

IS THE FIRE OF HELL ETERNAL AND REAL?

By FRANCIS J. CONNELL, C.S.S.R., S.T.D.

The June issue of *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review* contains an article by the Rev. Dr. John O'Brien, entitled "A Sane Treatment of Hell." The article is an exposition of certain views concerning the punishment meted out to the reprobate in the future life, which were proposed by Mr. Arnold Lunn in his controversy with Professor Joad, now published in book form under the title, "Is Christianity True?" Mr. Lunn wrote the affirmative side of this controversy while he was still a non-Catholic; but in "Now I See," his *apologia* which has appeared since his reception into the Catholic Church, he adopts a somewhat similar attitude toward the subject of the punishment awaiting sinners in the world to come (pp. 230-232). In view of the unfavorable criticism of Mr. Lunn's opinions on this subject to be presented in this article, let me emphatically state that I regard "Now I See" as one of the clearest and most convincing apologetic treatises I have ever read. That Mr. Lunn, despite his intelligence and sincerity, should err in some technical details of theology is easily understood and readily condoned.

Dr. O'Brien does not explicitly endorse all the statements made by Mr. Lunn; yet, he gives the views of the latter a certain measure of approbation by designating them as a "sane" treatment of hell. He also asserts that "persons who have found the doctrine of hell, as it is sometimes presented, to prove a stumbling block to many sincere searchers for the truth, will find much to commend in Lunn's presentation."

Let me premise, as a basic principle for this discussion, that from the fact that a proposition has never been solemnly defined as a matter of faith by the infallible teaching authority of the Church it by no means follows necessarily that Catholics are free to reject or to doubt this proposition. There are certain doctrines which have never been the object of a solemn definition of Pope or of (Ecumenical Council, but which nevertheless must be accepted with divine-Catholic faith, because they are taught as divinely revealed by the ordinary and universal *magisterium* of the Church.¹ To this class of dogmas belong, for example,

¹ Cfr. Denzinger, "Enchiridion Symbolorum," n. 1792.

the truths that the entire human race is descended from Adam,² and that bread and wine are the essential matter of the Eucharistic consecration.³ Furthermore, there are certain doctrines which, though not matters of divine-Catholic faith, are—in the words of Pope Pius IX (Denzinger, n. 1684)—“retained by the common and constant consent of Catholics as theological truths and as conclusions so certain that the opposite opinions, although they cannot be called heretical, nevertheless merit some other theological censure.” An example of a truth of this nature is the doctrine that the Eucharistic species are objectively real.⁴ Now, one of the norms by which the members of the Church can find out what doctrines are to be believed as matters of faith over and above those solemnly defined, and what doctrines are to be accepted as certain theological truths, is the unanimous consent of Catholic theologians. This criterion of Catholic truth—the universal and constant consent of Catholic theologians—is explicitly mentioned by Pope Pius IX in the above-quoted document (Denzinger, n. 1683). Theologians, as such, possess no teaching authority in the Church, but they are the reliable and recognized witnesses of what the teaching authority proposes. If, then, for several centuries Catholic theologians have unanimously held that a certain doctrine is an article of faith or an indubitable theological truth, Catholics are obliged to accept their decision and to give assent to this doctrine. As is evident, *moral* unanimity among theologians is sufficient in this matter, so that if only one or other Catholic writer has proposed a view opposed to the longstanding and unhesitating consent of all the others who have written on this particular subject, the strength of the agreement of these latter is thereby in no wise impaired.

The Eternity of Hell-Fire

Now to the topic of our discussion. Mr. Lunn's presentation of his subject is concerned chiefly with two points—the eternity of the punishment of the damned, and the reality of hell-fire. Concerning the first point, Mr. Lunn says: “Even if we were to take Christ's words literally—and Christ often spoke in alle-

² Van Noort, “De Deo Creatore,” n. 179.

³ Otten, “De Sacramentis,” I, n. 537.

