

GOSPEL WARNING

Is Hell empty? Jesus says no

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"I like to think Hell is empty, I hope it is reality"; said Pope Francis **speaking** on the Sunday night Italian TV programme, *Che Tempo Che Fa*. "What I have to say is not a dogma of faith but my own personal thought," the Pope said.

He did not declare that Hell does not exist, he did not say that it is empty, he did not advocate apocatastasis; yet in those apparently legitimate words is all the drama

that the Church has been experiencing for over half a century. In another interview from two thousand years ago, more genuine and less media-driven, as Our Lord was on his way to Jerusalem, "a man asked him, 'Lord, are there few who are saved?'" (Lk 13:23). The answer to this question highlights all the distance, not of time nor of space, but of meaning, between Jesus Christ and his vicar: "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will try to enter it, but will not succeed".

The Lord, who is mercy made flesh, does not try to extinguish the concern of salvation from man's heart, but even seems to confirm it: *many* will not enter. Therefore, you who listen to me, you who question me, strive to enter.

The continuation of Luke's Gospel passage, which is considered the Gospel of mercy because of the presence of the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost drachma, and the prodigal son, is even stronger: "When the master of the house rises and closes the door, standing outside, you will begin to knock at the door, saying, Lord, open to us. But he will answer you: I do not know you, I do not know where you are from. Then you will begin to say: We have eaten and drunk in your presence, and you have taught in our squares. But he will declare: I tell you that I do not know where you are from. Depart from me all ye doers of iniquity! There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you cast out" (Lk 13:25-28). This is by no means an isolated passage. In the Gospel of St Matthew, we find a similar warning: "Enter by the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it; but how narrow is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and how few are those who find it! Once again, the contrast is stark: *many* are lost, *few* find the way to life.

That is why St Paul, the Apostle who wore himself out to proclaim that God's salvation is available not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles, he himself, in a letter distinguished for its affection and consolation, exhorts the Christians of Philippi thus: "wait for your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12). With fear and trembling: why? Because, true to the Lord's teaching, he knew very well that a broad category of sins closes the door to entry into the kingdom: "Do not deceive yourselves: neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor rapacious shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9-12). No illusions in this regard, justified by a misunderstood mercy of God, no false tranquillity based on the fact that conditioning of all sorts would make it almost impossible to sin.

Saint Augustine, in Book XXI of his masterpiece *De Civitate Dei*, already found

himself compelled to rebuke the false teachings of the 'merciful Origenists', who understood the Gospel words in their own way, hypothesising universal salvation. These, "defending their own cause, almost attempt to go against God's words with a mercy, so to speak, superior to his own" (XXI, 24. 1). *Misericordia maiore conantur*. [They attempt to be more compassionate] The 20th century was the century in which these 'attempts' became dominant theological thought. Even in 1948, a Louis Bouyer in his early thirties was already noting the collapse of the eschatological dimension in Christian life, and in particular the emptying out of the reality of Hell and the concrete danger of eternal damnation: "we maintain a hell to put ourselves in compliance with texts that are all too clear; but, in private, we reassure people that no one risks going there".

Now, not even in private. There is a difference between the hope that many people will be saved and that Hell will be empty, that abysmal difference between working generously and tirelessly for our own and others' conversion and continually preaching 'excuses' for sin. The mission, the preaching on eternal life, the ascetic life, the fight without discount against evil, in all its forms, the continuous call to repentance and penance, the indication of the demands of God's commandments are the consequences of the former; the continuous affirmation of psychological, social, cultural conditioning, the morality of individual cases and circumstances, the search for solutions so that all may receive sacraments and blessings, without any appeal to conversion, are the manifestations of the latter.

A reader, always very attentive and sharp, unlocked for this writer the memory of a passage from the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, from the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. The dialogue between the Grand Inquisitor and Jesus Christ, who returned to the world and was immediately arrested after performing the miracle of the resurrection of a little girl, focuses on the claim to build a better order than the Son of God had done. And in this better world, there could be no lack of that greater mercy of which St Augustine spoke, a mercy capable of a supposedly more universal salvation than that desired by Christ: "We will allow them to sin, they are weak, lacking in strength and so they will love us as children, we will tell them that every sin will be redeemed if committed with our permission, that we allow them to sin because we love them and that we will take the punishment upon ourselves and they will love us as benefactors (...). It is prophesied that Thou wilt return with Thy chosen ones, with Thy strong and haughty people, but we shall say that they saved only themselves, while we saved them all... and we shall say: "Judge us if thou canst and darest. I too aimed to be among the number of Thy chosen ones, the strong, but I returned to myself and joined those who corrected Thy work. I

left the proud and returned to the humble, that the humble might be happy". Thus the Grand Inquisitor.

If the Redeemer of men announces that many will end up where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, why declare your own personal pleasure in thinking that Hell is empty? If Revelation announces that those not written in the book of life will be cast into the pool of fire (cf. Rev 20:15), why "hope" that this pool will be empty? Theological hope is based on faith, and faith is based on the words of the Lord, on the Revelation of God. Therefore, the hope that does not disappoint (cf. Rom 5:5) rests on the Gospel proclamation of salvation that, in Christ, is offered to all, that God "wants all men to be saved" (1Tm 2:4) and therefore has given us all grace in Christ; but also on the fact that "many, as I have told you many times before, and now with tears in my eyes I repeat, they behave as enemies of the cross of Christ: but perdition will be their end" (Phil 3:18-19).