

SAINTS WHO SAW HELL

SAINTS
WHO SAW
HELL

And Other Catholic Witnesses to
the Fate of the Damned

Paul Thigpen

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For Monsignor Richard Lopez

“A merry heart has a continual feast.”
Proverbs 15:15 NKJV

“O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy. Amen.”

Prayer taught by the angel to the shepherd children of Fátima

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INTRODUCTION

HELL MATTERS

Studies of religious belief in America reveal that a majority of those surveyed—in one study, a full 71 percent—believe in the existence of hell.¹ If this means that these respondents accept as a reality the possibility of eternal punishment, we might well expect hell to be a frequent topic of conversation, both public and private.

So why do we hear so little these days about the subject? Why is hell for most people nothing more than a wearisome profanity? If it truly exists, our lives should be thoroughly shaped by the implications of that reality.

Perhaps one reason for the silence can be seen in the results of another survey. Researchers found that of those Americans who believed in heaven and hell, the great majority were also confident that they themselves would not end

¹ Richard Morin, “Do Americans Believe in God?” *Washington Post*, April 24, 2000, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/wat/archive/wat042400.htm?noredirect=on>. See also “Rising Belief in Hell, Angels, Heaven, Devil: A Gallup Poll,” *The Christian Century*, June 15, 2004, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2004-06/rising-belief-hell-angels-heaven-devil>. This percentage, however, is declining.

up in hell. Only one half of 1 percent of those surveyed expected to be eternally damned.²

Presumption can lull us to sleep. We must recall St. Augustine's warning, when he spoke of the two men who were crucified with Jesus: "Do not despair. One of the thieves was saved. Do not presume. One of the thieves was damned."

Let's say a few words about hell, then, by way of introduction to the visions recorded here.

Why Hell Matters

To begin: Why publish a book on this topic? Do I take delight in thinking about the damned suffering in everlasting misery?

By no means. I feel great sympathy for the Christian writer C. S. Lewis when he says of the Christian teaching about hell, "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason."³ Scripture, Tradition, and Reason: All three lend their support to the teaching of the Church in this regard. And so we deny it or ignore it only at our peril.

Precisely because our culture has so thoroughly avoided this topic, it seems to me that the time is right to talk about it. To put it bluntly: *Hell matters*. It makes an infinite difference in our human situation.

² "Americans Describe Their Views About Life After Death" *Barna*, October 21, 2003, <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-describe-their-views-about-life-after-death/>.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain: How Human Suffering Raises Almost Intolerable Intellectual Problems* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 118. Much of my treatment of the topic here draws from Lewis's excellent summary of the relevant issues in chapter 8, "Hell."

If hell doesn't exist, then all roads lead to the same destination, whether it's heaven, or annihilation, or something else. And if all roads lead to the same place, it ultimately makes no difference which road we take. On the other hand, if our choices will lead us ultimately to one of two utterly different destinies, then our choices have crucially different consequences.

Hell is the final guarantee that what we do here and now really matters.

At the same time, we must keep in mind that to appreciate better the reality of hell is to appreciate better the reality of heaven. The more horrible we understand hell to be, the more marvelous we understand heaven to be. The more deeply we fathom what God wants to save us from, the more grateful we are that he desires to save us.

I am by no means alone in this concern that people today should talk about hell. Several years ago, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI observed, "Jesus came to tell us that he wants us all in heaven, and that hell – of which so little is said in our time – exists and is eternal for those who close their hearts to his love."⁴

The Witness of Scripture and Tradition

The Catholic Church doesn't insist on the reality of hell because she takes glee in thinking about torment, or because she wants to use the doctrine as a bludgeon to make people obey her. The Catholic Church insists on the reality of hell first of all, as Benedict noted, because Jesus himself did so. He spoke about hell a number of times and warned that his listeners could end up there forever.

Now if Jesus was who he claimed to be, and who the Church has always claimed him to be—God himself in the flesh—then he was certainly in a position to know the truth about whether hell is a reality. You may argue that he was

⁴ In a homily preached on Sunday, March 25, 2007.

wrong about this all-important matter. But if Jesus got it wrong on a matter so critical as this, then how can he be trusted to get it right on anything else? And if he got it wrong on this matter, how could he possibly be God in the flesh? By implication, we would be denying his authority, truthfulness, and reliability, and thus even his divinity.