⁴ Otten, “De Sacramentis,” I, n. 492.

gories—we should not be forced to believe in the eternal torments of the damned. The fire may well be everlasting, but Christ's words were quite consistent with annihilation by fire, or with the belief that after a period of punishment by fire the condemned soul goes on to a less uncomfortable part of Hell.... No Catholic is free to believe in the annihilation of the damned, but all Catholics are free to reject the view that the individual soul is *eternally* tormented. The damned, for all we know, may pass through the circles of Hell and eventually finish up in Limbo. Limbo is technically a part of Hell, but the punishment of Limbo is purely negative, and consists in the loss of the beatific vision."

The statement that the reprobate may "eventually finish up in Limbo," can be taken in either of two senses: first, that the damned may at some future time be entirely freed from both the punishment of sense (*poena sensus*) and the suffering caused by their separation from God (*poena damni*), so that their condition will be identical with that commonly attributed by theologians to infants who have died without Baptism; or, second, that the reprobate, while they will eternally experience the *poena damni*, will eventually be released from the *poena sensus*.

Understood in the former sense, this proposition is certainly heretical, for it is the denial of the doctrine of the eternal duration of the punishments meted out to those who die at enmity with God—a doctrine that has frequently been taught by Popes and by Councils. There are, for example, the declaration of Pope Vigilius against Origen (Denzinger, n. 211), the letter of Innocent III to Humbert of Arles (*ibid.*, 410), the declaration of Innocent IV against the teachings of certain Greeks (*ibid.*, 457), and the definition of the Fourth Lateran Council against the Albigensians to the effect that sinners will receive "cum diabolo poenam perpetuam" (*ibid.*, 429). This last, at least, is an infallible pronouncement.

Taken in the second sense, this proposition certainly cannot be held by a Catholic; for some of the aforesaid declarations are quite manifestly concerned with the eternity of the *poena sensus*, and not merely with that of the *poena damnis*. Thus, Innocent

⁵ *Pœna sensus* must not be confounded with *pœna sensibilis*. The latter will be possible in hell only after the bodies of the reprobate have been re-united with their souls. By *pœna sensus* is signified any punishment positively inflicted either

III distinguishes between the privation of the vision of God, which is the consequence of original sin, and “gehennæ perpetuæ cruciatus,” which is the punishment of actual sin. Innocent IV declares that one who dies in mortal sin is punished “æternæ gehennæ *ardoribus* perpetuo.” To one who would object that these decisions were not infallible pronouncements, I would reply that we have a sufficient argument in the *magisterium universale* of the Church, constantly inculcating the eternity of the *pæna sensus*, to render this doctrine at least *fidei proxima*. In fact, I am sure the vast majority of theologians would agree with Hervé, who asserts in his recent “Manuale Theologiæ Dogmaticæ” (IV, η. 681) that it is *defide* that the *pæna sensus* will never end. Accordingly, Mr. Lunn’s claim that the Church has never declared definitely the duration of the *pæna sensus* is utterly outside the question as far as the possibility of the denial or doubt of the eternity of this punishment by a Catholic is concerned.

Can we at least admit that part of Mr. Lunn’s statement which affirms as probable that “after a period of punishment by fire the condemned soul goes on to a less uncomfortable part of hell”? This brings us to the thorny question of the *mitigatio* of the punishments of the damned. Some theologians admit the possibility of a *mitigatio secundum quid*, in the sense that the Almighty inflicts on each of the reprobate, from the very beginning of his eternal incarceration, less punishment than he deserves in strict justice. This opinion is solidly probable, and is taught by St. Thomas (*Summa*, I, Q. xxi, art. 4, ad I).⁶ Some theologians also hold that there will be a *mitigatio secundum quid* for those souls that enter hell stained with venial as well as mortal sins, or burdened with a debt of temporal punishment for sins remitted in life. According to these theologians—among whom is Scotus (*In IV Sent.*, dist. 21)—the punishment for these venial sins and for the debt of temporal punishment will cease eventually, and thus there will be some manner of mitigation of the pains of hell.

on the souls or on the bodies of the damned by an external agent acting as the instrument of divine justice. As is evident, this is entirely distinct from the *pæna damni*, which is the interior grief of the soul caused by the deprivation of God.

