

HELL! WHY TALK ABOUT IT?

Fr. M. J. Huber, C.S.S.R

[A Plain talk on a vital subject for all. Read and reflect on it several times]

ONE EVENING last summer I was travelling towards the city of Melbourne along a very dangerous highway. The highway lived up to its reputation that evening by claiming three people in death. I saw the wreckage of the car that had side-swiped a semi-trailer. It was top down in a narrow but deep ditch.

“Anybody in there?” I said to a man who was poking the beam of a torch through the wreckage.

“No. Nobody in there.”

“Anybody hurt?”

“They took two into Melbourne in a police car and there’s three dead ones there in the ambulance.”

Nobody used any words just then, because, I suppose, all of us felt the same way: dryness in the mouth, tightness across the chest and shoulders; helplessness in general; and forgetfulness of all things outside that little circle where death had claimed three lives so quickly.

When such things happen our reactions are always the same. We are stunned, stupefied, speechless. Then we begin to talk; say the same things over and over until the shock begins to wear off.

But there is something much worse than fatal traffic accidents, something more horrible than plane crashes and hospital fires, and something more terrible than unexpected death in the night; something that can truly be called the greatest and saddest misfortune of all; it is that any human beings should go to hell where they will suffer horrible punishments forever and ever and ever and ever.

And can you name any three persons on whose face you ever saw the effect of shock because of the thought of even one soul going to hell? Have you ever experienced any emotional disturbance because you thought of a soul in hell forever?

Maybe it is because we have never seen hell; maybe it is because we have never seen a soul go to hell; maybe it is because we do not think enough about hell.

It is true that nobody ever went to hell because he thought about heaven. But many people have gone to heaven because they thought about hell. And it is just us true that many people are on the road to hell right now because they refuse to think about hell.

For some years a sort of silent agreement has been growing and spreading among otherwise sensible people, even among Catholics, that you must not make mention of the fact that there is such a place as hell; that if you do, personally, believe in a place of eternal punishment for those who die in unforgiven mortal sin you must not speak of it even to those who, like you, believe in hell. It’s not being done. In fact, this practice of frowning upon an open declaration of a belief in hell has been so generally accepted that any priest who is so far behind the times as to preach a rousing sermon on the eternal punishments of hell, runs the risk of being swept out of his pulpit by a wave of indignation. To put it mildly, he faces the possibility of never being the people’s choice as a preacher.

But the fact remains that human beings on their way through the world need the thought of hell to help them get to heaven, they need to be reminded of the existence of a place of eternal punishment so that they will remember that there is a place of eternal reward

Business men need hell in business to keep business honest; married people need hell in their homes to help them live a family life that is true to the law of God; young couples need hell in their company keeping to help them keep it straight and clean; the criminal needs hell beneath his feet to show him the way back to God; and you, even you need hell on the table before you, if it will keep you from eating a piece of meat on a day when it is forbidden. All the world needs hell and the thought of it to bring it back to a sense of sin.

For the world has lost its sense of sin and is playing a child’s game of living in a world of make-believe. And that is the worst sin in the world to-day; the sin of hypocrisy; the sin of pretending that things are not what they are. People used to commit sin and admit that it was sin; now they commit sin and pretend that it isn’t sin; that everything is all right. That, in great part, is due to the fact that they learned to pretend there is no hell.

Would a man commit mortal sin and continue to live in that condition week after week, for months, if he really believed in hell? But if he succeeded in convincing himself that for him there is no hell, because he will not die suddenly and unexpectedly, that he will repent and obtain forgiveness for his sin before he dies, what is he doing but pretending that for him there is no hell?

Our Lord has told us very plainly that there is a hell and that in hell the devils and all members of the human race who die in mortal sin will suffer eternal punishments. On the day of general judgment, He tells us, the judge will say to the wicked,

“DEPART FROM ME ACCURSED ONES, INTO THE EVERLASTING FIRE WHICH WAS PREPARED FOR THE DEVIL AND HIS ANGELS.”

All denying of hell and all the pretending that there is no hell will never change the meaning nor destroy the truth of that statement.

Any man who chooses mortal sin and by mortal sin rejects God and His friendship and fully gives himself over to something less than God (which is done in the commission of every mortal sin), and keeps on making that choice until the last moment of life has passed, will keep on making that choice for all eternity. For after death the will cannot change or make another choice. The time for choosing has passed. Forever that man will continue to reject God and God must respect that choice as He respected man's free will during life. God will give that man just what he wanted; an eternity of punishment in hell.

The punishment of hell will last forever because only in the fact that it lasts forever can hell be the punishment deserved by the man who dies in unforgiven mortal sin. Mortal sin is an offence against God Who is infinite and the offence is measured against the one who is offended; and if mortal sin is therefore infinite or without measure in its guilt then the only way in which punishment without measure can be administered to the creature who is guilty of such an offence is to make the punishment last forever.

The damned in hell realise that they have lost God forever. This realisation, which is called *the pain of loss*, is the most terrible of punishments of hell.

The damned in hell suffer also what is called *the pain of sense*. This pain is inflicted upon them by the fire of hell. The damned in hell suffer this pain not only in their souls, but after the day of resurrection and judgment this punishment of fire will be extended to their bodies.

There, in sketchy outline, you have the fundamental doctrine about hell and its punishments. It does not make delightful reading, even in cold theological language. Certainly it does not fill the mind with happy, carefree thoughts. If we really think it over seriously it makes us, to say the least, a bit uncomfortable. I suppose that is why people who want to be comfortable, even in the sins they commit, begin to deny hell, or pretend there is no hell, or simply refuse to think about hell in one way or another.

God in His heaven is well aware of the fact that men have lost their sense of sin; that they have lost the sense of hell; that they are pretending there is no hell. Isn't it true that He permitted the Blessed Virgin to appear to the children of Fatima and show them hell open at their feet? And the Mother of God said to the children:

“YOU SEE HELL WHERE THE SOULS OF POOR SINNERS GO.”

It was not for the children's sake that she showed them hell. She told them they were going to heaven. It was a warning to the world to stop committing sin and to stop pretending there is no hell.

We could conclude these reflections right here by saying, “Let's think more about hell” But there is an important thought to be added, it is good to let the thought of hell help us fulfill our destiny, but our destiny is to love God. We need hell to keep us from sin, not only because sin means punishment but because sin is an assertion of self, and a denial of love of God. We need hell to help us keep the commandments, but we must remember that the greatest commandment is this:

“THOU SHALT LOVE THE LORD THY GOD, WITH THY WHOLE HEART AND WITH ALL THY STRENGTH.”

It is a beautiful thing to let the thought of hell drive us out into the desert so that we are far from all things that can tempt to sin; but the sacrifice is not complete unless above that offering we place ourselves and our heart with all its love.

Yes, it is good to say to ourselves often, "There is a hell," and to think about the terrible punishments of hell. but let us always begin and conclude our meditation on that place of eternal punishment by saying:

"ALL IS VANITY, EXCEPT TO LOVE GOD AND TO GIVE YOURSELF TO HIM."