In fact, in the Gospels we hear the most frightening words about damnation from Our Lord's lips. And we find confirming references to this reality in other parts of Sacred Scripture as well. This biblical witness cannot be dismissed. We'll focus on it in the first chapter.

Meanwhile, we must note that the Church's constant tradition has affirmed this teaching of Scripture. We see it, for example, in the ancient Athanasian Creed (late fifth / early sixth century); in the declarations of ecumenical councils, such as the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the Second Council of Lyons (1274), the Council of Florence (1439-1445), and the Council of Trent (1545-1563); and in numerous places in the ancient liturgies.

The Reasonableness of Hell

As Lewis noted, reason can help us unpack and better understand this doctrine of faith. Once we understand more clearly what hell actually is, we can begin to see why it's an indispensable affirmation of the gospel—why it fits with other Christian teachings about the way God has created the world, and the way he has created human beings. Knowing more fully what it means to be human, we can see more clearly why it makes sense that hell exists, even if we find the reality disturbing.

Our Catholic faith teaches us that when God created the human race, he gave them a gift of the highest dignity. That gift was *free will*. He was not a manufacturer seeking to create robots that were hardwired to do his work. He was not

a puppeteer seeking to fashion puppets he could manipulate to act out his plot for a play.

No, he was a Father seeking *sons and daughters* to love, who could freely love him in return. And to exhibit real love, they had to possess the ability to choose freely—to say yes to him or no to him.

When we think of it, that's a more stunning, stupendous act of creation than all the rest. The immense power emanating from a star, or the breathtaking beauty of its spectacular brilliance, is nothing compared to the miracle of human free will. God has actually dared to give us a share in his own freedom, to make us, as the psalmist said, like little gods (see Ps 8:5), crowned with the glory and honor of a free will.

The doctrine of hell can thus be seen as a logical corollary of the doctrine of free will. For hell, to define it as the Catechism does, is simply the “state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed” in communion with God.⁵ And if we have free will, then it is possible for us to say to God in the end, “No—I don't want you.” If we do, then the eternal separation from him that we have freely chosen is hell.

The Unforgiveable Sin

Even so, can't God *forgive* the sin that leads us to hell? Yes, he can forgive it. But he cannot in justice simply ignore it. Forgiveness is a gift, and for sin to be forgiven, there must be an acceptance of the gift, or it will have no consequences.

Those who admit no guilt refuse to accept forgiveness. The Church teaches that to refuse God's forgiveness—to say to him, “I don't need or want you or your mercy”—is in fact the unforgiveable sin of which Jesus speaks in the Gospel (see CCC 1864). For God to overcome the separation of a rebellious creature with free will, he must have the consent

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1033, hereafter abbreviated as “CCC.”

and cooperation of the creature. If the creature refuses, the separation remains; the offer of forgiveness remains fruitless.

As Lewis once put it, “The doors of hell are locked on the inside.”⁶ Its inhabitants are like the Devil in John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*, who boasts, “Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven” (I, 263). Those who end up in hell are those who in the end say to God, “I’d rather live my own selfish way down here than to have to live selflessly in love up there with you.”

How, we might ask, could someone finally reject, knowingly, the divine offer of eternal joy? If it’s to their own advantage, how could they refuse it? Won’t people always choose what’s for their own good if they truly know what’s for their own good?

Not at all. We see people all the time—ourselves included—choosing a lesser good over the greatest Good, and knowing that they are doing so. We don’t always choose according to reason, and the more we choose selfishly, the more darkened even our reason becomes. Sin darkens the intellect; sin makes us stupid.

The Gospel of John puts it this way: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (Jn 3:19–20).

Self-Surrender to God

Why, someone might ask, does our greatest good lie in self-surrender to God? Because God is himself the ultimate Source of all that is good—the Source of love, of life, of existence itself. From him flow all truth, wisdom, power, beauty; and in his presence is all joy and fulfillment for his creatures.

⁶ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 127.

He has made us for himself, St. Augustine famously noted, and we are restless until we find our rest in him.