¶ I think that this is the passage, somewhat freely translated, that Mr. Lunn quotes on page 231 of “Now I See,” to show that St. Thomas favors his view of *mitigatio simpliciter*. Evidently the words of the Angelic Doctor refer to something quite different.

This opinion can safely be held, although it is not the more common view among theologians.

But what of the *mitigatio simpliciter* with which Mr. Lunn is evidently concerned—the diminution of the *pœna sensus* inflicted for unremitted mortal sins, with the result that the soul, though never entirely relieved of suffering, eventually “goes on to a less uncomfortable part of hell”? In the course of the centuries not a few Catholics have maintained such a view. St. Thomas mentions several different opinions, current about the thirteenth century, favoring the idea of a substantial mitigation being granted by God to the reprobate [*Supplementum*, Q. Ixxi, art. 5). Even as late as the nineteenth century this view was defended as probable by M. Emery, Superior General of the Sulpicians,⁷ and by Padre Ventura in one of his Notre Dame Conferences.⁸ As far as I know, no formal censure has been inflicted by the Church on this view as such, although the extreme form in which it was proposed by Mivart in his article “Happiness in Hell,”⁹ merited for this treatise a place on the Index. The dissertation of M. Emery was indeed referred to the Congregation of the Index, but was not condemned.

As far as the present question is concerned, however, three points are of vital importance. First, there is a tendency to exaggerate the force of the arguments from tradition in favor of the doctrine of mitigation. Of course, those who are striving to defend this doctrine naturally exhibit such a tendency; but even those who manifest no positive leaning towards the idea of mitigation are inclined to believe that it is supported by tradition much more strongly than is actually the fact. Thus, Father Faber asserts: “Before the days of Peter Lombard the generality of theologians held that, as time went on, there were some mitigations of the fierce punishments of hell.”¹⁰ Now, while it is true that the authority of the Master of Sentences (Sent. IV, dist. 45) undoubtedly influenced subsequent theologians towards a positive approval of the more rigorous view, it is likewise true

⁷ “Dissertation sur la Mitigation des peines des Damnés.”

⁸ *Za Raison Catholique et la Raison Philosophique*, Vol. III, Conf. 21.

⁹ *The Nineteenth Century*, 1892-1893.

¹⁰ “The Precious Blood,” Chap. III.

that not many of the Fathers and early ecclesiastical writers were indubitably and positively in favor of the mitigation theory, St. Augustine's statements are contradictory.¹¹ Some of the passages cited from the Greek Fathers (e.g., St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil, St. John Damascene), when studied more closely, will be found to be either ambiguous, or to refer to Purgatory rather than to hell. It must always be remembered that the eschatology of the Greek theologians has always been very vague, and their terminology very indefinite.¹²

Second, most of those who upheld the theory of mitigation for the reprobate believed that it is granted only by virtue of the prayers of the living, and that consequently it will not be granted after the Last Judgment. The mitigation visualized by Mr. Lunn would seem to proceed from the gratuitous mercy of God and to be of a permanent nature. I feel sure that very few passages from the Fathers and early theologians can be adduced in favor of this form of the mitigation theory.

Third, there is no scriptural warrant for the idea of mitigation;¹³ but on the contrary the parable of the rich man who was refused even a drop of water amid the flames of hell confirms the more rigid view. Moreover, the custom of the Church of not praying for the damned confirms the doctrine of severity. There were indeed in the early Church some liturgical prayers, in Sacramentaries and in Missals, imploring the alleviation of the pains of the damned; there were also some references to an old idea that every year at Easter the pains of hell are suspended. But since the reform of the liturgy by Pope Pius V, all such prayers and references have been abrogated.

