

## **Catholics Fearing Hell**

**2/12/13**

When I find myself in discussion groups with other mature Catholics, I often like to ask them questions about their attitudes toward aspects of the faith. Last night, at a parish bible study with seven other people, I asked if, as I did, they always felt a twinge of fear in the back of their hearts that they would go to hell—that God would send them to hell for their sins. Of the eight of us, six said immediately that they often experience this fear and have always felt it. The seventh said that she felt not so much fear as respect for God that he could do this. The eighth did not speak.

I asked this question not only because I experience this fear but because I believe that most Catholics do. One of the eight last night blamed her fear on Sr. Mary So-And-So, who instilled this fear in her as a child. Others said that they had experienced nightmares about this fear.

We were—all eight of us—sinners, to be sure, because we all recognized our failure to live perfect moral lives. But nonetheless, all eight of us were in a church-hall meeting room on a Monday night, gathered prayerfully to study the Bible. We were all, as you might say, faithful Catholics—not morally perfect by any means, but committed to God in Jesus Christ.

So, was there any basis in our lives to substantiate our fear? Of course, there is personal sin, and especially, offenses against the dignity of other people, in all of our lives. But even the Catholic Church officially teaches that such behavior does not automatically earn you a one-way ticket to hell. To qualify for hellfire, you must knowingly and with a free and full commitment of your will—a commitment unclouded by emotion and unconfused by imperfect analysis of your situation—commit a grievous act or movement of heart which clearly violates the will of God, as known to us by the moral teachings of the Church.

It's difficult to imagine that any of the eight of us elderly people gathered last night (the youngest was perhaps 45) and spending our evening studying the Word of God devotes much of his or her time behaving in the way set out in the previous paragraph here. Who of us would

confront the God of the Universe, the Creator who turns our hearts to himself, in such a bold-faced way?

So, if we Catholics don't spend our time telling God to go to hell, why should we fear that God will tell us to go to hell? Is it that we don't trust God not to double-cross us? Do we suppose that God will pull some hell-worthy sin out of his hat when we face him in judgment and condemn us for it—or in some other unexpected way blame us for that old sin-guilt that we Catholics carry with us, hidden at the bottom of our soul-lockers, behind the smelly gym shoes, forgotten?

Is it that we love God and commit ourselves to him, but we don't fully trust him?

Scripture goes two ways on this question. God did take the kingship of Israel from Saul for an offense over which Saul had little control, really. And God did prevent his great prophet Moses from setting foot on the Promised Land because of a single moment of weakness, and perhaps aggravation, and fear for his people, and yes, mistrust of God. Once!

On the other hand, Jesus consistently presents God as his—and our—loving Father who gives all of himself to us in love and whose interest is in being generous and forgiving to us. And yet, Jesus also announces the judgment of sinners and their punishment. And there we are, caught in the abyss between our love of God—which in these instances, feels more like appeasement of God—and our belief that we are sinners worthy of endless punishment.

So, consider this as you examine your own fear of condemnation. The Church teaches that once we achieve death, having remained faithful, we enter heaven where in the presence of the glory of God we will never again choose to sin. But why not? Does God take away our free will, so that we *can't* sin? The Church says No. We don't sin because we're enraptured by the beauty of God—the Beatific Vision. Okay, I buy that. Who would want to interrupt so beautiful an experience?

Then Lucifer comes to mind. The Church tells us that angels have free will and that at a certain time God sought allegiance from the angels. Some chose God; others, like Lucifer, didn't, and these God condemned to everlasting hellfire.

But wasn't Lucifer—as intuitively knowing as the theologians say he is—also enraptured by the beauty of God, so that he would never choose to be separated from God? The answer to this is No. He chose pride over enrapturement. But why would he do that?

Therein lies the problem. Apparently, the beauty of God, the Beatific Vision—the experience of which is the nature of the heavenly reward—was not powerful enough to prevent a great angel from rejecting God and choosing his own benefit and self-concern. If a great angel in heaven can toss God aside, why should this same possibility not exist for us far weaker creatures?

Will there come a time in our heavenly lives when God might heave us out of heaven to join Lucifer in the pit of hell? If that could happen to Lucifer, why not to us?

This is quite upsetting to think about, and it is heart-wrenching to ask these questions.