The soul in hell, on the other hand, is the soul that is so self-absorbed that it has selfishly rejected everything that is not itself. It has tried to turn everything and everyone around it into a mere extension of itself. In hell, such a soul is finally granted its fundamental desire to live only in itself. And what it finds there, in total isolation and degradation, is hell.⁷

If we turn away from God in the end, we are utterly cutting ourselves off from the Source of all these good things. He is the Light, and apart from him is only darkness. He is the Holy One, and his holiness is like a fire that serves as a torment to unholiness. In the presence of his ultimate righteousness—that is, his right ordering—all unrighteousness, all disorder, shudders in confusion and horror.

The damned soul cannot bear the divine light, just as a diseased eye cannot bear the brilliant sunlight.

Tormenting Fire, Cleansing Fire, Radiant Light

Think of our final destiny in light of three biblical passages.

The book of Hebrews (Heb 12:29) tells us that we must not reject God's grace, lest the presence of his perfect holiness be for us a consuming fire.

St. Paul tells us (1 Cor 3:10–15) that our deeds in this life build in us a character that is either like gold, silver, and precious stones (good works), or else like wood, hay, and straw (evil works). The fire of God, he adds, will test them, with the gold, silver, and gems being refined, but the wood, hay, and straw being burned away.

St. John tells us in the Book of Revelation (Rv 22:5) that those in heaven “need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light.”

⁷ Here and throughout I echo Lewis's thoughts in *The Problem of Pain*, 123.

God's holiness is having its natural effect in all three of these situations—but with different results, according to the disposition of the person in his presence.

In hell, the holiness of God is an agonizing fire to all those who are irrevocably opposed to him. His holiness is a continual torment to their unholiness.

In purgatory, the process of purging, God's holiness is painful but cleansing, like a cauterizing iron. It refines and burns away the dross of our souls to make us pure and holy ourselves.

To those in heaven, who have been fully refined and cleansed, and who have nothing left to be burned away, God's holiness is experienced, not as searing fire, but as radiant light. It fills them and illumines them inside and out, like sunlight sparkling through a diamond.

It's all the same holy presence of God. But whether we experience it as tormenting blaze or cleansing flame or brilliant illumination depends upon our relationship to him.

Body and Soul, Outside and Inside

The pains of hell have to do not only with the soul. The Church affirms that in the resurrection of the dead, both the blessed and the damned will receive their bodies back again. Then, for eternity, just as the glorified bodies of the blessed will share in the joy of heaven, the resurrected bodies of the damned will have their share in the suffering of the soul.

This arrangement is only just, because in this life the body had its share in the sins of the soul that led to hell. This reality is traditionally known as *poena sensus*, the pain of the senses.

Even so, the pain doesn't come just from the outside. It comes from the inside as well. The theologians speak, not only of the pain of the senses, but even more so of the pain of loss, or the *poena damni*. This pain results from the loss of

the beatific vision, the vision of God in heaven that brings perfect happiness.

Imagine what anguish it would be to know that the very destiny for which you were created was to enjoy an eternal and perfect embrace with the One who is infinite Goodness, infinite Beauty, infinite Love, infinite Truth—and yet, by your own free choices, you have turned away from that destiny, definitively, irrevocably, forever. The despairing pain you would feel at the knowledge of that loss is at the heart of the *poena damni*.

Still More Pain

Yet there's more. As the German theologian Joseph Hontheim compellingly argued:

The *poena damni* . . . 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. . . .

The utter void of the soul made for the enjoyment of infinite truth and infinite goodness causes the reprobate immeasurable anguish. Their consciousness that God, on whom they entirely depend, is their enemy forever is overwhelming. Their consciousness of having by their own deliberate folly forfeited the highest blessings for transitory and delusive pleasures humiliates and depresses them beyond measure.

The desire for happiness inherent in their very nature, wholly unsatisfied and no longer able to find any compensation for the loss of God in delusive pleasure, renders them utterly miserable. Moreover, they are well aware that God is infinitely happy, and hence their hatred and their impotent desire to injure him fills them

with extreme bitterness. And the same is true with regard to their hatred of all the friends of God who enjoy the bliss of heaven.⁸

Given all these horrors, I think we might well compare the pain of hell to an everlasting asylum for the criminally insane. Imagine a place overflowing with all those who are utterly filled inside with hatred, bitterness, malice, deceit, selfishness; lust and rage, pride and vainglory, gluttony and envy and avarice—all the so-called “deadly sins” and more.

