

Free-will Valued

August 11, 2012

Concerning the drama of souls falling into Hell (and many choose to do so – Mt.VII, 13; XXII, 14), a reader raises a classic problem which can be framed briefly as follows. Either God wants souls to be damned, or he doesn't. If he does want it, he is cruel. If he does not want it, yet it still happens, then he is not omnipotent. Then is he cruel, or is he not omnipotent? Which?

Let us establish immediately that God sends no soul to Hell. Every one of the many souls damned sent itself to Hell by the series of choices that it made freely during its time on earth. God gave to it life, time and free-will, and also any number of natural helps and supernatural graces to persuade it to choose to go to Heaven, but if it refused, then God let it have what it wanted, namely an eternity without him. And that loss of God, for a soul made by God only to possess God, is by far its cruellest suffering in Hell. Thus God wished that the soul might choose Heaven ("He will have all men to be saved" – I Tim. II, 4), but he wanted to allow the evil of its choosing Hell in order to bring out of that evil a greater good.

Notice the use made here of the two English words, "wish" and "want." To "want" something is more full-blooded than merely to "wish" it. Thus a family father may well not wish his son to suffer harsh experience in life, but in view of all the circumstances he can want to let him suffer because he knows that that is the only way his son will learn. Similarly in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father did not wish to let his younger son leave home and squander his heritage, but he wanted to let him do so because that is what the father in fact did, and good did come of it – the return home of the son, now repentant, a sadder but wiser young man.

In the same way God wishes on the one hand all souls to be

saved, because that is what he created them for, and that is why he died for all of them on the Cross, where one large part of his suffering lay precisely in his knowing how many souls would not choose to profit by their Redemption to be saved. Such a God can in no way be considered or called cruel! On the other hand God does not want all souls to be saved unless they also want it, because if he did, they would all be saved, because he is all-powerful, or omnipotent. But, given all the circumstances, that would mean in effect overriding the free choice of those who, left to themselves, would choose not to be saved, and that would mean trampling on their free-will. Now just see how passionately men themselves value their free-will, when you see how they dislike being given orders or like being independent. They know that their free-will is the proof that they are not just animals or robots. So God too prefers his Heaven to be populated with men and not just with animals or robots, and that is why he does not want all men to be saved unless they also want it.

Yet God does not want souls to be damned, because that again would be cruelty on his part. He only wants to allow them to be damned, in view of the circumstances that souls will thus have the eternity of their own choice, and he will have a Heaven of human beings and not just animals or robots.

Thus his wish to save all souls means that he is by no means cruel, while the damnation of many souls proves on his part not a lack of omnipotence, but a choice to value his creatures' free-will, and the infinite delight that he takes in rewarding with Heaven souls that have chosen to love him on earth.

Mother of God, now and in the hour of my death, help me to love your Son and to choose Heaven!

Kyrie eleison.