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Talk #2

Why is There a Hell?



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Why is There a Hell?

No one can deny that the eternity of hell is a doctrine which poses grave difficulties to the human mind and heart.¹ We have to recognize with intellectual humility that we are dealing with a doctrine that is supremely mysterious. Just as heaven—our supernatural end—is a supernatural mystery that transcends the grasp of reason, so too the voluntary frustration of this end by the rational creature has an analogously mysterious character. This should not surprise us, for iniquity is itself a mystery: *mysterium iniquitatis*. Mortal sin eludes the full grasp of the mind. Why would a creature freely choose to reject the Creator by preferring some creaturely satisfaction to the will of the Creator? And why would God permit the creature, whom He loves, to choose and merit final damnation?

Given the mysterious nature of hell, the theologian must recognize that he is powerless to fully grasp the mystery. Our assent, therefore, must be based squarely on the fact of divine Revelation. However, the believing mind also wishes to penetrate as far as possible into the intelligibility of the truth that is believed. What are the arguments of fittingness for an eternal hell?

The doctrine rests on three principal pillars: (1) the freedom of the human will, (2) the order of justice, and (3) the fact that God has established this life to be a trial of our lives in which we are to merit heaven through fidelity to God in the face of temptations.

Freedom of the Will

First of all, if the will were not truly free, the doctrine of hell would be impossible to reconcile with the divine attributes of justice and goodness. This is the great problem with Lutheran, Calvinist, and Jansenist doctrines on hell.

The Church has repeatedly defended the freedom of the human will against various heretical sects or rationalistic currents of thought which have denied that freedom. The denial of free will can be found in all times and places, despite the irrefutable evidence of each man's personal

¹ John Paul II alluded to this difficulty in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 185: "In Christ, God revealed to the world that He desires 'everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4). This phrase from the First Letter to Timothy is of fundamental importance for understanding and preaching the Last Things. If God desires this—if, for this reason, God has given His Son, who in turn is at work in the Church through the Holy Spirit—can man be damned, can he be rejected by God? The problem of hell has always disturbed great thinkers in the Church, beginning with Origen and continuing in our time with Mikhail Bulgakov and Hans Urs von Balthasar." See also Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 215: "This teaching, so contrary to our ideas about God and about man, was naturally only accepted with great difficulty."

experience of free choice. The human mind is perennially tempted to deny free will due to a hidden desire to avoid the burden of moral responsibility and sin.

Everyday human experience shows us that the human will is free and we therefore have moral responsibility for our actions. This is a revealed truth, evident in very numerous passages of Scripture, such as Sirach 15:14-17:

It was He who created man in the beginning,
and he left him in the power of his own inclination.

If you will, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.

He has placed before you fire and water:
stretch out your hand for whichever you wish.

Before a man are life and death,
and whichever he chooses will be given to him.

The existence of free will can be demonstrated by reason in several ways.

1. First of all, if the will were not free, then moral exhortations, praise and blame, respect and vituperation, merit and demerit, rewards and punishments, would all be superfluous and pointless. But that would be absurd.

2. Secondly, we all have the experience of choosing things freely. This means that we have the consciousness that our choices were not predetermined either by others or by our own constitution or nature. We know that we could have gone either way in our choices. And this applies to trivial as well as to serious matters. I could have ordered a hamburger or lasagna in the restaurant. I could have avoided or not avoided a proximate occasion of sin. I could have reflected before acting or not. I could have gone to Mass on Sunday or willfully stayed at home. In fact, any crime committed by others could be committed by each one of us, if we chose.

3. Third, we know that we have free wills by the remorse that we feel in conscience when we act badly. The remorse includes two aspects: (a) the choice that we took was not right and that it violated the law written in our heart; and (b) the choice that we took was free (at least in part, and this is enough), and therefore we are truly and personally culpable for having made it. For we know that no one is truly and personally culpable for what is not somehow in his power to avoid.

4. Finally, philosophers demonstrate that the possession of free will is a consequence of having a rational nature. Through reason we can order means to ends. Now it frequently happens that it seems that a desired end—such as happiness, health, knowledge, travel, etc.—can be brought

about by different means. Reason sees that all of these different means have good and bad points. We experience that our choices concerning these different means are free precisely because we could choose any of them, or not, depending on whether we *consider* their good or bad points in leading us to our end (and these good or bad points that we consider may be true or merely apparent and deceptive).

