

Why are we so afraid?

(To be afraid of hell)

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As I've taught classes and given talks on the "new evangelization" I've been struck at how both Jesus and the Apostles make a regular part of their message not only the positive proclamation of the good news that Christ has by his sacrifice won redemption for the whole world, but also, the terrible consequences of neglecting such an offer, namely, hell.

Yet, seldom is this foundational part of the New Testament's message heard in the contemporary Church. Why are we so afraid of speaking about hell?

Some common reactions: "Our religion is a religion of love, not of fear;" "People already have a bad self-image and this could make them feel worse;" "Fear of hell is an unworthy motive for being a Christian;" "We shouldn't be trying to frighten people into being good;" While in a short article I can't respond to reactions like these, I do want to affirm the necessity of making sure that in our thinking, preaching and teaching we stick with what Jesus and the Apostles have told us to communicate to people! They must have good reasons!

When only the positive offer of salvation is taught and proclaimed and we are silent about the consequences of not responding to this amazing offer of mercy, it is very easy to see the call to the New Evangelization as an "optional extra;" nice but not really necessary.

After decades of silence about the consequences of not responding to the mercy of God by a life of faith, repentance and obedience – namely, hell – an alien worldview has colonized the minds of vast numbers of our fellow Catholics which presumes that virtually everyone will be saved, except perhaps a few really notorious mass murderers. But, of course, murder is only one of a whole number of grave sins that if unrepented will exclude people from the kingdom of God.

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9-10)

This is not an isolated text; similar lists of sins that will exclude people from heaven are contained in Gal. 5: 13, 19-21; Eph. 5:5-6; Rev. 22: 14-15 and many other places as well.

Jesus is particularly emphatic about the absolute necessity of turning away from serious sin if we are to enter the kingdom.

And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. (Mt 18:9)

He clearly tells us not to fear those who can kill the body but to fear the eternal punishment due to unrepented sin in hell. (Lk. 12:4-5)

But it isn't just a wide range of unrepented immorality that will exclude people from the Kingdom but perhaps the gravest sin of all, unbelief.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned, he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (Jn 3:16-18)

Fr. Francis Martin in one of his biblical/theological essays, calls unbelief in the revelation of Jesus "the root sin of the world."

'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.' (John 3:36).

There are literally dozens of New Testament passages that speak of the eternal consequences of not repenting, of not believing, of not living a life of obedience as a disciple of Jesus.

It is manifest that Jesus and the Apostles thought it important that the negative consequences of failing to respond in thought, word and deed, to the message of salvation were clearly communicated to their hearers. Jesus knew what was in the heart of human beings and knew that the fear of hell, while not the end point of the Christian life, is a very good beginning, if it motivates repentance. And while "perfect love casts out fear," of punishment and of the day of judgment (1 Jn. 4: 17-18) the spiritual wisdom of the Church makes clear that we can't jump to the end of the journey without a good beginning, patiently working through each step of purification and cleansing.

St. Benedict, in the Prologue to his Rule, directs his monks to consider the eternal consequences of their actions: "For we ought at all times so to serve with the good things which He has given us, that He may not, like an angry father, disinherit his children, nor, like a dread lord, enraged by our evil deeds, hand us over to everlasting punishment as most wicked servants, who would not follow Him to glory."

In his chapter on Humility he speaks of the importance of fear of God, including the element of fear of hell: "The first degree of humility, then, is that monks always have the fear of God before his eyes, constantly beware of ever forgetting it. He must be ever mindful of all that God has commanded, frequently thinking about Hell, where those who scorn God will burn for their sins, and the eternal life that is prepared for those who fear Him."¹

¹ I am grateful to the July 6, 2014 newsletter of the Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval in Flavigny-sur-ozerein, France, for drawing my attention to this text of St. Benedict.

Catherine of Siena notes how the initial stage of the journey is characterized by a very useful fear of hell, a “slavish fear,” as she puts it, which later moves on to what she calls “mercenary love,” and finally to “perfect love.” You don’t jump to perfect love without a good beginning.

John of the Cross presupposes that before people are really ready to undertake the spiritual journey they have been deeply struck by the shortness of life, the narrowness of the road leading to life (Mt. 7: 114), the strictness of the judgment, how “the just one is scarcely saved” (1 Pet. 4: 18), how “perdition is very easy, and salvation very difficult,” and the need for profound repentance from sin and wholehearted surrender to God. (*The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 1; 1)

Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* acknowledges that the most important motivation for serving God is pure love but also cites the useful role of “servile fear” in the spiritual journey (as does also Francis de Sales).

“We should also strongly praise fear of his Divine Majesty. For not only is filial fear something pious and very holy, but so also is servile fear. Even if it brings a person nothing better or more useful, it greatly aids him or her to rise from mortal sin, and once such a one has arisen, one easily attains to a greater filial fear....” (# 370)

Unfortunately, it would not be uncommon today, after reviewing the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles, the witness of the tradition and the saints, to have someone claim that Vatican II made all this irrelevant and it’s all pre-Vatican II spirituality. Of course, this is manifestly not the case.

We strive therefore to please God in all things and we put on the armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil and resist in the evil day. Since however we know not the day nor the hour, on Our Lord's advice we must be constantly vigilant so that, having finished the course of our earthly life, we may merit to enter into the marriage feast with Him and to be numbered among the blessed and that we may not be ordered to go into eternal fire(257) like the wicked and slothful servant,into the exterior darkness where "there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth". For before we reign with Christ in glory, all of us will be made manifest "before the tribunal of Christ, so that each one may receive what he has won through the body, according to his works, whether good or evil" and at the end of the world "they who have done good shall come forth unto resurrection of life; but those who have done evil unto resurrection of judgment".(Lumen gentium, 48)

If we are to have a strong Church and a dynamic evangelization we need to pass on to everyone all that Jesus and the Apostles have commanded us to pass on, including the consequences of failing to believe and obey. We need not to be so afraid of people being afraid of hell. It’s an excellent beginning to the spiritual journey, and continues to be of- value even as the spiritual life progresses.

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