They are so full of these things that their souls have been perverted, bent, broken, corroded, shattered, disordered, so that not only their wills are devastated, but also their intellects. Their very reasoning and perceptions are grossly warped.

Think of Hannibal Lector, the chillingly evil character in the film *Silence of the Lambs*. Imagine an asylum packed with insane criminals like him. Imagine them all thrown in together in a single, inescapable place, where they will torment themselves and one another, without hope of redemption, forever and ever.

That is hell.

In my novel, *My Visit to Hell*, the protagonist finds himself there one day and is trying to figure out how to escape. In one conversation with a man he meets in the infernal regions, the two characters are talking about this reality—how the horrors they seek to flee are inescapable, because they carry the horrors within themselves.

“You can’t escape the torment,” one of them says, “because you *are* the torment.”

The other responds, “The worst of all is to be afraid of yourself. The monster isn’t under the bed like it was when you were a kid, or even *in* the bed beside you. The monster

⁸ Joseph Honthelm, “Hell,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910). Retrieved April 27, 2019, from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07207a.htm>.

is in *you*, and *you're* in the monster. That's the final horror, isn't it?"⁹

In one sense, then, God doesn't cast people into hell. They have freely chosen the road to that destination themselves. In a sense, you could also say that we ourselves, not God, are the ones who have built hell. We have cobbled it together from the terrifying consequences of our own sin, and we carry it around within us.

Some Objections to the Doctrine of Hell

Some critics of the doctrine of hell have objected that there seems to be a disproportion between transitory sin and eternal damnation. But it was St. Augustine who noted long ago that even in this life, we don't think in those terms.

A person can commit the crime of murder in a fit of passion, without premeditation, in a matter of seconds. But what would we think of a judge who sentenced the murderer to only a few seconds in jail for such a crime so that the crime and the punishment would be "proportionate"? No—duration in time means nothing, but rather the seriousness of the sin, and especially the definitive nature of the act.

Even in this life, some decisions, some actions, are definitive and irrevocable. If you murder another person, for example, you can never undo that action. And death is the point at which our decisions become definitive for us, when the ripened fruit of a lifetime achieves its final form.

In any case, eternity is not a mere prolongation of time. Lewis compares this present life to a line that we have drawn, and eternity to a solid that takes it definitive shape from the baseline of that earthly life. It is simply the final culmination of what we ourselves have begun, a thicker and wider and heavier version of the life we have lived in this world.¹⁰

⁹ Paul Thigpen, *My Visit to Hell: A Novel* (Lake Mary, Florida: REALMS, 2007), 193–94; emphasis added.

¹⁰ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 123–24.

Why, some have asked, can't God give second chances? The truth is that we have all had multiple, even countless, chances in this lifetime. If a trillion chances would do any good, God would probably grant them. But the chances must finally come to an end at some point, and if God knows all things, then he knows at what point they should end, and when any additional chances would be in vain.

Sorrow in Heaven Over the Damned?

Many have asked how God and the blessed in heaven could have perfect joy in heaven while knowing that even one soul had been damned. In Lewis's fantasy masterpiece *The Great Divorce*, he responds to that concern by imagining a conversation between two dead souls, one who is still trying to understand the reality of heaven and hell and one who has already been granted wisdom in that regard.

When the inquirer says that it seems as if those in heaven should be forever grieved by those in hell, ruining their happiness, the wise soul answers in this way:

That sounds very merciful, but see what lies behind it. . . . The demand of the loveless and the self-imprisoned that they should be allowed to blackmail the universe: that till they consent to be happy (on their own terms) no one else shall taste joy: that theirs should be the final power: that Hell should be able to *veto* Heaven. . . .

[It] must be one way or the other. Either the day must come when joy prevails, and all the makers of misery are no longer able to infect it: or else for ever and ever the makers of misery can destroy in others the happiness they reject for themselves.¹¹

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 120–21.

What Would We Ask God to Do Instead?

