

*Will Many Be Saved?*  
*What Vatican II Actually Teaches*  
*and Its Implications for*  
*the New Evangelization:*  
A Response to Some Criticism

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THE TITLE I'VE BEEN GIVEN for my presentation is the title of my recent book. I imagine this is so because of the unusual weight of the endorsements the book received before publication and the multiple reviews the book has received since, most of which have been very positive, but a few of which have been rather critical. The book has just gone into its fifth printing with Eerdmans and is increasingly cited in scholarly articles that deal with questions concerning the interpretation of Vatican II regarding salvation. Rather than simply repeat the thesis of the book, I thought it would be more interesting to respond to some of the criticisms that have appeared in the most substantial critical review.

The most extensive and theologically serious review that was critical of the book was that of Fr. Edward Oakes.

When a friend sent me a copy of Fr. Oakes's lengthy review of my book<sup>1</sup> – a lengthy article actually – I was amazed that in what must have been months before he died he was able to do this, and grateful that the topic raised in my book was getting such a serious response from such an esteemed scholar. May he rest in peace, and pray for all of us! I'm sure he now has the best insight of all of us into the matters that we will discuss!

While I appreciate Fr. Oakes's evaluation of my book as a "careful, sober, yet passionately motivated study" and his agreement with me

that “something about the reception history of Vatican II has had a damaging impact on missionary work,” and that “Martin is right when he claims that LG 16c [the last three sentences] has been slighted in subsequent debate on the possible salvation of non-Christians,” I think he misunderstands important parts of my argument, and I would like to offer some clarifications and response. He particularly disagrees with some points I make in my chapter on Balthasar, and I will address these shortly.

I will give a brief overview of my argument and then address each of Fr. Oakes’s main criticisms.

As is clear from my book’s title, my main concern is to focus attention on a text from Vatican II that sums up in a succinct form, both in the text itself and in its important footnotes, what the Catholic Church actually teaches about the possibility of people being saved without hearing the gospel and the significant limitations on these conditions. I thought it was important to do this study since in every major postconciliar document on evangelization<sup>2</sup> explicit reference is made, by popes and the CDF, to the doctrinal confusion that is undermining evangelization. Whether it be Paul VI’s 1975 *Evangelii nuntiandi* or John Paul II’s 1990 *Redemptoris missio*, or the CDF’s 2000 *Dominus Iesus* or the CDF’s 2007 *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*, each attempt by the magisterium to resolve the confusion seems to be met with failure. So much so that we read once again in the 2007 *Doctrinal Note* about this “growing confusion”:

There is today, however, a growing confusion which leads many to leave the missionary command of the Lord unheard and ineffective (cf. Mt 28:19). . . . It is enough, so they say, to help people to become more human or more faithful to their own religion; it is enough to build communities which strive for justice, freedom, peace and solidarity. Furthermore, some maintain that Christ should not be proclaimed to those who do not know him, nor should joining the Church be promoted, since it would also be possible to be saved without explicit knowledge of Christ and without formal incorporation in the Church.<sup>3</sup>

While the *Doctrinal Note* addresses in a thorough manner the question of whether preaching the gospel is an imposition on people's freedom, it doesn't thoroughly address the doctrinal confusion lurking around the truth of it being possible for people to be saved without hearing the gospel, and the common temptation to presume such people are saved.

That's why in my book, while clearly affirming the teaching of the Catholic Church, based on Romans 1 and Romans 2, and subsequent doctrinal clarifications, that it is indeed possible under certain conditions for people to be saved without hearing the gospel, I primarily focus on how the council teaches that "very often" (the Latin is *at saepius*; the translation I'm using is Flannery's) these conditions aren't in fact met, and for the sake of people in this situation and their salvation, the gospel urgently needs to be preached, not just to "enrich" their lives or "give meaning to their lives," but to save their lives.<sup>4</sup> Of course my book unreservedly affirms the clear teaching of the Church that since God wills the salvation of the whole human race, each person is given the possibility of being saved in ways known only to God.<sup>5</sup>

Here are the sentences of *Lumen gentium*, 16 in question. First of all those sentences that affirm the possibility of being saved without hearing the gospel:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience<sup>6</sup> – those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel<sup>7</sup> and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.

It is important to pay attention to the conditions under which it is possible for someone to be saved without hearing the gospel: an inculpable ignorance of the gospel, a sincere seeking of God, and a response to grace that enables one to live in accordance with the dictates of conscience. It is also important to pay attention to the very important footnote that references the response of the Holy Office to the Fr. Feeney case. This doctrinally important letter makes clear that indeed even an unconscious desire for God and his Church may be salvific, but not just any kind of unconscious desire. The letter makes clear that it is not enough just to “believe in God” and “be a good person” in order to be saved, but there must be a personal response to the light of revelation which involves a surrender in faith to the person revealing – a supernatural faith – and a change of life that is enabled by an infusion of supernatural charity.

And here are the final three sentences which speak about the obstacles to the possibility of salvation being realized without hearing the gospel:

But very often (*at saepius*)<sup>8</sup>, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and served the world rather than the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:21, 25). Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair. Hence to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all these, the Church, mindful of the Lord’s command, ‘preach the Gospel to every creature’ (Mk. 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions.

Because sustained attention hasn’t been paid recently to the doctrinal truths that the last three sentences of *Lumen gentium*, 16 reaffirm, many Catholics (including many theologians and pastoral leaders) – and many Protestants as well, including a growing number of evangelicals<sup>9</sup> – have made a hugely unwarranted leap from “possibility” to “probability” to a “practical universalism” that presumes virtually everybody will be saved except perhaps some exceptionally evil historical figures. What are these doctrinal truths that

*Lumen gentium*, 16c reaffirms? The conciliar text reaffirms the foundational doctrinal truths that affirm that we don't live in a neutral environment and that the spiritual realities referred to in the scripture as the world, the flesh, and the devil present great obstacles to fulfilling the conditions under which it is possible to be saved without the gospel. Everyone is subject to the weakness of mind and will as a result of original sin, and which is made worse by actual sin; everyone is vulnerable to the "world" – the international pagan culture that aggressively is attacking respect for God and his Word and that dominates the media and universities; and everyone without the protection of the "spiritual armor" is subject to the deceptions of the evil one who sends forth his "fiery darts" multiple times a day.

Because these sober texts have been virtually ignored – even by well-known theologians who deal with this issue – a presumption in favor of almost universal salvation has permeated the culture even of the Church.

John Sachs, in a lengthy article on universal salvation that appeared in *Theological Studies*, expresses what he claims is the current Catholic theological consensus.

We have seen that there is a clear consensus among Catholic theologians today in their treatment of the notion of apocatastasis and the problem of hell. . . . It may not be said that even one person is already or will in fact be damned. All that may and must be believed is that the salvation of the world is a reality already begun and established in Christ. Such a faith expresses itself most consistently in the hope that because of the gracious love of God whose power far surpasses human sin, all men and women will in fact freely and finally surrender to God in love and be saved.

When Balthasar speaks of the duty to hope for the salvation of all, he is articulating the broad consensus of current theologians and the best of the Catholic tradition. Like other theologians, notably Rahner, he intentionally pushes his position to the limit, insisting that such a hope is not merely

possible but well founded. . . . I have tried to show that the presumption that human freedom entails a capacity to reject God definitively and eternally seems questionable. And, although this presumption enjoys the weight of the authority of Scripture and tradition, it would seem incorrect to consider this possibility as an object of faith in the same sense that the ability of human freedom in grace to choose God is an object of faith.<sup>10</sup>

Richard Schenk, in a very important article, also identifies the significance of Balthasar's influence in effecting a shift to the presumption of universal salvation.