Accordingly, Catholic theologians since the thirteenth century have been practically unanimous in teaching that there is no *mitigatio simpliciter* in hell. St. Thomas calls the mitigation idea vain, presumptuous and unreasonable; and argues that, just as the essential happiness of heaven cannot be increased, so the essential punishment of hell cannot be decreased (*Supplementum, Q. lxxi, art. 5*). Cardinal Lépicier says that the more severe

¹¹ "Enchiridion," n. 112; Migne, *P.L.*, XL, 284-285; *De Civitate Dei*, lib. 21, c. 24, n. 3; *P.L.*, XLI, 739.

¹² Cfr. *Dictionnaire de Théologie*, X (2), col. 2001 sq.

¹³ *Ibid.*, col. 2006 sq.

view is theologically certain.¹⁴ Hervé pronounces the mitigation theory rash and devoid of foundation.¹⁵ H. Mazzella says that this view is opposed to the sense of the Church.¹⁶ Hurter asserts that it cannot be reconciled with the state of the lost souls as exhibited by Scripture and by the Fathers.¹⁷ It must be remembered that these authorities are primarily condemning the theory of merely temporary mitigation, effected by the power of the prayers of the faithful, which will not continue beyond the Last Judgment. Their judgment of the theory of permanent mitigation, advocated by Mr. Lunn, would naturally be more severe, although ordinarily they do not consider this theory distinctively. Billot, in passing judgment on a somewhat similar opinion, calls it rash, scandalous and erroneous.¹⁸

In view of these considerations, I cannot see how the opinion that any *mitigatio simpliciter* is granted to the souls in hell can in conscience be sustained by a Catholic. One who would do so would not indeed be guilty of heresy, but he would act rashly, and consequently sinfully, by rejecting what is abundantly testified by theologians to be the unmistakable attitude of the Church towards this question. It would be especially unjustifiable to hold that mitigation is granted permanently after the Last Judgment.

But what of Dr. O'Brien's statement that Mr. Lunn's view, though not at present the common opinion, may eventually become such? Of course, such a possibility is to be entirely rejected if Mr. Lunn's view signifies that hell will ultimately become a real Limbo in which there will be no suffering, or at least, no *pæna sensus*. For, as was stated above, such interpretations are heretical, or at least close to heresy, so that to imply that they could ever be admitted by the Church is to impugn her infallibility. But even the mitigation theory, it is my firm conviction, can never become acceptable. For in defending the more rigorous view theologians are only speaking as the reliable interpreters of the mind of the Church; and it surely would not be consonant

¹⁴ "De Novissimis," p. 223.

¹⁵ "Manuale Theol. Dogmaticæ," IV, n. 693.

¹⁶ "Praellectiones Scholasticæ," IV, n. 670.

¹⁷ "Theologiae Dogmaticæ Compendium," ed. 1908, III, n. 658 nota.

¹⁸ "De Novissimis," Q. Hi., thés. 3, n. 4.

with the idea of a special divine assistance given to the teaching authority of the Church to hold that a doctrine so constantly and positively favored by the Church for centuries should eventually be shown to be false or less probable. It is to be noted that as the doctrine of eternal punishment has become more clarified in the course of the centuries, the tendency of ecclesiastical and theological thought towards the denial of the mitigation theory has grown stronger, and doctrinal progress in the Church takes place in the direction of truth.

The Reality of Hell-Fire

The second point at issue concerns the reality of hell-fire. Mr. Lunn says that the "fire" of hell may be understood metaphorically; and Dr. O'Brien, commenting on this opinion, remarks: "This milder view which has so many champions today is not simply a concession to modern sentiments or an attempt to placate modern criticism, but it is the flowering of a view that has been in existence in the Church from the time of Christ down to the present day."

For an adequate grasp of this question, we must consider four points concerning the fire of hell—its reality, its materiality, its specific nature, and its mode of action.

