy?

With respect to the teaching on hell and judgment, the "heretic" cannot reconcile God's love and mercy with the reality of hell and eternal separation from Him. To him, it seems a contradiction, and so he largely sets aside the reality of hell, relegating it to the rarest of outcomes, reserved only for the most wicked sinner. Conflict resolved, or so he thinks. The problem is that both truths are taught and both truths must be held. God is Love and there is also a hell of which the loving Lord warns that many, not few, go there (see, e.g., Mt 7:13). Since truth cannot contradict itself, the conflict

between love and hell is only apparent, and it falls to us to resolve it.

Let us be clear: no one loves you or me more than Jesus, and yet the Lord of Love, Jesus, spoke of these truths more than anyone else. The Church teachings on hell and the drama of the judgment that awaits us are largely taken from the very words of Jesus. He combines a keen sense of the need to repent or to risk hell with His love and desire to save us. If we see a contradiction between these truths, the problem is with our perception. These doctrines as taught by the Church are coherent and harmonious. Hence, any conflict between God's love and the existence of hell is an apparent conflict, not a real one.

Are Most People “Too Stupid” to Go to Hell?

Others are dismissive of hell by holding that most human beings do not have sufficient knowledge of God and what God requires to merit hell. While invincible ignorance can lessen guilt, as these critics suggest, it does not amount to a blank check. Even those who have not been catechized or taught the Christian faith still have intellect and will. They also have consciences and hearts wherein God has written His name and placed the natural law, which is discoverable by reason and which must be followed. St. Paul makes this clear about the Gentiles, who, though they did not have the Scriptures, were without excuse: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly

perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Rom 1:19–20).

St. Paul goes on to accuse them of suppressing the truth and, through the darkened intellect and depraved mind, engaging in every sort of sinful practice and sexual perversion (see Rom 21ff). So, even though they lacked the advantages of the Jews, who had Sacred Scripture, they were still responsible for what they knew by the natural law and were without excuse. St. Paul concludes of them: “Though they know God’s decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them” (Rom 1:32).

Hence, while accepting that invincible ignorance can be a factor that God will account for in His judgment of us, God Himself, in His own word, teaches us that ignorance, especially of basic moral norms, is not as deep or widespread as many modern theologians may assume. Deep down, most people know what they are doing and if it is right or wrong. God’s moral law is written in the human heart and in the “Book of Creation.” Emphasizing ignorance or insufficient knowledge sets aside biblical norms that presume sufficient knowledge in general. Modern notions of widespread ignorance also diminish human dignity when they presume that many, if not most, are “too stupid” to go to hell. The assertion here is that God’s word says otherwise, ascribing to human beings sufficient intellect, conscience, and will to be moral agents responsible for what they do.

Do People Lack Sufficient Freedom to Go to Hell?

Still others are dubious of there being “many” in hell due to factors that limit human freedom. There are, in fact, things that limit human freedom to a sufficient degree as to lower the culpability (blameworthiness) of sin. Bad habits, compulsions, and addictions may mean that mortal sins rank more as venial sins in some individuals. God, who is just and knows the heart, will surely account for such factors. So, do most lack sufficient freedom to deserve hell?

The answer to this question must ultimately be no. If not, the entire moral exhortation of the Scriptures would be quite pointless, and its warnings of the consequences of sin would be downright cruel. The stance of God and His Scripture, as well as that of the Church, is to engage the human person as a moral agent who can freely choose, making decisions for which he is responsible.

While the Church does teach that freedom can experience certain limits that lessen moral culpability, this teaching ought not be over-applied. The tone and tenor of Scripture tell us to teach God’s law and insist upon it, warning of the consequences of unrepentant rebellion. There is no general qualifier attached to most biblical warnings, to wit: “But don’t worry too much about the consequences of sins mentioned here since most of you aren’t free enough to actually commit a mortal sin.” Hence, while not wholly disregarding diminished freedom in certain cases, we ought not apply exculpatory language in excess of what God Himself does. God treats us as moral agents and in a way that generally assumes we possess sufficient freedom to make individual choices that can also

build to existential choices. Jesus warns of hell because it is a real possibility. The Church should do no less.

Come to Your Senses

For these and other reasons, we moderns too easily refuse to obey what is taught in Scripture. We refuse to accept that the choices we make ultimately matter. We have been bewitched by the fairy-tale ending that everyone “lived happily ever after.” We deny that the sum of our choices constitutes our character and that our character ushers in our chosen destiny. We refuse to take responsibility for the fact that *we* make consequential choices that build over time. Instead, we blame God and accuse *Him* (who sent His own Son to save us) of being wrong; we say that *He* is responsible for whether we go to hell or not. Meanwhile, God is pleading, “Come to me, before it is finally time to rise and close the door!”

We need to be sober about this; Jesus certainly was. He warned and warned and warned; He pleaded and pleaded and pleaded. He knows whereof we are made; He knows how stubborn and stiff-necked we are, that we don't like being told what to do. Yes, Jesus sadly observed that many prefer the darkness to the light. Was He wrong in His judgment about us as individuals or as a human race? Surely not. His diagnosis of our spiritual condition should be taken seriously.

Are we smarter or holier than St. Paul, who, taking Jesus's urgent warnings seriously, admonished: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your

own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12)? Was St. Paul too anxious when he said of himself, “I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (1 Cor 9:27)?

What of the countless saints who have warned the faithful of the ever-present dangers and woes of hell? What of they who had visions of hell and the numerous souls there? What of our Blessed Mother, who both warned of hell and even showed the children of Fatima its awful reality?

Can we really dismiss such testimonies, warnings, and revelations of our Lord, our Lady, and the saints about judgment and damnation as merely distant and rare possibilities that could not apply to the vast majority of us? Were they wrong? Were they simply seeking to scare us or manipulate us? Do we know better than they did?

If we honestly assess all this evidence, as this book will seek to do, we should admit that our current and modern view is at extreme odds with the testimony of Scripture, the tradition, and that of the saints. This need not scare us, but it should sober and humble us.

As we reconsider the modern view of improbable damnation and hell, we should surely begin with our Lord Himself, and we will discover that He devoted substantial teaching and frequent warnings about hell. As we shall see in the next chapter, His warnings on this matter are substantial and urgent.