Whatever the final theological judgment on Balthasar's calling into question the facticity of ultimate loss may turn out to be, there can be no doubt that his proposals that we bracket out (set in *epoché*) the assumption that the possibility of any final loss will ever be realized have added their own considerable weight to a far more widely motivated shift in the way the burden of proof at these proceedings is allocated. . . . Today, due in no small part to Balthasar's works themselves the burden of proof has shifted to those who consider this newly prescribed hope dubious. . . . The hermeneutical situation of any possible discussion, then, is marked today by an already completed, widespread shift in mainstream Catholic attitudes, prior to any conceivable efforts in systematic or biblical theology, a shift away from the existential conviction that there really will be any kind of final loss.<sup>11</sup>

Cardinal Dulles also recognizes Balthasar's influence in communicating a universalist mentality:

Hans Urs von Balthasar popularized the idea that we may hope that no one ever goes to hell. Rightly or wrongly, he is often interpreted as though he believed that in the end all men and women attain to the joys of heaven. Priests and

theologians frequently give the impression that the doctrine of hell is a medieval superstition rather than an essential component of the gospel. In so doing, they may well be doing Satan's work because the fear of hell occupied a central place in the preaching of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

The claim of my book is that while Balthasar's hope for universal salvation is perhaps logically possible, given the weight of scripture and tradition, it is so only in the sense that it is logically possible that a major league baseball team would win every one of its games in any season. It has never happened, and to use his language, it is "infinitely improbable" that it ever will. Is a theological speculation that is contrary, as Fr. Sachs puts it, to the weight of scripture and tradition really well founded? And if it isn't well founded – as I will argue – how pastorally wise is it to teach such a thing?

To further complicate the effort to understand what Balthasar is really advocating, he uses the key word "hope" in ambivalent ways. At some points he says that by "hope" he means only the kind of wish that is expressed when we pray for someone who is sick to recover.<sup>13</sup> At other points he seems to imply a "supernatural hope" – a firm conviction based on the promise of God that will certainly come to pass. It is indeed admirable and imminently desirable, indeed obligatory, that we hope and pray for the salvation of all. But this is the hope of intercessory prayer not the supernatural hope that prays for something it knows will come to pass because of the certain promise of Christ. God wills the salvation of the whole human race, and we should pray for that, in the sense that he gives salvific grace to everyone and everyone who responds with faith and repentance whether to an interior illumination or to the explicit preaching of the gospel, will be saved, if they persevere in that response. Those who don't accept the gift of salvation will not be saved. This is how the Catholic Church understands the double truths of both God's will that all be saved and Christ's death that saves the whole human race, and at the same time the necessity of each individual to respond to that grace

with faith and repentance in order to have that universal salvation applied to them.

As Pope Paul VI put it in his enduringly valuable Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, which Pope Francis frequently cites:

This Kingdom and this salvation which are the key words of Jesus Christ's evangelization, are available to every human being as grace and mercy, and yet at the same time each individual must gain them by force – they belong to the violent, says the Lord (Mt. 11:12; Lk. 16: 16), through toil and suffering, through a life lived according to the Gospel, through abnegation and the cross, through the spirit of the beatitudes. But above all each individual gains them through a total interior renewal which the Gospel calls *metanoia*; it is a radical conversion, a profound change of mind and heart.<sup>14</sup>

Whether it be John Sachs's claim that a virtual universalism is the prevailing theological consensus among contemporary Catholic theologians and that Rahner and Balthasar have made major contributions to this consensus, or the "man in the street's" practical universalism, I haven't met many people who would disagree that this is the common mentality, not just in theological circles but in most ordinary Catholics' current worldviews, even orthodox and spiritual Catholics. This is how I would describe the explicit or implicit worldview of perhaps the majority of Catholics in the West: "Broad and wide is the gate that leads to heaven, and virtually everyone is going that way. Narrow and difficult is the door that leads to hell, and hardly anyone is entering it."

To effect an exact reversal of the solemn words of Jesus is no small thing! I decided I had to include substantive chapters on Rahner and Balthasar in the book not because I thought this was the main contribution of the book, but simply to remove some obstacles to getting a hearing for my explication of the significance of the final sentences of *Lumen gentium*, 16. I actually think the book can stand on its own without these chapters. But because of the widespread popularity of the concept of Rahner's "anonymous Christian" and



Balthasar's "hope" that no one be lost – even among those with no or very superficial theological training – I decided I needed to address these speculative theories directly. As I made clear in the book, I wasn't attempting anything like an overall evaluation of either theologians' work, and I find much that is admirable in both, but I was rather focusing on one particular theory in each which in my opinion has contributed to a culture of universalism. Fr. Oakes doesn't seem to have a problem with my chapter on Rahner, but as is to be expected, as a long-time defender of Balthasar, his main concern with my book is focused on my chapter on Balthasar.

Before I respond to Fr. Oakes's points, I would like to establish something that Balthasar's defenders, including Fr. Oakes, seem systematically to ignore. He is not, in my opinion, in fact, despite his frequent statements to the contrary, just establishing universal salvation as a possibility or something to hope for, as we hope for someone to recover from an illness, but he is quite clearly teaching – not directly, as that would be formal heresy – that it is "infinitely improbable" that human freedom will be able ultimately to resist God's grace. How does the ordinary person hearing this distinguish between "infinite improbability" and certainty? Not very easily, I would submit. Defenders of Balthasar often point to his claims that he is not teaching universal salvation and claim it is not charitable to not take him at his word. The main task in interpreting a complex theologian is not primarily one of being "charitable" but of coming to a just and objective evaluation, taking into account often contradictory statements, and a methodology that is very often not straightforward.

Balthasar has written so much that it is possible to find what appear to be contradictory opinions throughout his work, and so the reader is left with the challenge of trying to determine what he really believes. Fortunately, in *Dare We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved'?*, he very clearly states his conclusion on the issue of universal salvation by citing a text of Edith Stein (which she never published) which, he affirms, "expresses most exactly the position that I have tried to develop."<sup>15</sup> Balthasar recounts how she speculates on how grace can secretly work

in the souls of apparent unbelievers as “all-merciful love” descends to everyone.

And now, can we assume that there are souls that remain perpetually closed to such love? As a possibility in principle, this cannot be rejected. *In reality*, it can become infinitely improbable – precisely through what preparatory grace is capable of effecting in the soul. . . . Human freedom can be neither broken nor neutralized by divine freedom, but it may well be, so to speak, outwitted.<sup>16</sup>

Balthasar acknowledges that there must be a free response of human beings to the grace of God in order to be saved, but very much like Sachs, he doesn't think it is really possible for human freedom in the end to resist God. And even if it appears that men die rejecting grace and refusing to believe and repent, Balthasar makes his own Stein's speculation that, despite all appearances that many die without faith or repentance, perhaps another chance will be given after death:

For even if we cannot close our minds to the fact that temporal death comes for countless men without their ever having looked eternity in the eye and without salvation's ever having become a problem for them; that, furthermore, many men occupy themselves with salvation for a lifetime without responding to grace – we still do not know whether the decisive hour might not come for all of these somewhere in the next world, and faith can tell us that this is the case.

It is easy to understand why Stein never published these reflections herself. It is precisely faith that tells us that the “decisive hour” happens at the moment of death and not “somewhere in the next world.” This cannot be the case as the Church, basing itself on scripture (Hebrews 9:27-28), has definitively and frequently taught that at the moment of death our judgment takes place, and if we die in

unrepented mortal sin we will immediately and for all eternity be in hell.

Balthasar often “stands behind” theologians he favorably quotes, but seldom is he as direct in his endorsement of their views as he is here in his claim that Stein’s views most exactly represent his position. As the reader of *Dare We Hope* – Balthasar’s final summary of his argument published shortly before he died – makes his way through the book, the cumulative impression he gets is that while Balthasar knows he can’t teach directly that everyone is in the end saved, that is what he believes and thinks other compassionate people should believe as well. The way he makes fun of or mocks those who disagree with him, the way he quotes people who do hold universalist views, the effort to put into doubt the clear words of Jesus and the apostles, all leads to his final summary of his views, which by that time, seems to be an “all but certain” teaching of universalism. In the end, then, Balthasar is effectively communicating without formally teaching that, even though it is theoretically possible for someone to be damned, it is most likely in reality “infinitely improbable.” What impression does this leave the reader with? How thin is the line between “certain” and “infinitely improbable”? Or is there a line at all? It is not sufficient to say that people are drawing conclusions that Balthasar himself never drew; for he leads people to draw the conclusion of universal salvation. The “reception history” of Balthasar is not based on a misinterpretation or an uncharitable reading. In my judgment, what he is intending to communicate is exactly what people are receiving.

