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The Four Last Things – Hell (Part 3)

Last week we considered the second of the four last things, the eternal truths as we examined judgment: our own *particular judgment* and the *universal judgment* at the end of time. This week we consider the darker of man's potential ends, Hell. A good place to begin is simply reaffirming that hell does indeed exist. As the Catechism clearly states:

“The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, ‘eternal fire.’ The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.” (CCC 1035)

Hell is not held out to man as a divine “scare tactic” but as a tangible sign of God's merciful, just love and an invitation to conversion here and now. As the Catechism continues:

“The affirmations of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church on the subject of hell are a call to the responsibility incumbent upon man to make use of his freedom in view of his eternal destiny. They are at the same time 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.’” (CCC 1036)

The one thing that can separate us from God forever is sin. In sin we choose what is ultimately less than God over God Himself. The particular kind of sin that prepares the way to hell is particularly *mortal sin* that goes unrepented of in this life. Mortal sin, unlike venial sin, puts to death the life of charity in us. While faith and hope abide in heart of the sinner (these bring him back to God's mercy and love in the Sacrament of Reconciliation), charity is dead.

For this reason, we can say that a true resurrection takes place in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as the sinner, dying to self and the world, admits his sin and by his sorrow and the priest's absolution is raised up to new life. The truth of hell reminds us of the need to cultivate here and now a *hatred* for sin that will spur us to reject what is *not* God, *for* God.

An illustration of Hell may be helpful in putting some of these things together. Dante Alighieri, in his epic poem, the Divine Comedy, tells the story of a pilgrim (himself) moving from hell, through purgatory and unto heaven. He begins his journey through hell with sympathy for the damned souls he encounters. Each soul he encounters recounts (often against their will) the reason for their being there. As he witnesses these brief

testimonies one after another, a change starts to occur as he moves ever deeper and deeper into the Inferno.

Dante realizes with each explanation that the souls he is encountering are not innocent sufferers at the hands of an unjust God. They are rather the recipients of their just desserts. Dante begins to see quite plainly before him the *ugliness* of sin. The “*restlessness*” leaves the pilgrim feeling exhausted as he reaches Hell’s bottom, occupied appropriately by the Devil, encased in ice, flapping great bat-like wings endlessly only getting himself more and more “stuck.” The frenetic activity of hell stands in stark contrast with the “*rest*” of heaven. Next we explore man’s true end and the peace that does not disappoint.
~Fr. Matthew Biedrzycki

Next week: Heaven.