

Hell [65-71]

Usual Preparation Prayer.

First Prelude: The composition of Place: Here it will be to see in imagination the length, breadth, and depth of hell.

Second Prelude: The petition: I should ask for what I desire. Here it will be to beg for a deep sense of the pain which the lost suffer, that if because of my faults I forget the love of the eternal Lord, at least the fear of these punishments will keep me from falling into sin. – Of course, we should add that it's far, far better to love God, and to not want to sin because we love Him, but if the fear of hell keeps us from sinning, it's accomplished its purpose.

Then, in the points, Ignatius will have us use our five senses to really envision ourselves in the depths of hell, suffering for our sins.

[66] First Point: This will be to see in imagination the vast fires, and the souls enclosed, as it were, in bodies of fire.

[67] Second Point: To hear the wailing, the howling, cries, and blasphemies against Christ our Lord and against His saints.

[68] Third Point: With the sense of smell to perceive the smoke, the sulfur, the filth, and corruption.

[69] Fourth Point: To taste the bitterness of tears, sadness, and remorse of conscience.

[70] Fifth Point: With the sense of touch to feel the flames which envelop and burn the souls.

Holy Mother Church has always taught that hell is real, and that it is a real possibility for each of us to end up there for all eternity. This isn't something the Church made up; rather, Jesus Himself talks about hell on a number of occasions. In Matthew's Gospel, ch. 10 (v. 28), Jesus tells His listeners "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna." Later, in chapter 25, He warns that those who refuse to practice charity will hear the terrifying sentence: "Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us [1033-1035]: "We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves. . . . To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated

from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called 'hell.' 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."

The Catechism tells us that going to hell is a choice; it's a choice we make. We can say, and correctly, that God doesn't throw people into hell; we throw ourselves there by refusing to do what He asks and then, by refusing to repent. We were made for God, and so we were also made for heaven, but if we refuse to leave behind our sins and refuse to love God, God won't force us to be with Him for all eternity. We can choose to separate ourselves from Him forever, and that's what hell is.

This is all true, but sometimes to hear the experiences of the saints who have had visions of hell can help us to visualize this better and understand the seriousness of this eternal condemnation.

Servant of God Sister María Josefa Menéndez, who died at the age of 33, had a number of visions of hell. In fact, her fellow sisters used to know when she had had a vision of hell because the entire chapel would reek of sulfur. She describes it this way:

My soul fell into abysmal depths, the bottom of which cannot be seen, for it is immense. . . ; Then I was pushed into one of those fiery cavities and pressed, as it were, between burning planks, and sharp nails and red-hot irons seemed to be piercing my flesh. I felt as if they were endeavoring to pull out my tongue, but could not. This torture reduced me to such agony that my very eyes seemed to be starting out of their sockets. I think this was because of the fire which burns, burns . . . not a finger nail escapes terrifying torments, and all the time one cannot move even a finger to gain some relief, not change posture, for the body seems flattened out and [yet] doubled in two. Sounds of confusion and blasphemy cease not for an instant.

A sickening stench asphyxiates and corrupts everything, it is like the burning of putrefied flesh, mingled with tar and sulfur . . . a mixture to which nothing on earth can be compared . . . although these tortures were terrific, they would be bearable if the soul were at peace. But it suffers indescribably. . ."

She concludes this way: "All I have written is but a shadow of what the soul suffers, for no words can express such dire torment" (September 4, 1922).¹

Likewise, **Saint Faustina**, the saint of Divine Mercy, had visions of hell. As she writes: "I, Sister Faustina Kowalska, by the order of God, have visited the Abysses of Hell so that I might tell souls about it and testify to its existence. . . . What

¹ See her book, *The Way of Divine Love*.

I have written is but a pale shadow of the things I saw. But I noticed one thing: That most of the souls there are those who disbelieved that there is a hell" (Diary 741).

"I was led by an angel to the Chasms of Hell. It is a place of great torture; how awesomely large and extensive it is! The kinds of tortures I saw:

The First Torture that constitutes hell is: the loss of God.

The Second is: perpetual remorse of conscience.

The Third is: that one's condition will never change.

The Fourth is: the fire that will penetrate the soul without destroying it. A terrible suffering since it is a purely spiritual fire, lit by God's anger.