I am not the only one who reads Balthasar this way. James O’Connor describes the situation like this:

Although he rejects the theory of apokatastasis, von Balthasar is so categorical in denying that we *know* that there are or will be humans who are to be eternally damned, and so forceful in defense of a hope for the salvation of all that *he appears to be saying* that, in fact, no one will be eternally lost.<sup>17</sup>

Roch Kereszty makes a similar observation:

Does his understanding allow for a definitive free refusal of God's love on the part of any human being? He repeatedly insists on this possibility, but the inner consistency of his thought does not seem to admit it. . . . My reservation regarding his position comes from the suspicion that the logic of his thought leads not just to hope, but to a (consciously denied but logically inescapable) certainty for the salvation of all.<sup>18</sup>

Kevin Flannery, S.J. puts it like this:

Beginning with the idea that God's "triune will for salvation" may not be "blunted" or "thwarted" by men, Balthasar can only proceed to the conclusion that God cannot condemn anyone to hell lest he violate his own nature (or the nature of his will), but this is to go too far. . . . He quotes with evident approval the remark of Hans Jurgen Verweyen: "Whoever reckons with the possibility of even only *one* person's being eternally lost *besides himself* is unable to love unreservedly." In the light of *Matthew 25* it would seem that Christ's moral character is seriously flawed.<sup>19</sup>

Richard Schenk comes to a similar conclusion:

However, despite these reflections and the frequently repeated rhetoric of treating the "real possibility" of final loss with an "uncompromising seriousness," . . . it becomes clear with time that Balthasar sees this only as an "infinitely improbable possibility," no more likely than the possibility that God would have to view creation as an ultimate failure. . . . The one side of the apparent option is treated with scorn: "I do not wish to contradict anyone who, as a Christian, cannot be happy without denying the universality of hope to us so that he can be certain of his full hell" (*Dare We Hope*, 187). With that, the appearance of any antinomy is

dissolved, and the second alternative becomes the only one with any semblance of plausibility or decency.<sup>20</sup>

When I pointed out in some detail in my book that Balthasar is seeking to overthrow a massive witness of scripture interpretation, theological consensus, and magisterial teaching, Fr. Oakes responds by saying that he is only seeking to “overthrow the *Augustinian* tradition, which claims as a certainty that babies who die before baptism go to a hell of eternal suffering.” I would disagree. While almost shockingly negative on Augustine, Balthasar is clearly trying to overthrow the mainstream consensus, including Aquinas, about how to harmonize scripture passages that pertain to this issue and a theological synthesis embodied in magisterial teaching, about how God’s will that all be saved and the necessity of the creature’s response can be reconciled. His target is not just unbaptized babies but everyone!

There is a startling account of a conversation between Balthasar and Karl Barth reported by Barth’s biographer. There is some indication, as one might expect would be the case, of Balthasar himself being more open about what he privately held with those he supposed would be sympathetic to his views, and more guarded in his published writings.<sup>21</sup> Barth’s biographer, Eberhard Busch, relates several such conversations between Barth and Balthasar, who lived in proximity to each other in Basel. In a conversation with Barth, Balthasar is reported as saying: “That’s all right, at last we’re quite alone and one can say what one thinks.” Busch further reports on the basis of Barth’s recollections:

Balthasar first remarked: ‘The dogma is that hell exists, not that people are in it.’ At any rate, on these evenings Barth discovered to his amazement a Catholic theologian who, he said, ‘envisioned a kind of reformation of the Catholic Church and of Catholic theology from within. And now I was to be introduced like a new Trojan horse to bring it about (against Thomas and also against Augustine!).’<sup>22</sup>

Balthasar's quite conscious effort to affirm orthodoxy while proposing theories that are not consonant with it may account for his puzzling methodology. He frequently affirms sound principles and then proposes positions which *prima facie* do not seem to be in accord with the sound principles, usually making no attempt to explain the inconsistency. Pitstick puts it like this:

What are intended for such qualifications generally take the form of simple denials of what is implied in his language or simple reaffirmations of traditional doctrines, without explanation of the sense in which the affirmation (or the denial) and the rest of his texts can both stand.<sup>23</sup>

This is a long way from the teaching of Vatican II, incorporated into the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,<sup>24</sup> about the possibility of some being saved without hearing the gospel. Balthasar has completely reversed the traditional teaching of the Church and directly contradicts words of Jesus. Now he claims it is theoretically possible that some may be lost, but in reality, infinitely improbable! This is a complete reversal of some of the clearest words of Jesus – a text even verified by the Jesus Seminar as his *ipsissima verba*.

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few. (Mt. 7:13-14)<sup>25</sup>

Balthasar is not teaching just the possibility of everyone being saved. He is in fact communicating that it is infinitely improbable that anyone will be lost. It is important to be clear about what he is really doing in order to evaluate whether his teaching is well founded.

When Balthasar's defenders, including Fr. Oakes, claim that Balthasar is not really teaching universal salvation but merely saying it is possible and something to hope for, they can do so only by ignoring his own final summation of what he holds as demonstrated above.

Fr. Oakes raises a number of objections to my treatment of Balthasar, but in doing so he seems to misrepresent the main purpose of my book, namely, not to prove how many are in hell but to point out that, despite the possibility of being saved without hearing the gospel, many are in grave danger of being lost unless they are called to repentance and faith. My main concern in my book is how evangelization and the salvation of souls is put at great risk by a presumption that virtually everybody will be saved, which I believe I have adequately demonstrated in my book is unfounded and at variance with scripture and tradition and the current teaching of the Church, and yet is widely held and taught.

Fr. Oakes acknowledges that I have scored a few “direct hits,” in my critique of Balthasar – although I never thought of scoring “hits” while I was writing. Balthasar expresses discomfort at the possibility of God “losing his gamble” with human freedom if anyone ends up ultimately lost. I pointed out in my chapter that God has already “lost the gamble” with the freedom of the angels, and so to be scandalized at the possibility of humans being lost seems incongruous. The mystery of God’s justice and love and the mystery of human freedom have greater depths than what scandalizes the human mind. While Oakes acknowledges the truth of this, he doesn’t seem to be able to acknowledge its devastating implications for Balthasar’s perplexity about the possibility of any person being lost.

The second point Oakes acknowledges as a valid critique of Balthasar is the danger of trivializing the gravity of human sin that called forth such a sacrifice. Yet he concludes: “But while these points can be easily conceded, Martin has in no way, in my opinion, clinched his case for a certainly populated hell.”

Fr. Oakes misunderstands my effort. I am not arguing for a certainly populated hell, only a very probably populated hell. In fact in my book I nowhere answer the question raised in the title, “Will many be saved?” If pressed to give an answer I would say: from my reading of scripture and the doctrinal decisions of the tradition and my observation of empirical reality and analysis of contemporary culture, I would say that it is probable that many will be saved and many will be

lost, in numbers known only to God and in some relation at different times in human history to the state of Christian culture. Perhaps at the height of Christian culture “many” were on the road that led to salvation, even if they didn’t live that way, in the sense of wanting to receive the sacrament of reconciliation before they died or the “last rites,” as they were then called. That situation of social pressure in favor of reconciliation with God and confession of sins no longer persists, but rather just the opposite social pressure does. Many are dying without, it seems, any thought of repenting, and certainly not seeking the sacrament of reconciliation. Increasingly funerals are held in funeral homes and not in churches or synagogues. Funeral speeches seem almost always to presume that the deceased is in heaven or “lives on in our memories.”

Fr. Oakes seems to believe that my purported effort to argue for a certainly populated hell is undermined by my clear acknowledgement in various places in my book that salvific grace is given to everyone, and that no one can judge in the case of an individual, in spite of whatever the appearances may be, whether that person has responded to that grace or not at the hour of death. This criticism seems to be conflating two different issues. I certainly hold with the Church that God gives every human being grace for salvation. Based on the sacred scriptures, tradition, and the contemporary magisterium I do not hold that everyone accepts that grace. I completely agree with Fr. Oakes (and Pope Francis!) that no one can judge the state of an individual soul, and that is why all I am trying to do in the book is show that even though salvific grace is given to everyone, there are many factors working against its acceptance, and that we shouldn’t presume unbelievers have responded to this grace but should take up the urgent call to evangelize. This isn’t to say we can presume to know what transpires at the hour of death in the case of those who are living in objective grave sin or unbelief. Such external indicators of unrepented sin and unbelief, however, should lead us to redouble our efforts at prayer, love, sacrifice, and witness, and not presume that everyone experiences invisible deathbed conversions or that there is an after-



death chance to change one's fundamental decision (which Balthasar sometimes seems to postulate).<sup>26</sup>

Oakes interprets Balthasar as suggesting that Christ may meet the condemned sinner in hell itself and give him or her a last chance to repent, rather than lose the "gamble" in giving the creature freedom. He acknowledges that Balthasar is taking "astonishing leaps" where it may not be easy to follow or accept.