For example, I could choose illicit accumulation of money as a means to happiness by considering and focusing on the advantages that money seems to provide for the acquisition of happiness; or I could equally choose evangelical poverty for the same end, by considering the counsel of our Lord to give my possessions to the poor and to follow Him if I wish to be perfect.

The will remains free with regard to every particular object presented by the intellect because the object of the will is the good *in general*. No particular good in this life moves it with necessity because no particular good in this life realizes the good in general. Even in cases in which one choice appears manifestly better than the others, the will is still free in its choice. The will is not necessitated by any particular good, even if it appears as the best overall, because it may still have some aspect which can be seen negatively, which could motivate not choosing it.

The capacity to deliberate is what makes our acts free and morally responsible. The brute animals are not free, because they act on the basis of instinct, which is determined by nature to prefer one particular object to another, without reasoning and deliberation which can weigh different alternatives so as to choose between them.

It might be supposed that our wills necessarily desire God, for true happiness necessarily consists in God, and the will naturally and necessarily desires happiness. However, experience shows that this is not the case during our life on this earth. We can refuse God. It is indeed true, however, for the blessed in heaven who see God face to face, for they see with absolute certainty that God is an infinite sea of Absolute Goodness, Whom they cannot fail to love, just as we cannot fail to love and desire happiness in general.

Since we do not yet see Him as He is, even the true supreme Good, God, can appear to our erring reason as an evil in some respect, insofar as He prohibits what I desire, or punishes on account of sin. (For this reason all the damned hate God.) Thus it is not necessary that man elect a life ordered toward union with God. However, if he does not, he tragically commits a great and incredible stupidity!

The Order of Justice

Secondly, the doctrine of hell rests on the order of justice, which consists in giving to each one his due. Through the exercise of free will, we make ourselves and progressively

*forge our moral identity.*² Given that we have free wills capable of making free choices, it follows that this freedom brings with it *moral responsibility*. Our conscience tells us that our good choices merit praise and reward, whereas our sins merit blame and punishment. Furthermore, our habitual moral identity formed on the basis of our individual choices is itself something that we have progressively chosen. Thus God will judge our moral identity itself and the habitual state of our heart.

What is due to sin? In every grave sin, the sinner prefers his private good to the common good, and ultimately prefers his will to the will of God. It follows in justice that one who prefers his private good to the common good should be deprived of a share in the common good which he has despised and scorned. Likewise it follows in justice that one who prefers himself to God and his own will to God's will, should be deprived of union with God as his final end.

The essence of hell is to be deprived of both of these goods. The pain of damnation is the deprivation of union with God in the beatific vision through one's own fault. At the same time, hell also implies the loss of the common good which was despised in sin. This entails, above all, the deprivation of interpersonal communion in all its beautiful dimensions, peace, and even bodily welfare (to the extent that this was despised in one's neighbor).

We saw in the previous talk that no one goes to hell without having chosen it and having remained in that choice until the end of life. Everyone has a final end, on the basis of which they will everything else that they will. This final end is ultimately either God or oneself. One chooses hell by ultimately choosing oneself as one's final end, loving oneself over God, and not retracting that disordered love through repentance. In every mortal sin we are loving ourselves over God and His will, as known in conscience. God in His justice respects the creature's ultimate choice of final end. God takes human freedom seriously!

This Life Is a Trial to Merit Heaven

The angels were given a trial to merit heaven or hell which lasted one angelic instant. Their trial was based on one initial choice, made in the fullness of angelic knowledge, after which they were either granted the beatific vision or fell into hell.

Due to the weakness of our human nature, the temptation to which we are subjected, the great extent of our ignorance, and the fact that it is natural that we mature step by step, God's mercy offers a lifetime to the human person in which he can progressively form his moral identity, and always gives him the chance to repent of mortal sin. The parable of the prodigal son beautifully illustrates

² CCC 1731: "By free will one shapes one's own life. Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude."

the patience of the divine mercy which awaits the return of the prodigal to the end. However, other parables give witness that this period of mercy and forbearance has an end which comes as a “thief in the night,”³ and in which it will be said to the unprepared soul: “Fool! This night your soul will be required of you” (Lk 12:20).

