

Peril Eternal

September 17, 2011

“Why are we human beings here on earth?” an old friend just asked me. I said, of course, “To praise, love and serve God, and by so doing to save . . .” He broke in – “No, that’s not the answer I want,” he said. “What I mean is that before I came into existence, I was not, and I was not in any danger. Now that I exist I am seriously exposed to the danger of losing my soul. Why was I given, without my consent, this perillous existence which, once given, I could no longer refuse?”

Expressed in this way, the question is serious, because it casts a doubt on the goodness of God. Certainly it is God who gives to each of us life and thereby sets before us the choice which we cannot opt out of, between the steep and narrow path to Heaven and the broad and easy road to Hell (Mt. VII,13–14). Certainly the enemies of the salvation of our souls, the world and the flesh and the Devil, are dangerous, because the sad fact is that the majority of souls fall into Hell at the end of their lives on earth (Mt.XX,16). Then how can it be fair for me to find myself in such danger by no choice of my own?

The answer is surely that if the danger was in no way by my own fault, then indeed life might be a poisoned gift. But if often the danger is in good part by my own fault, and if the very same free-will that when used wrongly enables me to fall into Hell, also enables me when used rightly to enter upon an eternity of unimaginable bliss, then not only is life not a poisoned gift, but it is a magnificent offer of a glorious reward out of all proportion to the relatively slight effort which it will have cost me on earth to avoid the danger and make the right use of my free-will (Is. LXIV,4).

But the questioner might object that none of those three enemies of his salvation are his fault:– “The world which

incites us to worldliness and concupiscence of the eyes is all around us from cradle to grave, and can only be escaped at death. The weakness of the flesh goes with original sin, and goes back to Adam and Eve. I wasn't around then! The Devil also existed long before I was born, and is running wild in modern times!"

To which one can reply that the three enemies are still all too liable to be our own fault. As for the world, we have to be in it, but we do not have to be of it (Jn. XVII,14-16). It depends on us whether we love the things of this world, or prefer to them the things of Heaven. How many prayers in the Missal ask for the grace to prefer the things of Heaven! As for the flesh, the more we flee from its concupiscence within us, the more it can lose its sting, but which of us can say that he has by no personal sin of his own strengthened the concupiscence and the danger, instead of weakening it? And as for the Devil, his power to tempt is strictly controlled by Almighty God, and God's own Scripture assures us that God offers us the grace necessary to overcome the temptations he allows (I Cor.X,13). In brief, what St Augustine says of the Devil applies also to the world and the flesh – they are like a dog chained up which can bark but not bite, unless one chooses to go too close.

So there is indeed an inescapable degree of spiritual danger in human life, but it depends on us, with God's grace, to control that danger, and the reward is out of this world (I Cor. II,9).

Kyrie eleison.