We have now come to the point where Balthasar's thought is at its most daring and speculative, where perhaps indeed many will feel left behind, where they feel his thought borders on the very speculative reverie he accuses the nominalists of indulging. How true these reservations are can perhaps emerge only from one's own encounter with his thought.<sup>27</sup>

Oakes thinks Balthasar's effort is fundamentally sound, although he readily admits that these speculations are just that, speculations.

But he has dared to leap into previously uncharted territory, and we wish both to grant him this speculative freedom and also the right of the Church to assimilate these speculations in her own good time. Private reflections and personal opinions of a theologian, especially one who bases his works so heavily on the graces of a mystic, take time.<sup>28</sup>

Oakes calls Balthasar's teaching – about there perhaps being some mysterious "moment of death" or "after-death" last act of God to save everyone so he does not lose his "gamble – after his other arguments have been challenged or rejected," Balthasar's last "trump."

To which Balthasar has only one response left – his own trump, so to speak, but one that is quite arresting: if even a single human being is eternally lost by rejecting God and his holy grace, then God has lost the gamble he made with

himself when he first created a universe of free beings who were made to receive that love freely.<sup>29</sup>

When all is said and done, Oakes states, it may all come down to one question: “Perhaps, then, the issue boils down to whether there is a possibility of conversion after death, that is, in hell. Can the Church pronounce on that possibility if revelation has not?”<sup>30</sup> It’s quite surprising that Fr. Oakes considers this an open question given that the Church believes that revelation and the subsequent magisterium as a matter of fact have ruled out the possibility of conversion after death or “conversion in hell.”<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately Oakes’s interpretation of Balthasar’s postulation of an after-death chance of conversion by perhaps meeting Jesus in hell – which he postulates in light of the apparent large numbers who die in unbelief and serious immorality – is an ill-founded speculation.<sup>32</sup>

Cardinal Dulles summarizes the clear consensus of the dogmatic tradition:

The constant teaching of the Catholic Church supports the idea that there are two classes: the saved and the damned. Three General councils of the Church (Lyons I, 1245; Lyons II, 1274; and Florence, 1439) and Pope Benedict XII’s bull *Benedictus Deus* (1336) have taught that everyone who dies in a state of mortal sin goes immediately to suffer the eternal punishments of hell. This belief has perdured without question in the Catholic Church to this day, and is repeated almost verbatim in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC #1022, 1035).<sup>33</sup>

The Council of Trent, in teaching carried forward and affirmed by Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis splendor*, affirms the reality of eternal punishment for unrepented mortal sins.

It must be asserted, against the subtle modes of thinking of certain people, who *by fair and flattering words deceive the hearts of the simple-minded* (Rom 16:18), that the grace of justification

once received is lost not only by apostasy, by which faith itself is lost, but also by any other mortal sin, though faith is not lost. Thus is defended the teaching of the divine law which excludes from God's kingdom not only unbelievers, but also the faithful if they are guilty of fornication, adultery, wantonness, sodomy, theft, avarice, drunkenness, slander, plundering, and all others who commit mortal sins from which, with the help of divine grace, they can refrain, and because of which they are severed from the grace of Christ. (1 Cor 6: 9-10; 1 Tim 1:9-10).<sup>34</sup>

This section of the council's teaching on justification ends with the warning that "unless each one faithfully and firmly accepts it, he cannot be justified."<sup>35</sup>

Jesus, John, Matthew, Luke, Mark, James, Peter, and Paul, in the multiple texts that talk of the final judgment of the human race, are unmistakably declaring that if people persist in unbelief and immorality to the end, they will be eternally lost. To suppose that when they taught God's universal will of salvation they thought they were teaching something that wasn't in harmony with the specific criteria for the final judgment or were unaware that they were, lacks all credibility. There is nothing in scripture to indicate that there are second chances after death, but rather, just the opposite.<sup>36</sup> Life is emptied of its meaning if our choices do not end up really mattering for our eternal destinies.

As the International Theological Document on eschatology puts it:

In revealing the Father's secrets to us, Jesus wants to make us his friends (cf. Jn 15:15). But friendship cannot be forced on us. Friendship with God, like adoption, is an offer, to be freely accepted or rejected. . . . This consummated and freely accepted friendship implies a concrete possibility of rejection. What is freely accepted can be freely rejected. [No one who] thus chooses rejection "has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Eph 5:5). Eternal damnation has its origin in the free rejection to the very end

of God's Love and Mercy. The Church believes that this state consists of deprivation of the sight of God and that the whole "being" of the sinner suffers the repercussion of this loss eternally. . . . This doctrine of faith shows equally the importance of the human capacity of freely rejecting God, and the gravity of such a freely willed rejection.<sup>37</sup>

While we cannot judge the state of anyone's soul and what transpires at the moment of death, it certainly appears – from the view of human resistance to grace, and subsequent judgment, contained in the scriptures and from empirical observation – that many people persevere to the end in their rejection of God and/or in a life of immorality. Balthasar acknowledges as much, but then posits the possible chance(s) after death, for which there is no basis in scripture or the magisterium. He claims that those who take the traditional interpretation of these texts on judgment, following Augustine (but also Aquinas and the entire theological/magisterial mainstream!) – that there will be a definitive separation of the human race based on how people have responded to the grace of God – have "transformed" and indeed "vitiating" the scriptures which, he claims, only warn of a possibility and do not teach that there will indeed be a division of the human race into the saved and damned. Such an interpretation seems strained.

Cardinal Dulles summarizes the meaning of the "two destination" New Testament passages like this:

As we know from the Gospels, Jesus spoke many times about hell. Throughout his teaching, he holds forth two and only two final possibilities for human existence: the one being everlasting happiness in the presence of God, the other everlasting torment in the absence of God. He describes the fate of the damned under a great variety of metaphors: everlasting fire, outer darkness, tormenting thirst, a gnawing worm, and weeping and gnashing of teeth. . . . Taken in their obvious meaning, passages such as these

give the impression that there is a hell, and that many go there; more in fact, than are saved.<sup>38</sup>

Even if one does not want to claim that these passages indisputably reveal that there are people in hell, or that there are more in hell than in heaven, despite the strength of this opinion in the theological tradition's understanding, one would at least have to say that from the weight of these scriptures and the historical testimony of final rejection of God or embrace of immorality, both in scripture and contemporary history and experience, that it is not just a theoretical possibility, but very probable that many end up in hell.<sup>39</sup> Fr. Kevin Flannery, S.J. acknowledges that a case can be made that scripture does not imply with the force of logical necessity that there are people in hell. He argues though that the overwhelming weight of scripture and tradition "approach logical necessity."<sup>40</sup> As Fr. James O'Connor puts it, these passages and how they have been interpreted by the theological tradition and the magisterium lead us to *presume* that there will be many in hell, a presumption that the Holy Spirit who inspired the scriptures intends us to have, a presumption imparted to us by a God who is utterly truthful and cannot deceive:

In the light of what it has been given us to know, we must *presume* that (in numbers completely unknown to us) humans will be included in "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41), and that we ourselves could be among that number. It is such a presumption that the words of Jesus and the teaching of the Church would appear to have as their own, and better guides in this matter we cannot have. Against such a presumption one cannot have what is properly defined as *theological* hope, but we can and must have a human hope, a wish which expresses itself in prayer and zealous efforts, for the salvation of all.<sup>41</sup>

This "presumption" which is given to us in scripture and tradition, by a God who is utterly truthful and will not deceive, is the opposite of the prevailing "presumption" that everybody or almost everybody will

be saved, and that finite human freedom is unable finally to resist the grace of God. The current “theological consensus,” as Sachs has stated it, which he attributes to the huge influence of Rahner and Balthasar, is precisely the reverse of what has been revealed to us as it has been understood by the Church throughout the ages.

Finally Fr. Oakes indicates that “the real problem with Martin’s book is his approach to Scripture. He quite rightly points out that the famous paragraph 16 of *Lumen Gentium* which teaches the possibility of universal salvation is a strictly qualified one.” If Fr. Oakes really is in agreement with my interpretation on this point, we would have no substantive disagreement. This is my main point. But if Fr. Oakes really accepts my interpretation of *Lumen gentium*, 16 he would have to admit that Balthasar’s unqualified “hope” is directly contradictory to the teaching of Vatican II and the scriptural and doctrinal foundations it cites in *Lumen gentium*, 16. He goes on to say:

Martin goes astray, in my opinion, when he takes the reliance of LG 16c on Rom. 1: 21, 25 as demonstrating that the majority of the unevangelized will go to hell. Exegetically, this is troubling, on several grounds. First, Martin assumes without argument that Paul’s notion of God’s wrath is an indication of the *eternal* reprobation of the objects of God’s wrath rather than of God’s permissive will to let the consequences of sin take their toll inside history.