The Fifth Torture is: continual darkness and a terrible suffocating smell, and despite the darkness, the devils and the souls of the damned see each other and all the evil, both of others and their own.

The Sixth Torture is: the constant company of Satan.

The Seventh Torture is: horrible despair, hatred of God, vile words, curses and blasphemies. These are the Tortures suffered by all the damned together, but that is not the end of the sufferings.

There are special Tortures destined for particular souls. These are the torments of the senses. Each soul undergoes terrible and indescribable sufferings related to the manner in which it has sinned.

There are caverns and pits of torture where one form of agony differs from another. I would have died at the very sight of these tortures if the omnipotence of God had not supported me.

Let the sinner know that he will be tortured throughout all eternity, in those senses which he made use of to sin. I am writing this at the command of God, so that no soul may find an excuse by saying there is no hell, or that nobody has ever been there, and so no one can say what it is like...how terribly souls suffer there! Consequently, I pray even more fervently for the conversion of sinners. I incessantly plead God's mercy upon them. O My Jesus, I would rather be in agony until the end of the world, amidst the greatest sufferings, than offend you by the least sin." (Diary 741)"

Lastly, we have the vision of **Saint Teresa of Jesus**: she saw the very place that had been reserved for her in hell. As she writes:

I was one day in prayer when I found myself in a moment, without knowing

how, plunged apparently into hell. I understood that it was our Lord's will I should see the place which the devils kept in readiness for me, and which I had deserved by my sins. It was but a moment, but it seems to me impossible I should ever forget it, even if I were to live many years.

The entrance seemed to be by a long narrow pass, like a furnace, very low, dark, and close. The ground seemed to be saturated with water, mere mud, exceedingly foul, sending forth pestilential odors, and covered with loathsome vermin. At the end was a hollow place in the wall, like a closet, and in that I saw myself confined. All this was even pleasant to behold in comparison with what I felt there. There is no exaggeration in what I am saying.

But as to what I then felt, I do not know where to begin, if I were to describe it; it is utterly inexplicable. I felt a fire in my soul. I cannot see how it is possible to describe it. My bodily sufferings were unendurable. I have undergone most painful sufferings in this life, and, as the physicians say, the greatest that can be borne, such as the contraction of my sinews when I was paralyzed, without speaking of others of different kinds, yea, even those of which I have also spoken, inflicted on me by Satan; yet all these were as nothing in comparison with what I felt then, especially when I saw that there would be no intermission, nor any end to them.

These sufferings were nothing in comparison with the anguish of my soul, a sense of oppression, of stifling, and of pain so keen, accompanied by so hopeless and cruel an infliction, that I know not how to speak of it. If I said that the soul is continually being torn from the body it would be nothing,--for that implies the destruction of life by the hands of another; but here it is the soul itself that is tearing itself in pieces. I cannot describe that inward fire or that despair, surpassing all torments and all pain. I did not see who it was that tormented me, but I felt myself on fire, and torn to pieces, as it seemed to me; and, I repeat it, this inward fire and despair are the greatest torments of all.

Left in that pestilential place, and utterly without the power to hope for comfort, I could neither sit nor lie down: there was no room. I was placed as it were in a hole in the wall; and those walls, terrible to look on of themselves, hemmed me in on every side. I could not breathe. There was no light, but all was thick darkness. I do not understand how it is; though there was no light, yet everything that can give pain by being seen was visible.”²

In the supplement to the *Teria Pars* of the *Summa*, Thomas Aquinas confirms everything that these saints say: I would point out several of his conclusions:

In question 98, a. 4, Aquinas asks, “Do the damned in hell wish that others, who are not damned, would be damned as well?” In other words, are the damned so filled with hate, that they wish the saints would be damned with them, in hell? He

² Saint Teresa of Jesus, *Life*, Ch. 32.

answers, "Even as in the blessed in heaven there will be most perfect charity, so in the damned there will be the most perfect hate. Wherefore as the saints will rejoice in all goods, so will the damned grieve for all goods. Consequently the sight of the happiness of the saints will give them very great pain; hence it is written (Isaiah 26:11): 'Let the envious people see and be confounded, and let fire devour Thy enemies.' Therefore they will wish all the good were damned."