Man’s period of trial is far longer than that of an angel. Nevertheless, it is necessary that the trial be limited to a finite period with a distinct end, for otherwise no one would ever get to heaven. In harmony with our nature, God has determined that the end of our trial be the end of this mortal life. All merit and demerit must therefore occur before the separation of body and soul in death. The state of the soul at the moment of death thus determines the person’s moral identity for all of the eternity that follows.

God’s omnipotence could have given beatitude to creatures without subjecting them to a trial at all, or without making beatitude depend on our acts in this time of trial. However, the divine wisdom deemed that this would not have been as wise an order as that in which beatitude is merited by the rational creature’s free cooperation with God’s grace.

What are the reasons of fittingness for God giving man a trial in which his beatitude is at stake and he risks a miserable eternity? Such a world order is wiser for various reasons: (a) it gives the creature a real participation in the working out of his own beatitude; (b) it better manifests the divine justice; (c) it gives more scope to the divine mercy and love; and (d) it is a supreme motive to foment the practice of fraternal charity.

God’s glory is more manifested by a world in which created persons have a real cooperation with the Creator, than a world in which they are mere puppets without responsibility. The rational creature is given the capacity to cooperate freely in the determination of his own moral identity, which means that he also cooperates in determining his participation in God’s beatitude that is the reward of fidelity. God does not want us to have beatitude without our first desiring it and working for it (insofar as we are capable of it through attaining the age of reason). In the words of St. Augustine: “He who made you without you, does not justify you without you. And so He made you when you were unknowing; He justifies you when you are willing.”⁴

Although the creature can do nothing without the prior grace of God, the existence of a true trial makes it possible for the creature to cooperate with the Creator and receive beatitude as the *crowning* of that effort.⁵ God’s gift

3 See 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10.

4 *Sermo* 169.11.13. This text is cited by St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa of Theology*, I-II, q. 111, a. 2, ad 2.

5 See James 1:12: “Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.”

of grace is such that he allows us to *merit* heaven on the basis of His gratuitous gifts. St. Augustine has given the classic expression to this doctrine, which has been taken into the liturgy: “You are glorified in the assembly of your Holy Ones, for in crowning their merits you are crowning your own gifts.”⁶ The Council of Trent in the Decree on Justification similarly says that God’s “goodness towards all is such that He wants His own gifts to be their merits.”⁷

By cooperating with God’s grace in the trial of salvation, all the citizens of the Kingdom of heaven give glory to God in a way they could not have done without the trial. A part of the glory of heaven will consist in the triumphant manifestation of the merits of the saints. For this reason martyrs appear in depictions of the Last Judgment with the instrument of their martyrdom, which signifies their participation in Christ’s redemptive Cross. In this way, through God’s infinite condescension, heaven will be a “shared work” and a shared glory, as well as a shared beatitude.

However, the rational creature’s ability to freely participate in the earning of beatitude implies the real possibility that he may freely refuse to cooperate with grace. The very freedom of our participation in God’s plan during this trial implies that some will participate and others will choose not to do so in the decisive moments of their lives. We are not free to not will happiness, because this is a natural desire. However, we can prefer creatures to God, and experience shows that we have all done this ourselves. It follows, therefore, that we could do so to the end and die in that state if we make that tragic choice.

Secondly, in a world in which beatitude was not the crowning of fidelity in trial, God’s justice would not be manifested in giving to each creature according to his works. Creating men and angels immediately with the possession of the beatific vision would also curtail God’s love and mercy! In a world without a trial, no creature could give God glory through freely preferring Him over creaturely satisfactions. The overcoming of temptation gives great glory to God. It is a great mercy and manifestation of God’s love that He gives us this opportunity to give Him glory through freely adhering to Him in the trials of life. It is through God’s mercy that He gives us opportunities to show our love for Him by choosing fidelity to His will. In a world without a trial, that particular glory of love would never be given to God.

Third, a world order in which beatitude were given without a trial would lack one of the greatest motives for the exercise of fervent charity. Knowing that the salvation of all of our fellow men stands in the balance in the trial of this life ought to lead us to works of self-sacrificing char-

6 *Roman Missal*, Prefatio I de sanctis, citing the “Doctor of grace,” St. Augustine, *En. in Ps.* 102, 7: PL 37, 1321-1322. Cited in CCC as a heading for the section on merit, before no. 2006.