I actually don’t interpret Romans in this way. I devote a whole chapter to Romans 1 and related texts, drawing on the most highly respected commentators on Romans, because this is the scriptural foundation of *Lumen gentium*, 16. The picture painted in Romans 1 of those who willfully suppress the truth and are handed over to foolish thinking and gross immorality as a punishment for their turning away from God is the foundation for the necessity of evangelization. My interpretation doesn’t presume that those currently experiencing the wrath of God by culpable, unrepented unbelief and grave sin will end up eternally separated from God, but rather that they will end up that

way unless they respond to grace that God gives them, and they respond to the grace for repentance either through an internal illumination or through the preaching of the gospel. This is why Paul preached the gospel to the Gentiles – to save them from an eternity of the wrath they were experiencing in history.

Secondly, Fr. Oakes claims I am ignoring key texts that speak of God's offer of salvific grace to all. In my chapter on Balthasar I treat of the scripture texts that he himself says are most important in establishing his "hope" for the salvation of all. In treating them I point out that even within the same section of an epistle, texts that he claims teach that all will be saved are directly followed by texts that indicate that it is only those who repent and believe who will be saved, and the apostles were clearly not naively teaching contradictory things that can't be reconciled. It was already a sixty-page chapter with another twenty pages of footnotes, and I couldn't treat every text he mentions. The ones Fr. Oakes claims I should have treated are no different, in my opinion, from those I treated. Where we have a fundamental disagreement is what we think is the most appropriate approach to scripture.

I think supposing that the apostles and Jesus didn't have any idea they were teaching two irreconcilable views concerning salvation, or that they purposely were teaching two streams they knew couldn't and shouldn't be harmonized, is truly incredible. That the apostles, oftentimes within the same paragraph or pericope, were unaware that they were teaching things that were not in harmony in my opinion lacks all credibility, yet that is what Balthasar supposes to be the case.

Fr. Oakes argues, as does Balthasar, that the texts offering grace to all mankind and the texts speaking of the "twofold" outcome, heaven and hell, are in contradiction and can't be reconciled and should just be left as they are, unreconciled. But Balthasar doesn't leave them unreconciled and doesn't hold to the "agnosticism" he counsels.<sup>42</sup> He adopts Rahner's approach to eschatological statements, which posits that any eschatological statements that can't be reduced to Christology or anthropology should be treated as "apocalyptic" and not understood as really making statements about future outcomes.<sup>43</sup>

Oakes acknowledges that by adopting such an approach to scripture Balthasar “tilts” in favor of the universal offer of salvation texts and doesn’t abide by his principle of leaving them unreconciled. Balthasar dismisses the “two outcome” texts as simply “warnings” that don’t contain any real assertions about people being lost or saved. This is quite a stretch given the multiple clear assertions of future outcomes made by Jesus and the apostles. And the mainstream interpretation of these texts has always understood them as indicating a definite twofold outcome. This continues to be reflected in how Vatican II and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* interpret these texts.

During Vatican II, when one bishop requested the theological commission to declare in *Lumen gentium*, 48 that there were definitely people in hell, the response was that since the words of Jesus to that effect were in the declarative future no further specification was necessary. In any case *Lumen gentium*, 48 clearly teaches the twofold outcome as do multiple texts of the *Catechism*.

Balthasar’s approach to interpretation, I maintain, does violence to the commonly agreed meanings of the texts (both the universal offer of salvation texts and the “two outcome” texts) and overthrows fundamental Catholic principles of interpretation and the actual interpretation that the Church has given in its reconciliation of these texts. Fr. Oakes claims that I “tilt” in the direction of the “two outcome” texts. I maintain I am simply upholding sound principles of interpretation and the actual interpretation given by the mainstream tradition and teaching magisterium to these texts.

The principles of interpretation that I believe Balthasar seriously violates in the strained interpretations he gives in *Dare We Hope* are those articulated in Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution *Dei verbum*. For example:

Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which



God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures.<sup>44</sup>

The Catholic Church has a very “high” view of scripture, its inspiration and freedom from error. As Cardinal Ratzinger put it: “The Catholic tradition . . . trusts the evangelists; it believes what they say.”<sup>45</sup> Can we really say that of Balthasar?

But since sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind, no less attention must be devoted to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, taking into account the Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith, if we are to derive their true meaning from the sacred texts.<sup>46</sup>

Balthasar violates the first principle by turning the multiple declarative statements of the future separation of the human race on the basis of people’s response to the sacrifice of Christ into “bluffs.”

He violates the second principle, despite protestations to the contrary, by refusing to take seriously the unity of scripture and to interpret the texts in question in light of each other and in light of how they’ve been understood in the exegetical and theological tradition of the Church, including how they have been reconciled in the documents of Vatican II and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

One gets the distinct impression that Balthasar is not approaching the scriptures to receive what they actually say, but to explain away how the apostles themselves and the mainstream theological tradition, including the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, has always understood them, in order to advance his ambiguous universalist “hope.”

Germain Grisez, Richard Schenk, Geoffrey Wainwright, W. T. Dickens, Alyssa Pitsstick, James O’Connor, and Raymond Brown all raise serious questions about Balthasar’s approach to scripture. As does Fr. Oakes, without drawing the obvious conclusion.

The same is true, as I demonstrate in my book, with Balthasar’s claims for support for his position in the Fathers and in the testimony of the mystics and saints. While I don’t have time to go into this now, I

would simply like to state that, just as he is trying to get scripture to support his theories, he does the same with the Fathers and the saints. Patristic scholars and theologians have gone on record as seriously disagreeing with some of Balthasar's interpretations of the Fathers, including scholars such as Brian Daly, who disputes Balthasar's claim that Maximus was a universalist as well as the optic of his overall approach to the Fathers.

O'Connor identifies instances where Balthasar clearly misrepresents the teachings of the Fathers in order to claim precedents for his own theory. For example, Balthasar claims: "Let us return to the Church Fathers. At first, the view still existed among them that no Christians, even if they had sinned grievously, end up in hell. Cyprian already seems to suggest this; Hilary as well; Ambrose remains formal on the matter and Jerome no less so."<sup>47</sup> O'Connor comments: "This statement is disappointingly inaccurate. . . . There is no Father of the Church, up to the time of Origen, who teaches that all Christians, even those who sinned grievously, are saved." He finds Balthasar's citation of Cyprian particularly egregious, for the actual text of Cyprian teaches the very opposite; the Christian sinner who sins grievously and then *repents* can be saved.<sup>48</sup> He also points out that, contrary to Balthasar, the earliest Christian writing outside of the New Testament that attests to the reality of hell was not the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (c. 156) but the even earlier *Second Epistle of Clement*, which teaches:

For in reference to those who have not guarded the seal [i.e., the seal of Baptism], it says 'Their worm shall not die and their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be a spectacle to all flesh.' So while we are on earth, let us repent. . . . For once we have departed this world we can no longer confess there or repent anymore.<sup>49</sup>

Manfred Hauke also raises questions about Balthasar's invocation of various Fathers in support of his theory, noting that it is precisely those ambiguous teachings of various Fathers that were never accepted by the Church that Balthasar cites for support.<sup>50</sup>

In Hauke's detailed survey of the scholarship which has attempted to assess the accuracy of Balthasar's claims of support for his theory from "the saints," he comes to this stark conclusion.

The testimony of the saints is decisively unfavorable to the opinion that hell would be empty. . . . The Balthasarian proposal, to put in first place the saints and mystics, in its actual results, witnesses to the falsification of the hope in apokatastasis and confirms the existence of a two-fold justice.<sup>51</sup>

But back to Balthasar's approach to scripture. I would like to propose another hermeneutical principle as well, in light of which we need to judge the soundness of a particular interpretation of scripture. If one interpretation of scripture causes us not to believe or act on another part of scripture, or to empty direct commands of Christ or assertions about the moral life and eschatological realities of their meaning, such an interpretation can't be considered sound. I submit that Balthasar's interpretation of numerous direct assertions of Christ and the apostles as simply warnings, "infinitely improbable" to be realized, has made it easier for many to become lax in their moral life and has undermined evangelization, endangering the salvation of many souls.