In the end, when people question the existence of hell and insist that a loving God would have made things otherwise, we must respond with a question: What exactly are you asking God do with these creatures of free will he has created?

Do you want him to pay the terrible price required to offer them the chance to have their sins removed and their souls cleansed and a chance to make a fresh start? That's precisely what he did in the passion and death of Our Lord.

Do you want him to provide them miraculous means of grace to assist them throughout life in making it to heaven? That's exactly what he has given them through establishing the Church.

If they refuse to be forgiven, if they spurn his grace, do you want God simply to leave them alone? That is exactly what he does in the end, and that is hell.

God Knows Who Is There

One last note about the Church's teaching with regard to hell: It has not been revealed to us by God (at least publicly) who is there. In this life we are in no position to discern for certain whether any particular individual has been damned. As we shall see in these pages, however, some saints and others have claimed that God has revealed to them the identity of certain lost souls through private revelation.

This is true even of those who have appeared to reject God right up until their last breath on earth. We simply don't know what went on within their souls in the last fraction of a second before their final choice, *for* God or *against* him, was ratified by death. Only God knows that.

The Lord has in fact revealed to us that certain individuals are now in heaven; they are the canonized saints. But we know nothing for sure about which individuals are in hell—even with regard to a Hitler or a Stalin. The closest

we come to such a revelation is the scriptural witness about Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ.

The Book of Acts says darkly that after he died, he went “to his own place” (Acts 1:25). Even more grimly, Jesus said of his apostles on the night he was betrayed, “None of them is lost but the son of perdition [that is, damnation],” and he was obviously referring to Judas (Jn 17:12). This language seems rather clear to me, but many would claim that we don’t know for sure even about Judas. So we’ll simply leave that to God.

Hell Is a Mystery

In the end, we must confess, hell is one of the great mysteries of human existence. Now something can be a mystery in one of two ways: One kind of mystery is the type that can be solved once we know enough about it. Murder mysteries are of this sort; they are no longer mysteries once we know “whodunit.”

Hell is certainly this first kind of mystery. There is so much about it that we simply cannot know in this life, but will be revealed to us in the next (by divine revelation, I trust, not by firsthand experience).

The other kind of mystery is the type that we can never fully grasp because our minds are too small. No matter how much information we receive, it will still be beyond our understanding. The nature of God, especially the nature of the Blessed Trinity, is a mystery of this sort. And it may well be that some aspects of hell are of this sort as well.

Loath to Swallow the Medicine

Meditation on the last things is thus a “simple medicine for the soul,” as St. Thomas More put it.¹² Yet our generation is loath to swallow the pill, and we are not alone. More than a century and a half ago, Fr. Frederick Faber, the celebrated

¹² St. Thomas More, *The Last Things*, Introduction.

English convert and spiritual writer, identified and lamented the same tendencies in nineteenth-century British society.

“One crying [lack] of modern spirituality,” he observed in his book *Spiritual Conferences*, “is [that we need to hear] more of heaven and hell, as the natural and secure means of getting more inward repentance. But I am met on the threshold with all manner of objections.” He continues:

As noises must be kept from invalids, some say, so all the coarse horrors of hell must be relegated to the background, and not be allowed to intrude upon our calmness or our gentility. They do no good. They only startle and scare.

Here again, I [reply], is it so certain that you do not [need] startling? Is it quite beyond a doubt that a scaring would be no great help to your salvation? Kindness is cruel . . . to those who have taken opium, in order that it may be more [truly] kind. It walks them about, when they [pitifully beg] to lie down and sleep. What if modern spirituality has something akin to opium in it? . . .

Who made these “coarse horrors”? God. Then they must be worthy of him and somehow manifest his perfections? Assuredly. Now did he make them with the intention that they remain concealed and unknown? Does he wish sinners to remain in ignorance of them, so that the intensity of their punishment should take them by surprise when they die? If so, why did he reveal it to them?

Fr. Faber concludes pointedly: “In these polished days, [is] religion . . . to be allowed no [function] except to soothe?”¹³

¹³ Fr. Frederick Faber, *Spiritual Conferences* (London: Thomas Richardson and Son, 1859), 376, 378–80.

“REMEMBER THE END OF YOUR LIFE”

What Are We to Make of These Visions?