7 DS 1548.

ity which would not have been necessary without the fact of the real danger of their eternal loss. Just as the trials of physical suffering in this life provide us with an occasion to practice the corporal works of mercy and so foment charity, so the uncertainty and the trial involved in the salvation of the souls of our fellow men gives us an impetus to practice the spiritual works of mercy to the point of heroism. This consciousness of the trial in which all souls stand and the difficulty of salvation led to the heroic charity that we see in the Apostles and Saints. On this account, for example, St. Paul glories in his tribulations:

Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?" (2 Cor 11:24-29)

In all of these trials, St. Paul was "pressed by charity" for souls. The same could be said for every saint. The Church's mission of evangelization and charity is based on the uncertainty and difficulty of the salvation of every person and the consequent need for the mission of the Church. If there were no trial for the salvation of our souls, the Church would lose its essential purpose and reason for being. Still more, the world would have had no need for the infinite charity manifested in the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ!

Furthermore, a world in which beatitude would be given to all regardless of the state of their soul would be a world violating the principle of justice. The injustices of history would in a sense have the last word. The trampling on both God's glory and human dignity worked by every unrepented mortal sin would never be vindicated, and would have no transcendent consequences. A world without hell would be a world in which sin is cheap. Pope Benedict in *Spe Salvi* has a profound reflection on this topic, to which we shall return in our talk on the Last Judgment. He writes:

Grace does not cancel out justice. It does not make wrong into right. It is not a sponge which wipes everything away, so that whatever someone has done on earth ends up being of equal value. . . . Evildoers, in the end, do not sit at table at the eternal banquet beside their victims without distinction, as though nothing had happened.⁸

In summary, in a world in which beatitude were not the result of victory over a true trial, many great goods would be lost, including the creature's participation in arriving

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi* 44.

at his final end, the manifestation of the justice of God, the glorification of God through fidelity in trial, and the necessity for the practice of heroic charity in the service of the salvation of souls. For these reasons Dante puts these words over the portal of hell: "I was made by the supreme power, by the highest wisdom, and by eternal love."⁹

Despite the existence of hell and the real possibility that we could find ourselves on the broad way that ends up there, we can be sure that God's plan is one of super-abundant mercy, for "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20-21).

Dare We Hope that All Are Saved?

Hans Urs van Balthasar has recently focused the attention of theologians on the question of hell with his work, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?*¹⁰ The central thesis of his book is that it is legitimate to *hope* that all men have been and will be saved, and that hell, although it exists, is and will remain empty of human beings.

To avoid confusion, it is important to distinguish his position from that of Origen, and from those who deny the existence of hell altogether. Origen did not hypothesize that none would go to hell, but that all the souls condemned to hell—together with Satan and the fallen angels—would one day repent and end up in heaven. In other words, the error of Origen was to deny the eternity of hell. Van Balthasar does not contest the eternity of hell, nor does he make any factual claim about the number of souls in hell, but rather he argues that we can *hope* that an eternal hell is empty of human beings. I think that this is incorrect. It is certain that there are some individuals in hell, including Satan, all the other fallen angels, and Judas, the "son of perdition,"¹¹ of whom Jesus says "it would be better for him if he had never been born."¹² If Jesus foresaw that Judas would not be damned and would repent, He could not have said this, for never having existed could only be preferable to hell, and never to heaven!¹³ Therefore, we cannot hope that perhaps hell is *entirely* empty of human beings.

⁹ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 3.

¹⁰ *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?* *With a Short Discourse on Hell*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

¹¹ See Jn 17:12: "I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled."

¹² See Mt 26:24: "The Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."

¹³ See Avery Cardinal Dulles, "The Population of Hell," *First Things* (May 2003): "If Judas were among the saved, these statements could hardly be true. Many saints and doctors of the Church, including St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, have taken it as a revealed truth that Judas was reprobated."

Secondly, it is inconceivable that Jesus would have spoken of hell as He did if He had foreseen that no one would ever lose their soul. Why did He make so many solemn warnings?

Third, human experience unfortunately seems to show that there are people who live in mortal sin without repenting of it, and who consequently choose themselves as their final end, loving themselves over God. Yet it is dogma that all who die in such a state will go to hell.¹⁴ We certainly hope that some of them repent on the point of death, even though they may show no such sign. Nevertheless, it would be unwarranted and naïve to think that *all* do so. The reason for this is that people *generally* seem to die as they have lived, for better or worse.