Hell, for Balthasar and others influenced by his theories, often gets reduced to material for personal meditation – hell as a theoretical possibility for me – but is emptied of its evangelization force by ignoring the fact that hell is a risk, not just for me, but for vast numbers of the human race, baptized and unbaptized, who are not responding with faith and love to the interior light of the Spirit and need to hear the proclamation of the gospel.

As Vatican II put it (a text that was taken up by John Paul II in *Redemptoris missio*, 11):

Even though incorporated into the Church, one who does not however persevere in charity is not saved. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but 'in body' not 'in

heart.<sup>52</sup> All children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be the more severely judged.<sup>53</sup>

As Stephen Bullivant put it in his nuanced treatment of the possibility of salvation for atheists, what is *possible* may not actually be realized unless the gospel is preached, and a concern for people not being eternally lost, “as unfashionable and unpalatable as it might seem . . . is the best and most urgent rationale for evangelizing today’s unbelievers.”<sup>54</sup>

Fr. Oakes admits there very well may be a relationship between the collapse of mission after Vatican II and the spread of a presumption in favor of virtually universal salvation. He concedes that

as can be seen in numerous studies when belief in hell wanes, so too does missionary fervor. . . . The statistics concerning waning church membership certainly are grim. . . . Something about the reception history of Vatican II has had a damaging impact on missionary work, as most observers agree. . . . True, in any social-science study, correlation does not (necessarily) entail causation, so no purely sociological study can verify a direct causal link between discomfort at the idea of hell and waning church membership. Nonetheless, a link seems plausible.

While Fr. Oakes acknowledges that Balthasar “tilts” in favor of the texts that he interprets as promising universal salvation, I don’t know if Fr. Oakes realized the seriousness of his admission that Balthasar’s interpretation is skewed. In his fine book that gives an overview of Balthasar’s theology he makes the telling statement: “the whole value and validity of Balthasar’s theology for the Church in the coming millennium will hinge on the validity of his approach to the Scriptures.”<sup>55</sup>

In a footnote concerning Balthasar's insistence that the parables of judgment are warnings, not declarations of what will happen, Oakes acknowledges that to interpret certain parables in this manner – and he especially mentions the parable of the sheep and the goats – seems to be a stretch, “and if Balthasar's exegetical ground is shaky there, it will prove unstable everywhere else as well.”<sup>56</sup>

I would argue that my own interpretation is not unique or personal or a “tilt.” It is simply a defense of the way these texts have been reconciled in the exegetical, theological, and magisterial traditions. In brief, the tradition considers the promise of universal salvation as an offer to everyone that has to be responded to in order to become actualized in an individual's life. Those who respond – either to a supernatural grace given to those who without fault have not heard the gospel or to an explicit preaching of the gospel – will be saved, if they persevere in that fidelity to the end. Those who persist in rejecting this grace of salvation until death, or who turn away from it even after a lifetime of fidelity, will be lost, in numbers and in individual cases known only to God.

I find this tradition of interpretation to be very sound – as does the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* – and much more satisfactory than interpreting a whole set of passages as empty warnings leading us to conclude that it is “infinitely improbable” that anyone will be lost. This is not a development of the tradition; this is an overturning of it. It also radically undermines evangelization.

This leads us to Fr. Oakes's final criticism. He claims that I should have paid more attention to the development of doctrine. I wonder if his focus on the chapter on Balthasar caused him to overlook the entire chapter in my book which traces the development of doctrine that led to the broader understanding of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* found in *Lumen gentium*, 16. He claims also that there is actually a post-Vatican II development of doctrine that I am neglecting and a particular sentence of Benedict XVI in *Spe salvi* which “undermines” my argument to my “painful embarrassment.” Fr. Oakes's colleague at Mundelein, likewise a vigorous defender of Balthasar, Fr. Barron, even made the claim that my suggestion that a clarification of this sentence

of Pope Benedict was needed was dissent analogous to the dissent of those who dissented from *Humane vitae*!<sup>57</sup> I'm not embarrassed, and the sentence of Benedict in no way undermines my argument. And I know from my conversations with other theologians that I am not the only one who feels that this "supposing" of Benedict's needs clarification. What is the sentence?

In discussing purgatory Benedict remarks on the reality of "certain figures of our own history" (Hitler? Stalin? Mao?) who seem to have irrevocably closed themselves to good and the reality of others, and then the saints, who are "utterly pure, completely permeated by God," but

for the great majority of people – we may suppose – there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil – much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul. What happens to such individuals when they appear before the judge?<sup>58</sup>

Fr. Oakes seems to be interpreting Benedict here to be saying that only a very few truly evil historical characters go to hell, and a relatively few saints go right to heaven, but most go to purgatory. Perhaps this is what he is saying, but a lot would need to be clarified to determine this. Is he implying that for many people the "die is not yet cast," and their salvation is in the balance, and if they repent before death of serious sin they will be saved? Is he presuming that the "filth" that covers over the soul is of a venial nature? Is Benedict asserting anything at all, or is he only "supposing," whatever that may mean? What is certain is that a "supposition" can hardly be understood to be solemn, authoritative teaching. "One may suppose" is a very ambiguous phrase. What does it mean? Some are saying? Most people believe? It appears to be the case? Indeed in the very next section (*Spe salvi*, 47) Benedict begins by saying, "Some recent theologians are of the opinion that the fire which

both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and Savior.” The most likely way to describe what Benedict is doing here is “musing” on contemporary theological opinion but in no way authoritatively teaching. I refer to these reflections of Benedict in a footnote in my book, noting the need for further clarification.

Fr. Oakes seeks to heighten the weight of Benedict’s thoughts here by pointing out that *Spe salvi* is an encyclical, which is “after all a solemn teaching document of the church’s magisterium,” investing Benedict’s passing on of theological opinions and “supposing” as solemn teaching. It is not. Fr. Oakes fails to advert to the various rules for discerning the weight and import of magisterial statements, even within the same document, that the magisterium itself has published to guide the reception of its documents.

The most important of these documents is the 1998 apostolic letter, *motu proprio*, of John Paul II, *Ad tuendam fidem*, and the *Doctrinal Commentary* of the CDF that accompanied it. In its 1998 *Commentary*, 11, the CDF notes that, with respect to doctrines belonging to the lowest level of magisterial teaching, nondefinitive teaching of the ordinary magisterium, one has to take into account a number of factors to determine the weight of the teaching:

[O]ne can point in a general way to teachings set forth by the authentic ordinary Magisterium in a non-definitive way, which require degrees of adherence differentiated according to the mind and will manifested; this is shown especially by the nature of the documents, by the frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or by the tenor of the verbal expression [cf. LG, 25].

It is common knowledge that even within encyclicals and other magisterial documents there may be a wide range of things going on, not all of which is intended to be taken as authoritative teaching. While the words of Benedict in question appear in an encyclical, the criteria of frequent repetition aren’t met, and the “tenor of the verbal

expression” is clearly that of informal musing, not authoritative teaching.

In addition, the teachings of popes need to be interpreted in light of all their teachings,<sup>59</sup> the teachings of previous popes, and most importantly scripture and tradition – not in discontinuity from them, which is the hermeneutical principle Benedict has so usefully stressed in guiding us to a true understanding of the documents of Vatican II. We need to apply the same approach to interpreting his own thought.

I think it is grasping at straws to claim that these lines of Benedict can be understood to overturn the teaching of *Veritas splendor* about a single unrepented mortal sin excluding us from the Kingdom, or the teaching of Vatican II, carried forward in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that “very often” people are deceived by the evil one and exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship the creature rather than the Creator. In the text under discussion Benedict includes a footnote which references the *Catechism*, 1033-37, which repeats the traditional teaching that those who die in unrepented mortal sin will be excluded from the Kingdom. “To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell.’”<sup>60</sup>

### *Conclusions*

(1) Balthasar’s approach to the interpretation of scripture is based on a fundamentally faulty principle which he simply announces and doesn’t justify. To maintain a “cleft” between two streams of scripture is not only impossible in practice but completely undesirable. As Catholics we believe there is a unity to scripture, and one passage has to be interpreted in the light of other passages and the overall revelation of scripture. When complete harmony cannot be had it is certainly acceptable to declare that we have reached our limits in understanding (Fr. Oakes invokes “paradox” to explain some of Balthasar’s apparent contradictions), but to rule out the attempt to



harmonize is unsound. The job of theology is to harmonize. And that's what the Catholic Church has always done with these passages.