That makes sense, but, in an objection Aquinas points out how wicked this is. He notes, that, if in heaven, the saints increase in joy as the number of the blessed increases, so in hell the punishment suffered increases as the more people end up in hell. It would seem like the damned shouldn't want more people to end up there, because it just means they'll be suffering more. Aquinas replies: "Although an increase in the number of the damned results in an increase of each one's punishment, so much the more will their hatred and envy increase that they will prefer to be more tormented with many rather than less tormented alone." They are so hate-filled, that they prefer to suffer worse torments with many people than be tormented less alone.

In q. 97, a. 4, we can also consider what he says about the darkness there, which all the saints have touched upon: the place is dark, and yet there's a certain amount of light. He says: "The disposition of hell will be such as to be adapted to the utmost unhappiness of the damned. Wherefore accordingly both light and darkness are there, in so far as they are most conducive to the unhappiness of the damned. Now seeing is in itself pleasant for, as stated in *Metaph.* i, "the sense of sight is most esteemed, because thereby many things are known."

Yet it happens accidentally that seeing is painful, when we see things that are hurtful to us, or displeasing to our will. Consequently in hell the place must be so disposed for seeing as regards light and darkness, that nothing be seen clearly, and that only such things be dimly seen as are able to bring anguish to the heart. Wherefore, simply speaking, the place is dark. Yet by Divine disposition, there is a certain amount of light, as much as suffices for seeing those things which are capable of tormenting the soul. The natural situation of the place is enough for this, since in the center of the earth, where hell is said to be, fire cannot be otherwise than thick and cloudy, and reeky as it were."

Let us consider that there is a place in hell for us as well, a place with our name on it, reserved for us and our particular sins. Whether that spot will be occupied or empty for all eternity depends on the way I live my life from now on.

Again, as we said earlier, it is far better to serve God out of love than out of fear of hell but, if love of God doesn't keep us from sinning, then at least fear of the torments of hell should.

To this, I will add one short story, one involves my mom and one of her friends. My mom was raised Protestant, so I do most of her theological vetting when

there is a question. Anyways, she once asked me to tell her what I thought about a particular event that took place at the hospital. Her friend is a nurse in the cardiac intensive care unit at a major hospital, and, being a devout Catholic and a mother, she would try, subtly, to convince the other nurses, many of them young, to stop living wild lives, and really focus on God. Of course, this approach met rather dismal results, until one day, a fellow nurse stopped her and said, "Sue,³ could you tell me about Jesus and God and what I need to do to be a good person?" My mom's friend looked at her, surprised, and said, "Of course! But . . . what happened? Why the change?" The other nurse began to recount that she had been caring for a patient in the ward when suddenly he went into cardiac arrest, meaning, his heart stopped. Of course, they are prepared for that in the ward, and they were able to revive him, but, when he came around, he was extremely agitated, and so the nurse tried to calm down, saying, with all her professional ability, "Sir, your heart stopped and we revived you. You're ok now, but you need to calm down." But the man was not to be calmed, and was shouting, "No! You don't understand! You have no idea how awful it was! It was terrible! It hurt so much! Please, you can't let me die! Don't let me die! I don't want to go back there!" At this, the nurse was shaken, but told the patient to remain calm, that he was going to be fine, but the patient insisted and insisted . . . until his heart stopped again. And again, the nurses and doctors came and revived him, and, again, the nurse told him to remain calm, but the patient, even more frantic, replied, "No! You don't understand! It was awful! He was there! It hurt so bad! Help me! Don't let me die! I can't go back there!" And this continued . . . until his heart stopped a third time. Only this time, they couldn't revive him, and he died, with a horrific expression on his face, one of sheer horror and agony. The nurse then added: "The look on his face convinced me that, whatever he had seen, was real."

[71] Colloquy: Enter into conversation with Christ our Lord. Recall to memory that of those who are in hell, some came there because they did not believe in the coming of Christ; others, though they believed, because they did not keep the Commandments. Divide them all into three classes:

Those who were lost before the coming of Christ;

Those who were lost during His lifetime;

Those who were lost after His life here on earth.

Thereupon, I will give thanks to God our Lord that He has not put an end to my life and permitted me to fall into any of these three classes.

I shall also thank Him for this, that up to this very moment He has shown Himself so loving and merciful to me.

Close with an Our Father.

³ Not her real name, I think!