Von Balthasar cites in support of his position the text of 1 Timothy 2:1: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for *all men*, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.” Von Balthasar says that this “could not be asked” of the Church “if she were not allowed to have at least the hope that prayers as widely directed as these are sensible and might be heard.”¹⁵

It is surely true that the Church prays fervently and strives for the salvation of *all souls*. All her members are called to join in this prayer. The Church must be filled with a great desire for the universal salvation of mankind. This, in my opinion, is the positive merit of von Balthasar’s position. It reminds us of our Lord’s *thirst for all souls*. The Church must never content herself with praying only for Catholics, or any finite part of mankind!

However, it is one thing to pray for all men and to have a concrete and solicitous hope for the salvation of all our neighbors, and it is another thing to hope that hell be absolutely empty. The former is concrete and fruitful in fomenting charity and heroic sacrifice, whereas the latter seems to me to be abstract and relatively sterile, for it is not directed to prayer and sacrifice for souls. The prayer and hope for the salvation of all of our neighbors is a supremely practical concern, whereas the hope that hell be empty is more of a theoretical or speculative concern. The New Testament directs us both to pray and hope for the salvation of all (in the practical order), and at the same time to recognize the reality of hell and the difficulty of the road to heaven (in the theoretical order).

It seems to me that the attitude of theologians in this question ought not to diverge from the answer given by Jesus Himself when asked a similar question. In Luke 13:23, Jesus Himself was asked: “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” He could have answered: “Dare to hope that all men be saved.” Instead, he answered: “Strive to

enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us.’ He will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from. . . . Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity!’” (Lk 13:24-29). When Jesus says that “many will seek to enter and will not be able,” the obvious meaning is that many of those who desire salvation will fail to attain it and will “depart from Christ” definitively.

The *same charity* that demands that we pray for the salvation of all requires that we recognize the difficulty of their salvation, and the real risk of their loss. The Church prays fervently for the salvation of all souls and works tirelessly for this precisely because of her awareness that “many are called, but few are chosen.”¹⁶ Charity demands that we pray for the salvation of all, but the gift of fear of the Lord requires that we recognize that souls are falling into hell every day, and that we must work out our own salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12).

On the Number of the Saved

Theologians have posed the question as to the number of the saved. Will the majority of men be saved, or only a minority? In my opinion, the principal point to bring out in this question is that the proportion of the saved as compared to the reprobate is not something statistically constant in every society, but will vary greatly according to the degree that the life of the Church is more or less present and vigorous in that society. We should expect that a much greater number will be saved in a society more fully imbued with Christian principles and saintly models. The reason for this is obvious. It is much easier to die in a state of unrepented mortal sin where the preaching of the Church is not heard, and where one is not aided by the sacraments, the Scriptures, and the examples of the heroic charity of the saints.

Christ came and founded His Church to bring salvation: that we may have life in abundance. Hence we can expect and hope that the proportion of the saved will be very great in a truly Catholic society. However, to the extent that the population is only nominally Catholic (as is today so often the case), our realistic expectation could not be so high.

The second point to bring out is that salvation is something supernatural that is infinitely above human nature, and thus is impossible without grace. It is not enough to be merely a decent and ordinary human being. On the contrary, salvation implies corresponding to grace so as to love God above all things as our Father, and have perfect

14 See Pope Benedict XII’s bull *Benedictus Deus* (1336).

15 *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?*, 35.

16 This saying is the conclusion of the parable of the man who came to the wedding feast without a wedding garment, in Mt 22:13-14: “Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”

contrition for all mortal sins. We cannot simply assume that almost all men have this, for it is not in us by nature. This consideration reinforces the conclusion that far more will be saved in a truly Catholic society, in which the channels of grace are far more abundant through the seven sacraments of the Church.