(2) The way these scriptures have been interpreted in light of each other by the greatest of theologians and by the magisterium over the centuries, expressed today in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, seems to be extremely sound and convincing.

(3) I would submit that in the theory of Balthasar on the "hope" of universal salvation, in the sense in which he intends it, which is to view as "infinitely improbable" human freedom's capacity to finally resist salvific grace, we have not a development of doctrine but a rupture with a sound tradition of interpretation.

(4) I would submit that Balthasar's theory has contributed to the widespread "culture of universalism" which is commonplace in the Church today.

(5) I would submit that the reason why all the postconciliar magisterial documents that treat of the fundamental mission of the Church to evangelize bemoan the doctrinal confusion that undermines motivation to evangelize is that they continue to fail to deal with whether the speculative theories that promote universalism are well founded or not.

(6) I would suggest that, if I were the devil, one of my primary goals would be getting the mass of human beings, including Catholics, to believe just the opposite of what Jesus tells us our situation actually is in Matthew 7:13-14, which is cited in the *Catechism's* teaching on hell, along with *Lumen gentium*, 48:

The affirmations of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church on the subject of hell are . . . an urgent *call to conversion*: '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. (Mt. 7:13-14)

Since we know neither the day nor the hour we should follow the advice of the Lord and watch constantly so that,

when the single course of our earthly life is completed, we may merit to enter with him into the marriage feast and be numbered among the blessed, and not, like the wicked and slothful servants, be ordered to depart into the eternal fire, into the outer darkness where ‘men will weep and gnash their teeth,’ (LG, 48, no. 3; Mt 22:123; cf. Heb 9:276; Mt 25:13,26,30,31-46.)<sup>61</sup>

I am sincerely grateful to Fr. Oakes for his lengthy essay and for his graceful acknowledgement of areas of agreement. I hope my own comments here will further this important discussion about a topic which couldn’t be more important – salvation!

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<sup>1</sup> Edward T. Oakes, “Saved From What? On Preaching Hell in the New Evangelization,” *Pro Ecclesia* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 378-94, is a lengthy review essay on my book, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Just as over a period of decades a body of teaching that came to be known as the Church’s “social teaching” developed, so too we are seeing a body of teaching develop concerning the Church’s teaching on evangelization.

<sup>3</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ad gentes*, 7; *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> The following footnote is inserted here as part of the Council text: “Cf. Epist. S.S.C.S. Officii ad Archiep. Boston.: Denz. 3869-72.” The reference to the *Letter of the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston*, which offers doctrinal clarifications on the issues raised by Fr. Leonard Feeney in his strict interpretation of *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Sallus* provides important insight to the proper understanding of the text, as we will see.

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<sup>7</sup> The following footnote is inserted here by the Council fathers as backing for this text: “See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, I, 1: PG 21, 28 AB.” Joseph Ratzinger, “La Mission d’Après Les Autres Textes Conciliaires,” in *Vatican II: L’Activité Missionnaire de l’Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1967), 129 n. 11, indicates that this reference to Eusebius does not really support the point being made, but, of course, the point can be supported in other ways. “The reason for this allusion is not very clear, since in this work Eusebius, in treating of the non-Christian religions, has another emphasis than our text: Eusebius underlines the aberrations of the pagan myths and the insufficiency of Greek philosophy; he shows that Christians are right in neglecting these in order to turn to the sacred writings of the Hebrews which constitute the true ‘preparation for the gospel.’” (“La raison de cette allusion n’est pas très claire, car dans cet ouvrage l’orientation d’Eusèbe, par rapport aux religions non chrétiennes, est tout autre que dans notre texte: Eusèbe signale les égarements des mythes païens et l’insuffisance de la philosophie grecque; il montre que les chrétiens voient juste en les négligeant pour se tourner vers les livres saints des Hébreux qui constituent la véritable ‘préparation évangélique.’”) The Sources Chrétiennes translation of this text, *La Préparation Évangélique: Livre I*, trans. Jean Sirinelli et Édouard des Places (Paris: Cerf, 1974), 97-105, shows that Eusebius, in the chapter cited, only mentions the non-Christian religions and philosophies as being in dire need of conversion. He speaks of them as representing a piety that is “lying and aberrant” (*mensongère et aberrante*) and cites the scripture that speaks of “exterminating all the gods of the nations” and making them “prostrate before Him.”

<sup>8</sup> The Walter Abbott translation that appeared in 1966 translates the Latin phrase as “but rather often.” The commonly used Flannery translation of the council documents translates the Latin *at saepius* as “very often.” This is the translation we are using. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition, vol. 1, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing, 1996). Other English translations use “but often” (the translation of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the precursor of the National Council of Catholic Bishops; contained in *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II: Introductions by Douglas G. Bushman* [Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1999]). The Vatican website translation also uses “but often.” The English translation (by Clarence Gallagher) of *Lumen Gentium* in Norman Tanner’s two-volume collection of the *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990) uses “more often, however.” The French translation of the text that Congar collaborated on translates *at saepius* as “mais trop souvent.” *L’Église de Vatican II*, Tome I, Texte Latin et Traduction, P.-Th. Camelot (Paris: Cerf, 1966). The Vatican

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website French translation uses “bien souvent.” The Italian translation on the Vatican website is “ma molto spesso.” The Spanish translation on the Vatican website is “pero con mucha frecuencia.”

<sup>9</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person who Ever Lived* (San Francisco: Harper, 2011) is perhaps the best known of the popular evangelical books adopting stances similar to Balthasar’s regarding the possibility of eternal separation from God.

<sup>10</sup> John R. Sachs, “Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell,” *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 252-53.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Schenk, “The Epoché of Factual Damnation,” *Logos* 1, no. 3 (1997): 124-25.

<sup>12</sup> Avery Dulles, “Current Theological Obstacles to Evangelization,” in *The New Evangelization: Overcoming the Obstacles*, ed. Steven Boguslawski and Ralph Martin (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 19-20.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”? With A Short Discourse on Hell*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988). 166. Henceforth, *Dare We Hope*.

<sup>14</sup> *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 218.

<sup>16</sup> Edith Stein, *Welt und Person. Beitrag zum christlichen Wahrheitsstreben*, ed. L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven (Freiburg: Herder, 1962), 158 ff. Cited by Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 219-21.

<sup>17</sup> James O’Connor, “Von Balthasar and Salvation,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 89, no. 10 (July 1989): 12. See also in the same text O’Connor’s comments on the tenor of Balthasar’s work.

<sup>18</sup> Roch Kereszty, “Response to Professor Scola,” *Communio* 18 (Summer 1991): 228-30.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin L. Flannery, “How to Think About Hell,” *New Blackfriars* 72, no. 854 (November 1991): 473-74.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Schenk, “The Epoché of Factual Damnation,” *Logos* 1, no. 3 (1997): 135-36. See also Balthasar’s mockery of those who attempt to integrate the two outcome passages with the universal offer of salvation passages in *Dare We Hope*, 184-85.

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<sup>21</sup> It's the same approach he took to introducing Adrian von Speyr's writings to the public in two books. He explicitly says he will start publishing the more conventional biblical meditations because there are disconcerting things in some of her other writings. The first book, first published in 1968 in the original German, provides a lengthy overview of their relationship and collaboration and an overall introduction to the written works of Adrienne von Speyr: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*, trans. Antje Lawry, Sr. Sergia Englund, O.C.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 98-99. The second book was first published in 1984 in German and is a much more intimate portrait and homage to the importance of their relationship for all of their joint theological work and an introduction to their "child," the secular institute of the Community of St. John: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Our Task*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 361-62. Cited in Edward T. Oakes, *The Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 46, 306.

<sup>23</sup> Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 338.

<sup>24</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 761, 839, 841-44, 847, 1260, and 1281 all cite *Lumen gentium*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> This is by no means an isolated text. See also the direct question to Jesus about whether few in number will be saved and his response in Luke 13; the separation and judgment parables in Matthew 13; the clear assertions at what sinful behavior which if unrepented will exclude people from the kingdom of God in 1 Corinthians 6; Galatians 5; Ephesians 5; 2 Thessalonians 2; and Revelation 21-22, among many others.