First, is the "fire" of hell something *real*, or is the use of this term only a metaphor, chosen to designate the keen spiritual torments that, so to say, burn into the souls of the damned? There have been Catholics—for example, Ambrose Catharinus, O.P., in the sixteenth century and H. Schell in the nineteenth century¹⁹—who have defended the metaphorical interpretation of hell-fire at least as a probable view or as an opinion free to Catholics. As in the question of mitigation, so in this point the authority of the early writers is invoked—for example, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John Damascene, and even St. Augustine. But in passing judgment on the sayings of the Fathers, it must always be remembered that in the early centuries, when eschatology was in an undeveloped state, it was believed by many that the just are actually admitted to heaven and the wicked actually cast into hell only after the Last Judgment. Those who held

¹⁹ Schell's "Katholische Dogmatik" has been placed on the Index.

this opinion logically believed that at present the reprobate suffer the pains of fire only metaphorically, not because they denied the reality of hell-fire, but because they thought that the damned are not yet actually in hell.²⁰ The opinion that entrance to heaven and to hell is delayed until the end of the world was condemned by Pope Benedict XII in the fourteenth century (Denzinger, n. 531); and from about the same time it has been the consistent view of practically all Catholic theologians that the "fire" of hell, the chief instrument of divine justice in the infliction of the *pcena sensus*, is a real entity. I should like to know who are some of the "many champions" of the milder view at the present day of whom Dr. O'Brien speaks, and what standing they possess as Catholic theological authorities. I cannot agree with Dr. O'Brien's statement that the Church has never censured in any way the metaphorical interpretation of hell-fire. There is not, it is true, any *doctrinal* censure affixed to this Anew, but there is a *disciplinary* censure; for on April 30, 1890, the Sacred Penitentiary decreed, in response to a question sent by a confessor, that penitents who acknowledge only metaphorical—not real—fire in hell, are to be diligently instructed; but if they persist in this idea, they are not to be absolved.

Mr. Lunn quotes Father Martindale, S.J., who argues that since the "worm" in the text, "Their worm dieth not and the fire is not extinguished" (Mark, ix. 43),²¹ is to be taken metaphorically, the "fire" is to be understood in the same way. However, the argument breaks down when it is remembered that hell-fire is spoken of in many other scriptural passages in which the literal sense not only is not incongruous, but is even positively demanded by the expressive mode of speech employed by the sacred writers.²² The doctrine of the reality of hell-fire is therefore adjudged by theologians to be certain; and they do not hesitate to declare that one who would deny this would be guilty of a grievous sin of temerity.²³

²⁰ *Dictionnaire de Théologie*, V (2), col. 2208.

²¹ Fr. Martindale, who was apparently misunderstood by Mr. Lunn, makes clear his position on the question in our August issue.—Editors.

²² *Dictionnaire de Théologie*, V (2), col. 2196 sq.

²³ Cfr. Arendzen, "Eternal Punishment," p. 24; Tanqueray, "Synopsis Theologiae Dogmaticae," ed. 1929, III, n. 1160; Hervé, "Manuale," IV, n. 681; Hugon, "De Novissimis," Q. iii, art. 1.

Nature of Hell-Fire

Second, is the fire of hell *-material*? Theologians commonly answer this question also in the affirmative; and indeed it seems to follow logically and necessarily from the doctrine of the reality of the fire. For, according to Catholic philosophy, every substance is either material or spiritual; and all spiritual substances are also intellectual. Now, it would seem unsuitable that God should employ an intellectual creature as the tormenting medium of hell. However, since the Church is concerned principally with the reality of hell-fire, one who would hold it to be real but immaterial WOULD satisfy his obligations as a Catholic, however erroneous his view might be from a philosophical standpoint.

