



INTRODUCTION

One day, one of the legionaries was telling us that he met a man who started telling him all his problems and sufferings. This man had a colleague whom he hated tremendously. They had been competing to see who could make the other's life more unbearable. At one point, this man said to the priest with tears in his eyes: "you can't imagine the hell that I have in my heart, all because of this hatred that is consuming me very slowly." Then the priest asked him: "If you know the cause of your suffering, and if that cause is in your hands to change it, why don't you just forgive him?" To his surprise, the man replied with his tears sinking back into his eyes: "I don't want to forgive him. Even if I go to hell, I will never stop hating him..."

After hearing this story, I asked Our Lord: **"Why Jesus? Why is hatred capable of turning freedom against oneself?"**

It has been a couple of years, and now I am starting to understand the mystery of hatred, and with it, the mystery of hell. That is why I want to share with you some of my reflections about hell.

Many people deny the existence of hell. To be sincere, I think that they have really good arguments. However, hell is not something impossible to be understood. With this, I am not trying to affirm that I completely understand all the mystery that is behind. What I do know is that all the arguments that I thought were against the existence of hell, are now even a confirmation of hell.

And which are these arguments? **There are three that I have found the most common:** the first argument is that hell goes against the nature of God. “If he is omnipresent” -people say-, “then there can’t be a place where He is not present, and if there is such a place, then God is not God anymore.” The second argument is that it denies human freedom: if there is a hell waiting for the wicked ones, then it is not true that I am free to do whatever I please, and that term of “human freedom” becomes fake. The third argument is that hell goes against the love of God for two reasons: first, because it would imply that the love of God is conditioned to our behavior: if you are a good boy, you will be invited to heaven, but if not, you go to hell... second, because it is impossible to conciliate the idea of a merciful God with the existence of hell, and of course, we all prefer to stay with the idea of a merciful God. Therefore, hell doesn’t exist.

Sounds interesting, don’t you think? What I will do in this conference is, first, I will expose the nature and important things to consider about hell. Then, I will try to contrast that reality with each of these three arguments mentioned above. I pray to God that you may be able to discover in these ideas, the beauty that is behind (very behind!) the mystery of hell. Yes! You heard it right... Believe it or not, I can’t conceive a merciful God without the existence of hell; I wouldn’t be so grateful in my life if hell didn’t exist.

CONTENT

What do we think hell is? We tend to imagine that it is a physical place where you enter and it smells bad, and your senses never get used to it; a place where the demons are always tormenting you. Or maybe we think of it as a kind of grouse pool where you are sinking but you never die, neither can you take even a short little breath. We can think of many other things like these. However, these perspectives are completely wrong and far away from what the Catholic Church believes about hell.

First of all (and I am sure this will “break the schemes” of many of you) **hell is not a place, but a state of the soul**. Hell is not a “room” where you enter after death and you can’t get out. Let me explain myself.

Have you seen how the metals are instinctively attracted to a magnet? Or how a book falls instantaneously if you stop holding it on the air? The same way all things are attracted to the earth, we all are naturally attracted to God. We all have a deep desire for an everlasting love, of transcending this insignificant life –however proud we may be with what we have done in our lives-. God attracts all His creatures to Him, the same way a magnet attracts all metals. Glorifying God consists on letting oneself to be pulled by that

attraction and not putting any obstacle or barrier between us and God. That is what we, **Catholics**, mean when we affirm that **all creation glorifies God**. However, the human person is a special creature, a special “metal”: only we can decide weather to let himself be attracted or not. None of the rest of creatures can refuse to that attraction. **Only man can glorify God FREELY**. Only we can decide not to glorify Him.