On this question, the view of the greatest Doctors of the Church, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine,¹⁷ and St. John Chrysostom,¹⁸ is that the majority of mankind (abstracting from the situation of a fully Catholic society) will not be saved. They base this conclusion principally on the words of Christ in Mt 7:13-14. St. Thomas deals with this question in the *Summa of Theology*, I, q. 23, a. 1, ad 3, in response to an objection that reasons that the majority ought to be saved because God's works are more perfect than those of nature. Since most people attain the goods of our natural life, such as reason, they ought to be all the more expected to attain the goods of heaven and the vision of God, since it is the power of God that brings this about. He answers by stressing that heaven is a supernatural good, which, because of its divine transcendence, is something supremely arduous and difficult. Exceeding the powers of nature, it requires a struggle in collaboration with God's grace, working against the disordered inclinations of concupiscence and sloth. Thus he holds that it is not reasonable to think that the majority of men will attain it, as if it were merely the natural course of things. He writes:

The good that is proportionate to the common state of nature is to be found in the majority; and is wanting in the minority. The good that exceeds the common state of nature is to be found in the minority, and is wanting in the majority. Thus it is clear that the majority of men have a sufficient knowledge for the guidance of life; and those who have not this knowledge are said to be half-witted or foolish; but they who attain to a profound knowledge of things intelligible are a very small minority in respect to the rest. Since their eternal happiness, consisting in the vision of God, exceeds the common state of nature, and especially in so far as this is deprived of grace through the corruption of original sin, those who are saved are in the minority. In this especially, however, appears the mercy of God, that He has chosen some for that salvation, from which very many in accordance with the common course and tendency of nature fall short.¹⁹

Whatever the proportion of the elect to the reprobate, we can be sure that God's plan is a plan of super-abundant mercy, as St. Thomas emphasizes, for "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned

in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rm 5:20-21).

Spe Salvi

Pope Benedict takes a more optimistic view of the number of the saved in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*. In a discussion on purgatory he speaks of the relative numbers of three types of people: (a) those who are obstinately impenitent at the moment of death; (b) those who are perfectly purified in love; and (c) those who die in a state of grace but still need purification:

With death, our life-choice becomes definitive—our life stands before the judge. Our choice, which in the course of an entire life takes on a certain shape, can have a variety of forms. There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth and readiness to love, people for whom everything has become a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in certain figures of our own history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what we mean by the word *Hell*.²⁰ On the other hand there can be people who are utterly pure, completely permeated by God, and thus fully open to their neighbours—people for whom communion with God even now gives direction to their entire being and whose journey towards God only brings to fulfilment what they already are.²¹ Yet we know from experience that neither case is normal in human life. For the great majority of people—we may suppose—there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil—much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul.²²

Thus we can hope, through the grace of God and the mediation of the Church, for the ultimate salvation of the "great majority," though they may have to pass first through Purgatory. It is interesting that rabbinical Judaism maintains the same position with regards to the three classes of men: The Talmud records this saying of the school of Shammai:

"[There will be] three groups on the Day of Judgment [when the dead will rise]: one comprised of the thoroughly righteous, one comprised of the thoroughly wicked, and one of middling [people].

[C] "The thoroughly righteous immediately are inscribed and sealed for eternal life.

[D] "The thoroughly wicked immediately are inscribed and sealed for Gehenna,

[E] "as it is written [Dan. 12:2]: 'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to eternal life

17 *Contra Cresconium*, bk. 3, no. 66 and bk. 4, no. 53.

18 See Hom. 40 to the People, and Hom. 65 in the Gospel of Matthew. Other great theologians who hold this view include St. Irenaeus, St. Basil, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Gregory the Great (Hom. 19 in *Evang.*), St. Robert Bellarmine, and Suárez (*Opera omnia*, vol. 1, p. 524).

19 Another related text of St. Thomas is *ST*, I-II, q. 71, a. 2, ad 3, in which he explains that vice seems to be more common than virtue because most men follow the inclination of their senses more easily than the guidance of reason, and thus are easily led into sin.

20 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1033–1037.

21 Cf. *ibid.*, 1023–1029.

22 Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 45–46 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), 94–96.

and some to shame and everlasting contempt.’

[F] “Middling [people] go down to Gehenna [17a], scream [in prayer], and rise [again],

[G] “as it is written [Zech. 13:9]: ‘And I will put this third into the fire and refine them as one refines silver and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them.’

[H] “And, concerning this group, Hannah said [1 Sam. 2:6]: ‘The Lord kills and brings to life. He brings down to Sheol and raises up.’”²³

We will return to this topic in our next talk on Purgatory.

²³ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. Jacob Neusner (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), vol. 6b, p. 83–84.