Third, what is the *specific nature* of hell-fire? This is a matter of free discussion among Catholics. Some believe it to be substantially of the same nature as fire on earth—that is, an incandescent gaseous substance;²⁴ others think it is some material medium substantially different from the fire with which we are familiar.²⁵

Fourth, *in what manner* does the material fire exercise its punitive action on the souls of the reprobate before they are re-united with their bodies at the end of the world? This question offers difficulties, for it is not easy to conceive how a material thing can directly affect a spiritual substance. St. Thomas depicts the punitive efficacy of hell-fire as *chaining* the souls to a certain place (*Supplementum*, Q. lxx, art. 3). Others, emphasizing the fact that the fire is the instrument of God and consequently can be endowed with power to transcend its natural sphere of operation, contend that it produces directly in the soul of the reprobate the same suffering that a living person experiences when fire is applied to his body.²⁶ As is evident, this is also a question that is open to free discussion among Catholics.

In conclusion, let me state that I have no patience with those who depict hell in a lurid manner that is unjustified by revelation and Catholic teaching. If we confine ourselves to the doctrine proposed and approved by the Church, we shall present a concept of hell-fire sufficiently forceful to inspire a salutary fear of the

²⁴ Hugon, "De Novissimis," Q. iii, art. 1.

²⁵ Hurter, III, n. 653.

²⁶ Cfr. Lessius, "De Divinis Perfectionibus," XIII, 30.

divine vengeance in any one who believes the Christian Revelation. *i*It is indeed a deep and awful mystery how the all-merciful God can punish some of His intellectual creatures with excruciating tortures for all eternity. But it is an explicitly revealed doctrine, and it behooves us not to minimize this truth in order to harmonize it with the concepts of our fallible reason, but rather to adapt our ideas to the indubitable fact that God does punish sinners for all eternity. In this way we shall be led to the realization that mortal sin must be something immeasurably wicked, since for one mortal sin God will cast an immortal soul, beautified with His own image, into everlasting flames. The Catholic Church has never made any compromise with the doctrine of eternal hell-fire in order to make *it less* repugnant either to her own members or to those outside the Fold; but she has constantly proposed it in all its terrifying force, ever repeating Our Saviour's solemn injunction: "Fear Him that can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt., x. 28).

TOWARDS LOVING THE PSALMS

By C. C. Martindale, S.J., M.A.

XII. Shall We Save the Psalms?

It is clear from the New Testament that the Apostles, St. Paul included, were steeped in the Psalms (cf. the magnificent exordium to "Hebrews"). The Psalms were at once incorporated into the Liturgy; if the New Testament provided the first Christians with the image of the Shepherd and the Lamb, it was the Psalms which handed on that of the Stag eagerly seeking the living water. The *Acta Martyrum* are full of instances which show Martyrs, even quite young boys, desperately (or rather *naturally*) repeating verses from the Psalms while they were being tortured. St. Ambrose says that people talked in church when other parts of the Scriptures were read, but, when the Psalms were recited, all were dumb; and that a man should blush if he did not begin the day with a Psalm, since even the birds devoutly sing at morning and at dusk (a St. Francis before his time!). The very classic-minded Sidonius Apollinaris says that the river banks reëcho with the bargemen's "psalm-songs"; and Paula and Eustochius wrote from Bethlehem to Marcella that the ploughman, the reaper, and the vinedresser sang the Psalms to lighten their work. St. Gregory Nazianzus, while still a pagan, dreamed that he was singing *Lætatus sum in his* and the dream haunted him, and he came thus to baptism. When St. Monica died, the whole of her son's companions sang the Psalm *Misericordiam* (Ps.c) to console him; and he died with the Penitential Psalms written up large before his bed. Marcella, mentioned above, actually gathered a group of women around her, studied Hebrew so as to sing the Psalms properly (and Greek, so as fitly to read the Gospels), learned the entire Psalter by heart, and apparently recited the whole of it daily. Paula died with the Psalms *Quam dilecta* and *Domine dilexi* on her lips; and round her dead body Psalms were sung in Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Syriac for three whole days.

As for St. Jerome, who in a sense controlled these ladies, we know how continuously he worked at the Psalter: to my mind, it is disastrous that his Psalter according to the Hebrews (*i.e.*,