And that is what our life is about: making decisions to let God shine forth in our poor lives. Depending on what decision we make, we fulfill more or less our whole mission in life, which is to glorify God. It is pretty obvious: when we make good decisions, we feel happy and we experience in ourselves a little piece of heaven, that joy of knowing that we are what we are supposed to be. But, the more we set barriers between God and our soul, the more we get frustrated and suffer. Isn't this true? Haven't we all experienced that frustration of knowing that we could have done something more noble, that our decisions could have been more courageous at certain moments of our lives? That frustration is just a shadow of hell, and it is then that hell starts to exist. Coming back to the example of the magnet, we can say that that frustration is like experiencing the attraction to God, but finding in between He and me an obstacle placed by my own will. How come that my passions can turn my free will against myself? How come that I feel so attracted to the Divine and still step back by my own determination? This is very true, and we must believe it to understand ourselves better. “The spirit is strong, but the flesh is weak”. Yes: **It is possible to decide freely against what we know is the best for us**. Just like the man I was talking about.

Having said this, we can now start contrasting this reality with the three arguments against the existence of hell.

1. “Hell goes against the nature of God. If he is omnipresent, then there can't be a place where He is not present, and if there is such a place, then God is not God anymore.”

I don't see how hell -understanding it as a state of the soul and not as a physical place- can be opposed to the Divine nature. Rather, the existence of hell is a confirmation of the omnipresence of God. Why do you think that we suffer and have problems of conscience when we want to do something that we know is not right? For instance, when you want to get drunk just for pleasure, and you find yourself in the perfect occasion, you are with your “friends”, but still you doubt and you hesitate. Let's suppose that you fall and you commit sin. How do you feel after that? Yes, you pleased your body, you had a great time, but there's a feeling of discomfort. That feeling comes from the presence of God. He is always present, awfully present. He never leaves us alone. Even when we deny His presence, it is impossible for Him not to be somewhere. And hell is precisely that: seeing God so close to my and yet not wanting Him to be there. Seeing in His presence

a threat to our passions and dark intentions. Hell is the desire of throwing God away from our lives, but never being able to escape from His loving gaze.

2. "Hell denies human freedom: if there is a hell waiting for the wicked ones, then it is not true that I am free to do whatever I please, and that term of "human freedom" becomes fake."

The problem here is just a matter of misunderstanding the concept of freedom. I don't know why people think that freedom equals to do whatever they please, to have the capacity to do this or that, decide for or against... Big mistake!

Freedom is not an end in itself, but a tool to achieve our ultimate goal, which is heaven, or love, or God, as you want to call it (it's the same!). Freedom, therefore, is the capacity to choose the good. The fact that our destiny (God) is already traced doesn't imply that we are not free. We are free not to decide or determine our destiny, but to accept it or reject it. We can reject it freely, but that won't change the fact that we were meant for that.

Only by being what we are meant to be we achieve our personal realization and happiness. Only by being what we are meant to be we become authentically free persons. A pilot can freely decide that he will no longer fly his plane, but that he will drive it on the streets. He is free to make that decision, but I bet you! It won't work, and in the least of the chaos we can imagine, the plain will end up completely destroyed and broken forever.

Just as nourishment is what nourishes us, a free act is what makes us free, don't you think? Therefore, the "capacity" to choose evil, is in reality a defect of human freedom more than a "capacity".

Based on this concept of human freedom we can understand the reality of hell. The souls that go to hell are the ones that make the decision to go to hell. You might be thinking it is stupid and impossible that someone can freely opt for hell. Well, I also thought that before I heard the story of that mad man mentioned before...

Have you read Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus? "He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." (Jn 3: 18-20). I have to accept that even I, that am consecrated, have experienced this terrible hatred to light. It is scary, but nevertheless true: sometimes I hate the light and clarity with which

my conscience keeps telling me: “you know you shouldn’t be doing this, or thinking this, or consenting this feeling...” Think for example of a lame person who is used to beg for money. Jesus approaches to him, and before healing him, he asks him: “do you want to be cured?” Why does He ask that silly question? Who on earth would answer: no, thank you, I prefer to stay lame for the rest of my life...” Well, if that person starts thinking of all the new responsibilities that he will have to face by being no longer lame, maybe he will think it twice. And believe me, there are many who end up answering: “no, thank you, I prefer to stay lame, cold, alone, in suffering, for the rest of my life...” “Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”

3. “Hell goes against the love of God for two reasons: love is unconditional and merciful. Therefore, hell doesn’t exist.”

