

HELL AND LIMBO

Does hell exist? I guess that's the first question. How can a loving God sentence anyone to hell? Maybe it's only temporary, a limited time of punishment?

I am absolutely convinced that hell exists. The Church has always taught the existence of hell. I believe in hell because I believe in human freedom. What we think and say and do counts. If I can freely say "Yes" to God, then I also have the same freedom to say "no" to God. Ultimately, human beings choose and their choices have consequences, eternal consequences.

That does not mean that I have any idea about the population of hell. Judgment is not ours to make. Only God knows the true heart of a person, not you, not me and not the Church.

We do know that God, in His love for us, wills the salvation of everyone and makes it possible for everyone to be saved.

God does not impose the penalty of hell on anyone. If a person ends their journey of life in serious, unrepented mortal sin, they have freely chosen a life apart from God and hell is just the living out of that life and that choice. A person is already in hell on this earth. After death, they fully realize and experience that fact.

The pain of hell is often portrayed as eternal fire. But in fact THE pain of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone we find our ultimate happiness and our peace. There is no physical reality like fire, but eternal frustration, being separated from the one who alone can fulfill us.

We pray that we might have the grace of repentance from our sins, the willingness to humbly turn back to our God who is always ready to forgive us, no matter what. We pray as the old form of the Act of Contrition used to say, that we might avoid "the loss of heaven and the pains of hell."

Some of the early theologians had difficulty with the question of infants' getting into heaven without being baptized. Such infants are incapable of making any act of faith in God because of their young age. These theologians said that these children went to a place of total natural happiness called LIMBO. There these children would not have the vision

of God, which alone fulfills human hopes, but would not be punished in any way either because they had personally done nothing wrong.

The Church has never taught LIMBO as a part of our Catholic faith. It was one or another theologian's effort to try to deal with a particular issue.

The Church's view is that everyone is offered the possibility of salvation, regardless of age, intelligence or anything else. We do not know how this is worked out by God in the case of children who die without baptism, but we are confident that salvation is theirs. Our prayers in the funeral liturgy for unbaptized children indicates this belief quite strongly.

God's will and fervant desire is that everyone be saved. Let us pray that God's will be done in our lives and in the lives of those we love. Pray confidently for one another's salvation and rejoice in the gift of eternal life promised to all who believe and who struggle to live according to that belief.