

Eternal Damnation? – I

May 18, 2013

A reader has raised once more a classic problem that has arisen a few times, directly or indirectly, in these “Comments,” but it is so serious that it deserves to be treated again on its own. He writes: “I find it difficult to be the Catholic I want to be because of the doctrine of eternal damnation. I cannot seem to accept the idea that a soul could be tormented ceaselessly for all eternity. It’s just too horrible. There has to be some Catholic doctrine that it’s not so cut and dried.” In brief, how can even one soul be justly condemned to an eternity of frightful torment?

Notice that in a cave one can still visit in Segovia in Spain, a great Saint like St Dominic spent a night agonising in prayer over this question. But let us lay down immediately that there can be no question of putting Almighty God in the dock, as though he either deserves to be condemned or needs to be acquitted. If his Church teaches, as it does, that one mortal sin can condemn a soul to eternal hellfire, and if I disagree, then it is I that am wrong, and not his Church. Why am I wrong?

For either or both of two connected reasons. Either I do not grasp the greatness and goodness of God, which it is easy to do, because my little mind is finite and God is infinite. Or I do not grasp the seriousness of sin, which it is also easy to do, because sin primarily offends God, only secondarily myself and only in third place my neighbour. So if I fail to grasp the greatness of the God offended by sin, naturally I will not grasp the seriousness of sin.

The question then becomes, has the great and good God given to every human being that ever lived sufficient means during its short life on earth of knowing that he exists, that he can be offended, what basically offends him and how serious it is to

offend him? The answer can only be affirmative on all four headings.

* I do not need supernatural faith to know the existence of God. Upright reason alone tells that behind all the good things in a man's life is a Supremely Good Being. Reason twisted out of true by pride or darkened by sin may not tell of this Being, but any twisting and darkening are my fault, not God's, and they deserve a punishment proportionate to all of the goodness which I have experienced in this life and which it was "inexcusable" of me (Rom. I, 20) not to ascribe to God. * The reality of free-will is an everyday experience, and every one of us has the natural light of conscience to tell us that we owe worship to the Supreme Being, and that to refuse that worship is to offend him. Such is the First Commandment, and it does not need faith to be known. * Natural conscience also tells me of the other nine Commandments, which merely spell out the natural law, and it also tells me that to break them offends not only my neighbour but also, and even primarily, the Supreme Being. * And lastly, the cleaner my conscience is, the more clearly it tells me how serious it is to offend Him. The problem is that we are all sinners, and any sin helps to darken our conscience. But our sin is our own fault, not God's, and he is entirely just to punish us for how we darken our minds.

Alright, one may object, then all men are given in this life to know enough of God to deserve punishment after this life in proportion to how much they have offended him. But how can any mere man offend him so seriously that a punishment eternal and unimaginable is just? Let next week's "Comments" attempt to approach a mystery which is as deep in a way as God is deep.

Kyrie eleison.