<sup>26</sup> The central part of this teaching is in *Theodramatics*, vols. 3-5 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990-1998).

<sup>27</sup> Oakes, *The Pattern of Redemption*, 241-42.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. John R. Sachs, "Review of 'Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar,'" *Theological Studies* 56, no. 4 (December 1995): 788. Sachs, who is in other respects a strong defender of Balthasar, in a review of Oakes's book, thinks that Oakes is too sympathetic to Balthasar's "rather strong tritheism" and believes that "Balthasar succumbs here to the very sort of vain speculation in theology that he condemns."

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<sup>29</sup> Oakes, *The Pattern of Redemption*, 314. Italics are Oakes's and appear to be Oakes's summary of a key teaching of Balthasar, rather than a direct quotation of him.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 318 n. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Pitstick, *Light*, 53, cites Augustine's conclusion, in considering the various possible interpretations of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6, that if those who die in mortal sin go to hell immediately and their punishment is eternal (DS 857, 1002, 1306, DS 72, 76, 411, 780, 801), to hold that conversion after death is possible is contrary to the faith. "There is no possibility of their conversion after death. Indeed, St. Augustine finds the ideas of conversion after death and the ongoing preaching of the Gospel in hell to be ridiculous, since they militate against the necessity and charity of preaching the Gospel in this earthly life." Pitstick is citing Saint Augustine, Ep. 164 contained in Letters, 3:131-64. *Writings of St. Augustine 11*. The Fathers of the Church 20 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 391. O'Connor, "Salvation," 16, does not seem to advert to this aspect of Balthasar's theory when he comments on the condemnation of the Origenists: "It should be clear that this condemnation is not directly contrary to Fr. von Balthasar's thesis. He does not teach that the damned will be eventually restored. He proposes the hope that no humans are or will be actually damned." It actually seems that Balthasar is suggesting that damned humans may meet Christ in hell and be given another chance. Kereszty, "Response," 231-32, clearly explains the difficulty with positing conversion after death: "According to Scripture and Tradition, our free acceptance and rejection of God's grace takes place here on earth, and conversion in a radical sense after death is impossible. Not even those in purgatory can help their own process of purification; rather they rely on the help of the living. [Kereszty references nn. 26, 506, 2308 in *Christian Faith* in the doctrinal documents of the Catholic Church, ed. J. Neuner & J. Dupuis (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1975).] The explicit magisterial statements reflect a consistent Christian anthropology according to which a human being can act as a human being and thereby decide freely about his destiny only in this life while he is in the body. In contrast, Balthasar seems to say that sheol is contemporaneous to all sinners of all times and their encounter with Christ in sheol decides whether or not sheol becomes for them purgatory or eternal damnation. [Kereszty references *Theologik* II, 314-29; see also *Theologik* II, 345-61 where the very murky material on the efficacies of souls in hell may be found.] How he can reconcile his own theory with the Church's teaching remains – to say the least – unclear to me."

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<sup>32</sup> In those parts of his writings where he speculates on what happens in hell he draws very heavily on the purported mystical revelations of his close companion Adrian von Speyr. To discuss to what extent Balthasar's speculations are dependent on these purported mystical revelations and to discern their source and validity would require additional research, and while quite an important issue, is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>33</sup> Avery Dulles, "The Population of Hell," 37.

<sup>34</sup> Decrees of the Council of Trent, Session 6, "Decree on Justification," chapter 15. Tanner, 677.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 16. Tanner, 678.

<sup>36</sup> "Some Current Questions in Eschatology," in *International Theological Commission: Texts and Documents 1986-2007*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Sharkey and Thomas Weinandy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 85-91. The widespread belief in "second chances," in the form of various theories of reincarnation caused the ITC to devote substantial attention to this issue in their document on eschatology.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Dulles, "The Population of Hell," 36.

<sup>39</sup> When the ITC in the document on eschatology, "Some Current Questions in Eschatology," 90-91, attempts to assess the efficacy of the universal offer of salvation, it cautiously says that it has "ample efficacy." It then warns: "But, since hell is a genuine possibility for every person, it is not right – although today this is something which is forgotten in the preaching at exequies – to treat salvation as a kind of quasi-automatic consequence. . . . The Christian ought to be aware of the brevity of life since he knows we have one life only. As we 'all sin . . . in many ways' (Jas 3:2) and since there often was sin in our past lives, we must 'use the present opportunity to the full' (Eph 5:16) and 'throwing off every encumbrance and the sin that all too readily restricts us, run with resolution the race that lies ahead of us, our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith' (Heb 12:1-2). 'We have not here a lasting city, but seek one that is to come' (Heb 13:14). The Christian then as an alien and a pilgrim (cf. 1 Pet 2:11) hurries in holiness of life to his own country (cf. Heb 11:14), where he will be with the Lord (cf. 1 Thes 4:17)."

<sup>40</sup> Flannery, "How to Think About Hell," 477.

<sup>41</sup> O'Connor, "Von Balthasar and Salvation," 20.

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<sup>42</sup> Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 236-37.

<sup>43</sup> Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," trans. Kevin Smyth, *TI*, vol. 4, 13 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 323-46. Despite the sometimes bitter disagreement between Rahner and Balthasar on certain issues, Balthasar adopts Rahner's theory that the scriptural texts on final judgment should be interpreted only as warnings, and on this issue at least both end up in remarkably similar places, despite very different methodologies. As Schenk, "Factual Damnation," 130-31, puts it: "Balthasar adopted many of the formulations developed by Rahner in his 1960 essay, 'The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions'."

<sup>44</sup> *Dei verbum*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, ed. Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 146.

<sup>46</sup> *Dei verbum*, 12. Joseph Ratzinger, *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Thomas Söding, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 91-126, cites the principle of the unity of scripture as central to a truly Catholic approach to the scriptures. He provides a useful analysis of the main thrust of *Dei verbum* in relationship to the contemporary confusion and conflict in biblical interpretation.

<sup>47</sup> Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 58.

<sup>48</sup> O'Connor, "Salvation," 15.

<sup>49</sup> 2 *Clement* 7:6 to 8:4. In C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970), 189. Cited by O'Connor, "Salvation," 14.

<sup>50</sup> Hauke, "Sperare per tutti?" 204-08.

<sup>51</sup> Hauke, "Sperare per tutti?" 219. ("La testimonianza dei santi, però, è decisamente sfavorevole all'opinione che l'inferno potrebbe essere vuoto. Tuttavia, con la sua "tesi più azzardata", provocando il *contradicitur*, il nostro teologo ha messo in rilievo l'importanza della santità per la testimonianza teologica. La proposta balthasariana di mettere in prima fila i santi e la mistica, applicata conseguentemente, porta alla falsificazione della speranza nell'apocatastasi e conferma l'esito doppio del giudizio.")

<sup>52</sup> A footnote in *Lumen gentium*, 14 lists several citations from the works of Saint Augustine as support for the phrases quoted here.



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<sup>53</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 14. Luke 12:48 is cited as support for this teaching as well as Matthew 5:19-20; 7:21-22; 25:41-46; and James 2:14.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Bullivant, *Faith and Unbelief* (New York: Paulist, 2014), 125.

<sup>55</sup> Oakes, *The Pattern of Redemption*, 185.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column.php?n=2383>. See my response: <http://www.renewalministries.net/wordpress/?paged=4>. Similar comments have been made about the last chapter of my book, where I suggest that an “adjustment” in the pastoral strategy of Vatican II is needed in order to take into account a more contemporary reading of the “signs of the times” and the continual evaluation that’s needed to speak to the realities of the current situation. To suggest, as some have, that I am repudiating the strategy of Vatican II and the postconciliar popes is a gross misrepresentation. All I can suggest here is that the actual chapter be read, preferably as the conclusion of a reading of the entire book.

<sup>58</sup> *Spe salvi*, 45-46.

<sup>59</sup> See for example other of Benedict’s teachings which clearly affirm the certainly settled Catholic teaching, based on the scripture, that those who die in serious sin, unrepentant, exclude themselves from the kingdom. “True death, on the other hand, which is to be feared, is the death of the soul which the Book of Revelation calls ‘the second death’ (cf. Rev 20: 14-15; 21:8). In fact, those who die in mortal sin without repentance, locked into their proud rejection of God’s love, exclude themselves from the Kingdom of life.” Benedict XVI, Angelus Address, November 5, 2006.

<sup>60</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1033.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 1036.