

XIII. HELL

MAN, we say, is a union of spirit and matter. The soul animates the body. But there comes a time when the body is no longer capable of responding to the soul's animating power. The soul is as powerful as ever, but the body has deteriorated—whether by the sudden destruction of some essential part or by the gradual wearing down of age. When that moment comes, the body ceases to be vivified by the soul, and falls away into corruption. The soul, being a spirit, does not cease. It ceases to animate the body, but its other powers—of knowledge and will—are still in action. The soul lives on, awaiting the moment when, by God's act, the body is to be reunited to it and man thereby reconstituted in his complete humanity for all eternity.

Death is not at the end of life. Yet there is a finality about death. It closes the first period of man's life, and this period, though not in itself permanent, is decisive of all that is to come. It is not the end of life. But it is the end of the road. After it man has arrived, and there is no further journeying for him. This life upon earth is a period of preparation. At the end of it, man has *become* something: the something he has become he will eternally remain.

HELL

The decisive factor is his will. From the beginning of his life upon earth God is the supreme object of the love of man's will when this is rightly directed. Yet during life upon earth there is in most men a good deal of fluctuation, and in all men at least the possibility of fluctuating. At one moment the will is set towards God. Then comes mortal sin and the will is set towards self and away from God. With repentance and true sorrow, the will is turned again to God. And so it goes on. But with death the fluctuations of the will are over: it has chosen finally, and will not change. This power of the will to make a final choice which it will not change—a power which makes possible not only the eternity of hell but also the eternity of heaven—anyone might at least suspect from reflection upon the experiences of this life. Character tends to set into a mould, the way of life to become settled as the years go by. We might, as I say, suspect that at death the will has made final choice of its direction. From God's teaching we know that it *has* done so. It is either fixed towards God or fixed away from God: that is to say man either loves God with a love that will abide forever or hates God with a hatred equally abiding. In the one case he will spend eternity with God. In the other case he will spend eternity apart from God.

It is easy to see how all this applies to the Catholic. By baptism he is incorporated with Christ—that is to say, he becomes a living cell in Christ's Mystical

Body. As such he is living with the Supernatural Life of Christ, just as in every man the cells of his body live with his life. But membership of Christ does not automatically mean living with the life of Christ. While the will of the individual remains united with the will of God, the life of Christ pours into his soul, and he remains supernaturally alive. But if the individual sets his will against God, he cuts off the flow of the life of Christ. He remains (during his life upon earth) a member of the Body: but he is not sharing in the life of the Body. He lives with his natural life as a man: but supernaturally he is not alive.

The ending of our life upon earth will then find us either with the Supernatural Life, with our wills united to God: or without the Supernatural Life, with our wills set away from God. The one state means heaven, the other hell.

It is necessary to be very clear about hell. I have said that if a man dies hating God, then he must be separated from God. But it may be urged that hatred of God is rare. Explicit hatred of God may be rare, but there is a form of self-love which is equivalent to it. Thus a man might go through life ignoring God—and therefore not hating Him—but building up such a love of self that he has only to be confronted with God to hate him. After death, God cannot be ignored: and then love of self will bring to the surface that hate of God which has always been implicit in it, and of which

HELL

the only possible consequence is separation from God.

This separation is everlasting. Enough has already been said to show why: it is everlasting because the state of will that produces it is everlasting. A man goes on through all eternity hating God. Therefore, through all eternity he remains separated from God. There is only one barrier between himself and God—his own hatred of God: but that barrier he will not tear down. Thus since his will is fixed in hatred of God, there is nothing to be done. Obviously he cannot be united to God, whom he hates: he must therefore remain separated.

Here, then, is a man with his will fixed irrevocably against God. What follows? In the first place he has sinned and has not repented: justice demands then that he be punished. In hell he receives punishment from God: that there is punishment, and that it is great, we know: but how great and whether or not it is unrelaxing, we do not know.

But there is a second, more terrible consideration. He is, as we have seen, eternally separated from God. But he needs God, his nature was made for God. Whenever we are deprived of something that our nature needs, we suffer. From that rule there is no escape. If we are deprived of food, we suffer the agonies of hunger. If we are deprived of drink, we suffer the far worse agonies of thirst. But our whole nature needs God far more than our bodies need food and drink. If, then, a man is deprived of God,

he must, inescapably, suffer, and this with the greatest suffering possible to man. And whereas death comes to end the agonies of hunger and thirst, the man in hell cannot die. He is deprived for all eternity of what his nature needs, *and deprived by the inflexible choice of his own will*. If any soul in hell would turn to God and ask for mercy, God would grant his prayer. But the souls in hell will not ask. They hate their suffering: but they hate God more. With their love of evil and their hatred of God, heaven would be a fiercer torment than hell. It is the tragedy of final impenitence that it puts the sinner beyond the reach of help. There is nothing that *can* be done for him. He has perverted his own nature and there is therefore no possible condition of happiness for him. Hell is bad. Heaven would be worse. What keeps him in hell is not the insatiable vengeance of God, but the unchanging direction of his own will towards evil. The will of man is free to make its choice: God does not interfere with that freedom. Those who have hoped that the souls in hell might one day be saved have assumed that those souls would one day turn from evil to good. We know, because God has told us, that they will never do so. They have *become* something—their will has fixed itself, for ever, in the hatred of God. Given the purpose of man's life, these men have failed.

It is worth noting that Our Lord is very insistent upon the reality of hell. In the best-known passage of all He describes Himself as saying to sinners at

HELL

the Last Day: "Depart from Me, ye cursed, into the everlasting fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels." In this passage are contained the three truths about hell which have already been set down: that it involves separation from God ("Depart from me"): that it involves punishment ("fire"): that it is *everlasting* fire. And there is the further assertion that the souls of the damned in hell will be in the company of those angels who, like them, fixed their wills in eternal enmity with God.

Apart from this passage, however, Our Lord is constantly referring to it. In the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, He reminds sinners of Hell six separate times. And this fact is worth weighing by those who would dismiss the doctrine as contradicting the Divine love. For no one would question Christ's love for men: yet the doctrine is undoubtedly His. There is, it is true, a mystery in the fact of Hell: but it is not a mystery of God's cruelty: it is a mystery of the human will with its possibility of fixing itself in evil.

XIII. HELL

Discussion Aids

Explain what happens when a man dies. What makes the finality about death? Do intellect and will survive after death? Which has been the decisive factor in what man is at the time of death? After death can man change that which he has *become*? What is the state of the individual member of the Church as a cell in the Body of Christ who sets his will against the will of God? If he remains in this state at the time of death, can he be with God? May we call the state he is in a state of hatred of God? Is explicit hatred of God common? What is equivalent to it that is more common? Analyze this self-love. Why is the state of separation from God everlasting? What do we know of the punishment attendant upon this separation from God? Explain why the separation in itself must be terrible suffering. Upon what do we depend for our knowledge of the reality of hell? Quote at least one scriptural passage. Advert to others. What is the real mystery in the fact of hell?

Practice: Avoid with eternal vigilance the habits that foster self-love, considering what they lead to.