Visions of hell have been reported since ancient times in cultures throughout the world. Even today, some of our contemporaries claim to have witnessed scenes from the realm of the damned.

The Catholic faithful can look back, not just to visions beginning with the earliest generations of the Church, but to prior references in the scriptural record. Both the Old Testament books they inherited from the Jewish people and the New Testament books of the Apostles and their associates provide glimpses of hell.

Beyond the biblical references, however, a number of Catholic sources have written about the reality of everlasting punishment for the wicked. Some of these reports come from canonized saints or are attributed to them. Some come from other explicitly Catholic witnesses, such as clergy and religious. Some are anonymous but reported in a Catholic setting.

Among these accounts are reports of visions in the strict sense: things heard and seen through the intervention of God, angels, or demons. Others report dreams; still others, what we would today call “near death experiences,” in which someone who was at the threshold of death returned to consciousness and reported what was experienced. A few are visions in the broader sense: a reasoned description, based on divine revelation, of the reality of hell; a legendary depiction; and a literary portrait.

Public versus Private Revelation

What are we to make of these visions? To interpret them wisely and discern their usefulness, we must first recognize the important distinction between *public* revelation and *private* revelation, and the claims of each with regard to our Catholic faith.

The supreme revelation of God to the world is Jesus Christ, his Son, his Word made flesh, who lived among us (Jn 1:14). In him, the Church received, through his words and deeds, a Divine Revelation, a deposit of faith (see 1 Tm 6:20; 2 Tm 1:12–14) that is unique, complete, definitive, intended for all people of all generations, and confirmed by God himself as worthy of faith. This *public* revelation, as it is called, has been preserved and transmitted to us in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, as authentically preached and interpreted by the Sacred Magisterium (teaching office) of the Church, beginning with the Apostles whom Jesus himself appointed. All faithful Catholics are bound to accept these revealed truths with a divine faith.

Though public revelation is complete, its meaning, mysteries, and implications continue to be understood more fully and deeply through the Holy Spirit’s enlightening work in the Church. Nevertheless, no *new* public revelation is possible until the return of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory. And

certainly no change in the public revelation is possible that would contradict what has already been revealed by God.

With this understanding of public revelation, we can distinguish it from what is called *private revelation*. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “Throughout the ages, there have been so-called ‘private’ revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. . . . Christian faith cannot accept ‘revelations’ that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfilment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain recent sects which base themselves on such ‘revelations’” (CCC 67).

Some individuals, then, have claimed to receive private revelations from God, such as visions, apparitions, dreams, or locutions (words heard interiorly). The Church warns us to examine carefully any claims to private revelation and to be cautious in accepting their validity. Some private revelations, such as the visions of the Portuguese children at Fátima in 1917, have been approved by the Church as worthy of belief. But most such claims over the centuries have not received such approval, and some have been explicitly rejected by the Church as inauthentic.

With regard to all claims to private revelation, we must always keep in mind that they do not and cannot have the same status as public revelation. We are not bound to accept them as a part of the deposit of faith, on the same level as Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, even if they have the Church’s approval. And if they claim, even implicitly, to surpass or correct the definitive Revelation given to us in Christ, then we must firmly reject them.

Visions of Hell

The descriptions of hell in Scripture, offered by Our Lord and by biblical writers, fall of course into the category of public revelation. These will be presented in the next chapter. We are bound to accept such biblical passages as a part of Divine Revelation. This is the case even if we don't fully understand them, and even if the Holy Spirit has not revealed through Sacred Tradition and the Sacred Magisterium the answers to all the questions we might have about their interpretation.

On the other hand, the visions and descriptions of hell reported in the subsequent chapters of this book are clearly claims to private revelations (or else privately reasoned or creatively depicted interpretations of Divine Revelation). We must treat them accordingly. Even when the claim is made by a canonized saint, we cannot for that reason assume that the revelation is authentic or approved by the Church. Canonization does not imply the authentication of someone's claims to private revelation. And even when such a private revelation has in fact been approved by the Church as worthy of belief, we still must not place it on the same level as the scriptural accounts of hell.