Can we trust the scriptures on this matter? Can we trust the theologians and the Catechism? Somewhere within ourselves, do we ask the question, Can I trust God?

No wonder we Catholics are full of fear of the God who made us and loves us.

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As for my personal situation, the ancient fear and sin-guilt remain embedded in me—and at my age, I can say: probably for the rest of my life. And probably when I stand before the Lord after my death—as we Christians believe will occur—this fear and sin-guilt will remain in me as well. So that, when he asks those questions in his open-hearted kindness: “Matthew, do you love me?” And “Matthew, did you feed my sheep?”, the shadow of that fear and sin-guilt will pass over me and cloud whatever purity of heart my answers might otherwise have been born in.

I believe that the answers that arise in me—and in all of us—at that moment will be completely spontaneous, honest, and unmanipulable. They will not be “reasoned” answers. Rather, they will be the instantaneous truth of the heart.

I believe at this moment of writing that yes, I do love the Lord, that for years I have daily sought to find my life in him, and that I have striven to open my heart moment-by-moment to his

will, though often failing at this for selfishness. I know also that in the many essays I have written in these last years, I have often attacked and found fault with the Catholic Church, and at other times just nipped at the ankles of the Church from spite or vengeance. But I also believe that the well-spring of this torrent of words—flavored with invective, irony, impatience, and also sorrow, loss, and betrayed love—is the Spirit of God, who educated me, and trained me, and ordained me, and opened the inquisitive mind and skeptical heart that he gave me—to these questions and observations about the follies and insufficiencies and cruelties and rule-bound absurdities and hubris of the Roman Church—the Church which, perhaps in small part through these words, he desires to change, to rectify, to purify.

I believe that I have tasted the meaning of that least palatable of beatitudes, “Blessed are they who mourn.” For in all these pages, I have not lost my love for that pure and beautiful Body of Christ, the source of the Eucharist and of the sheep-feeding which the Lord desires.

Nonetheless, though I can say all these things now, I fear that in the moment of judgment itself, when that darkness of fear and sin-guilt moves into my awareness, that deep insecurity and uncertainty about myself under whose shadow I daily live, I will be thrown into confusion. And I blindly fear the answers that will arise from me.

I do not fear that the Lord will double-cross me. I fear my knowledge of how far short I fall from the “perfect.” I fear that satanic self-accusing spirit within me. I fear the unknown depths of myself out of which, I fear, the terrifying ultimate truth of my own spiteful self-love will finally emerge.

It is not the Lord I fear. I fear myself. I fear my imperfection and my inability to control my deepest heart and my inability, in that desperate moment of questioning, to counterfeit an acceptable answer. I fear that I will double-cross myself.

I know the meaning of the last verses of Romans 7, and Paul’s deep suffering articulated in them. There is no way for one to control the depths of oneself out of which genuine thought and action arise. The fearsome truth of oneself is undeniable, uncontrollable, and one senses, intolerable.

My only hope at that moment of true self-declaration is in—not myself, not my spiritual disciplines, not my devotional practices or pious beliefs or hopes, not my “good record” which is, in fact, not so good—but in the Lord. The Lord will stand there before me with a purpose which is not to condemn one whom he loves, but (per Jn. 14) to escort me into the heavenly kingdom. I trust his words: that his interest is not in accusing and condemning, but in continuing to open the right way to me.

That is my hope as I find myself at this moment in these spiritual and psychological realities—these lenses—through which I read my interior experience.

But spread like clear sky over all this ponderous intelligencing is the Easter gift of Jesus to his disciples: “Peace be with you.” (Jn. 20:21). In the context of this current discussion, not only of my own fears, but also of the fears of my companions in the Bible study, who are presumably striving as I am to live the life of Christ as each of us sees it come to be in our individual lives, where *is* this peace and why when he gives peace do I and we feel fear?

If Jesus brings peace, and if we seek to follow Jesus, why are we cursed with this poisonous fear that corrodes our joy in the Lord?

I know the truth that respectful justice given to others is the precondition of peace. And so, living out Jesus’ two great commandments is the foundation of the peace he gives. But I believe that I am living in that way, as my personal resources and my health permit, as I presume my Bible study companions are. So I ask again, why does this shadowy fear of hell lurk in our hearts, which are dedicated to God? And how are we to bridge that chasm between fear and the Peace of Christ?

I have no answer for this. And so, I wait for God.