Of the three arguments, I think this is the most difficult to understand (maybe that is why I left it to the last!). I am tempted to say that only through prayer we can understand that hell is not in opposition with love. Indeed, what I have understood about it has been only through prayer. **Without prayer, the human reason is just insufficient. Even faith without prayer remains impossible to be accepted. You need to pray.**

However, I will share with you what I have prayed about it. It has brought me to the same idea: hell doesn’t contradict the idea of an unconditional and merciful love. Rather, it confirms it.

How can this be possible? Here we will have to philosophize. Do you like philosophizing? It’s nothing different than using our brain, putting it to work on matters that we have always taken for granted. So let’s start. Some people have come to me and told me that if God is merciful, it is impossible that He permits such a painful punishment forever! “Okay, we understand that if He got mad at someone, He has the right to give us some good lessons, but sending us to eternal fire? No, it is simply impossible.”

Do you remember the story of the man that didn’t want to forgive his colleague? Imagine that he dies right now. He goes before Jesus, and Jesus stares at him with eyes of mercy. I imagine that He is looking at him in the same way He looked at Judas after the kiss of the betrayal. It is not a gaze of hatred, of complain or revenge. Rather, it is a gaze of pity, of a frustrated love. It reflects more sadness for Judas than the pain of being betrayed. Now, if Jesus would ask our mad man if he would be ready to forgive his colleague so as to be able to experience love in His heart, we know that the mad man would answer “no, I won’t forgive!” (and we know it because after death there’s no possibility to make new decisions. Now, in your imagination, try to compare the gaze of Jesus with the gaze of our poor fellow. Who is suffering more? Look closer, hear the heart beats of both of them, and tell me: isn’t Jesus suffering more than the condemned one? When one single soul goes to hell, the real victim is Jesus, our Lord. After all, He was the one that died on the Cross so that not even one soul would be lost. Do you think

that Christ was not aware of the many souls that, even with his death, were going to be condemned? Do you think that in Gethsemane He was a too naïve, that He should have listened to the devil telling Him that it was impossible? No! He knew everything! In that tragic moment, He saw all the sins of every single soul, He saw all our ingratitude towards Him, He knew that not even with His death on a Cross we would turn our hearts to Him. But He didn't stop loving us. Isn't this what we call unconditional love? He gave His life for those that He knew were going to reject Him FOREVER.

Hell is not about a God mad at us. It is about a God that did all He could to give us His joy. Hell is about a betrayed God that accepts, out of His unconditional love, to be betrayed forever. And He won't change that if it implies to violate our freedom. He respects His promises. He will give us what we ask for. He won't enter into our lives if we don't allow Him to do so, even if that is the cause of His sufferings on the Cross. He won't enter, not because of bitterness or resentment, but because He is a sweet gentleman that doesn't impose Himself to His creatures.

CONCLUSION

As you see, talking about the eternal truths that the Catholic Church has always taught us is not something to be afraid of. The truth of hell is beautiful, because it lets the love of God shine forth. He came to save us, not to condemn us. He came to make us aware of the power of our freedom, this beautiful gift given just so that we could enjoy glorifying Him. Flowers glorify Him, but they don't enjoy it, because they don't do it freely.

After all, it is Christ who talked about hell. The Church didn't invent this doctrine. If you don't believe them, then you must consider Christ as a liar. But we know He is not a liar, we have been witness of His light, we want to accept His light, and become light for the others.

Finally, I invite you to pray for all those souls that have started their way to hell with the hatred they crave in their hearts. We must understand that in the moment they die, they will lose their will to change their decisions. Just until the day of our death we are "free" to make choices. After death, our intentions will be crystallized for eternity. Pray so that they can accept the light of Christ and find the courage to illuminate the darkness of their intentions and be purified. Pray that God may give them the courage needed to turn their