So what is the value of such claims to private revelation? Why should we pay them any attention? Are we interested in them simply because of a morbid curiosity? Or can we learn profound lessons from them because they illuminate, in certain ways, the perennial teaching of the Church, the deposit of faith?

First, we are reminded by these texts in a vivid and compelling way that, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI once noted, "Human life is fully serious. The irrevocable takes place, and that includes irrevocable destruction."¹⁴ God "will render to

¹⁴ Cited in Regis Martin, *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven* (Charlotte, N.C.: TAN Books, 2014), 120.

every man according to his works,” either “eternal life” or “wrath and fury” (Rom 2:6–8).

Second, through these texts, we are pressed to take seriously the biblical language that presents hell not simply as a sorrowful tragedy but as an overwhelming horror to be avoided at all costs. Like the relevant biblical passages, these visions speak of damnation in the most gruesome and terrifying terms, with everlasting darkness, fire, and worms (Mt 8:12; Mk 9:47)—and much more as well.

If we should conclude that such language is figurative rather than literal, we should find no comfort in such a conclusion. These figurative descriptions stretch the limits of human language in trying to convey an indescribable nightmare. The reality of hell *surpasses* such figurative language in horror. Just as heaven is beyond our dreams, so is hell worse than we can imagine.

Third, these visions can help us see how our disordered actions in this life could find their culmination in the next life. In many of these depictions, the punishments are profoundly (and sometimes ironically) related to the sins and vices they punish. When we observe here the final ripened, rotten fruit of wicked behavior, we can more clearly identify the evil root from which it grows—and labor even now to eradicate it. “I the LORD search the mind and test the heart, to give to every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings” (Jer 17:10).

Fourth, these accounts sometimes remind us that human appearances can be deceiving. Those who seem righteous to everyone around (and even to themselves) may actually be hell-bound if they fail to repent. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). “The LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sm 16:7).

Why Read About Visions of Hell?

Finally, some of these visions tell of the wicked receiving one last chance to repent. While one soul may take advantage of the opportunity, another may not. They should remind us that God is merciful, but we should not presume upon his mercy.

We read these stories, then, for the same reason we read biblical accounts of those who failed to embrace God's mercy: "Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. . . . They were written down for our instruction. . . . Therefore let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:6, 11–12).

It's the principle of the *memento mori*, which in Latin means "remembrance of death." The most succinct statement of that principle is found in Scripture: "In all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin" (Sir 7:36).

Memento mori takes its place in the liturgy as well, most notably in the Ash Wednesday imposition of ashes: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gn 3:19).

Anyone familiar with the history of Christian art knows that *memento mori* is also found there. Consider the medieval and Renaissance paintings of saints with a skull beside them. The skull serves as a reminder of death and what waits for us beyond.

Yet *memento mori*, and thoughts about hell in particular, shouldn't have us thinking of ourselves alone. Just consider that all the people we meet throughout our day are on their way to either heaven or hell—and how we treat them could help them move in one direction or the other. So we read visions of hell not just to avoid it ourselves but to help others avoid it. The house of the world is on fire, and somebody had best be shouting, "Run for your life!"

A Final Note on Interpretation

One final note: If we find a particular vision convincing, should we receive it as a literal description of hell?

That approach presents certain problems. For one, the various visions differ considerably in their depictions of hell. We could perhaps account for those variations by arguing that hell is a vast place, and various visionaries might have seen different regions of it, and reported accordingly. Even so, some of the details would be difficult to reconcile if we interpreted them all literally.

Perhaps a better approach is suggested by the sixth-century pope St. Gregory the Great (c. AD 540–604). In his *Dialogues*, he reports (approvingly) several visions of hell experienced by his contemporaries (see Book IV, 35–36). Peter, the man engaging him in dialogue, complains that some of the details of a particular vision are difficult to accept if taken literally.

St. Gregory clearly assumes that the man’s vision was real and the result of an actual intervention by God. But he explains to Peter that the language describing what was seen should be interpreted symbolically, not literally. With regard to the vision’s details of a ship, a river, a bridge, bricks, and more, “the representation of these things express the causes which they signify.” God uses the vision, the saint insists, to teach us spiritual truths about our behavior in this life and its potential consequences in hell.

With fear and trembling, then, and with open minds and hearts, we turn now to visions of hell.