

"Moral consciousness began with God's question: Cain, where is thy brother Abel? It will end with another question on the part of God: Abel, where is thy brother Cain?"

Nicolas Berdyaev.

Pope John Paul II was fond of repeating that man is the only creature in the physical universe that God the Creator willed into existence for his/her own sake.¹ What this implies is that the human person possesses an intrinsic value, as opposed to a value determined in reference to something extrinsic, such as how well the person is able to serve the ends of the society outside of him. The human person is a relational being; however, his existence is always open to a greater fullness and expansion, which can only occur in community. The human person is created by God for his sake, but at the same time called by God to Himself, because God is Goodness Itself (God is Love), and so God wills that the human person be most fully, to expand, first and foremost for his own sake. It is true that persons exist for the good of others, but the only way to maximally benefit others, to exist most fully in community, is to become as good and complete as possible, because goodness is self-expansive, effusive, and communicable.

The kind of self-expansion specific to the human person exists on the level of the intellect and the will. The human person has the capacity to apprehend intelligibles, that is, to gradually understand the natures of things through the observation of their activities. But intellectual knowledge is a specific kind of self-expansion. Through this kind of knowing, the human person becomes more than what he is without ceasing to be what he is. What this means is that the things a person knows exist *in him*, that is, in his mind—we say that knowledge is within us. For example, the knowledge of my friend or the maple tree in my front yard is real and in my mind, and so it is true to say that these things exist *in me* in a certain way, obviously in a way that is different than the way they exist outside of me. The tree outside me exists *physically* (with size, weight, shape, texture, subject to place, etc.), but within me it exists *immaterially* (without size, weight, place, etc.). Through knowledge, I become more, that is, I expand; for I am more than what I would be without knowing the thing that I know; for my mind has become that cat, this dog, the sky, etc., immaterially. The concepts of things are “conceived” in me; I become “pregnant” with the world around me. Hence, knowledge is a kind of union and an expansion of self.

But intellect is not man’s only power. He wills, inclines to, or desires to be most fully. The human person has volition. He not only apprehends intelligible objects (the natures of things, their existence, truth, beauty, real harmonious relationships, justice, etc.), he also wills them. The intelligible objects that draw him are intelligible goods (i.e., life, knowledge, beauty, friendship, integrity, religion, etc.). The will, however, makes possible another kind of self-expansion, namely the self-expansion that occurs through love. Not only do I know the other as a person of the same nature as myself (as another self), I can also will his good for his own sake, not merely for the sake of what he does for me. *I can will his good as I will my own, for his sake.* In other words, *I can love him as another self, another me.* In knowledge, he exists *in me* in a certain way; but through love (an act of the will), I go outside myself and exist *as him*. Through love, I become two, or three, or four, depending on how extensive that love is.

¹ “Man - whether man or woman - is the only being among the creatures of the visible world that God the Creator “has willed for its own sake”; that creature is thus a person”. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7. Cf. *GS*, 24.

The larger I become, that is, the more I love in the true sense of self-expansion, the better and more complete I become, and the more complete I become, the happier I am. The more that my love is limited to myself—which means that I love others not for their sake, but primarily for what they do for me—the more I shrink. I can desperately seek to be filled up with all sorts of experiences, using others for the sake of that end, and at the same time experience a gradual diminishing and accompanying emptiness, much to my chagrin. In this case, I am deceived about my own fulfillment. A self-centered life is joyless, although it may very well be filled with pleasures of all sorts.

What is particularly noteworthy at this point is that as a person shrinks, he becomes increasingly large in his own eyes. Hence, the self-centered live in unreality; they live a deluded existence. There is a sense in which one has rejected one's status as a creature, created by God out of the effusiveness of divine generosity, but to reject such a status as dependent upon God, measured by the divine law, is to have chosen to be one's own god, and so all reminders of one's creaturely status become the object of such a person's hatred. The life of those on this path is a life of envy; for every reminder of my limits, such as anyone who is smarter or more talented or more skilled than I am, becomes an object of my envy, and envy delights in the misfortunes of others, and wishes that others be deprived of the good that is theirs. What Sergius Bulgakov writes about Satan's anxiety is entirely applicable here:

...this same consciousness [the knowledge of his creaturehood] introduces an unbearable, rending contradiction into the very depths of Satan's being, instilling in him an unconquerable anxiety and a struggle against his very self; it creates the need for incessantly assuring himself (in spite of self-evident testimony to the contrary) of that in which there is no and cannot be any assurance. The living out of this contradiction constitutes the only and exhaustive content of the life of the prince of this world in his exile from this world.²

The human person living within the current of Satan's rebellion not only lives in unreality, he is, to one degree or another, in a constant battle against the reality of his own creaturehood and all that it implies (his limitations, dependency upon God and others, etc.). He has a deep hatred for that truth, which is really the most fundamental truth about himself.

The human person, created in the image and likeness of God, is a mystery in the true sense of the word: an inexhaustible and infinitely knowable reality, for God is the unutterable mystery—infinitely knowable and incomprehensible. My deepest identity is the moral identity that I determine by the moral choices that I make, but those choices occur within a highly complex network of personal interactions that extend as far back as the womb. *I am* my relationship to the history of those interactions in my life, from the acts of love shown to me by my mother and father, my siblings, friends and strangers, teachers and administrators, to even acts of indifference towards me, acts of cruelty and hatred, accidents and coincidences, etc. And all these interactions are with

² Sergius Bulgakov. *The Sophiology of Death. Essays on Eschatology: Personal, Political, Universal*. Trans. Roberto J. De La Noval. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021. P. 78. He continues: "Can this struggle extend for an infinite (and in this sense "eternal") duration, a bad infinity, or, having been weakened by the struggle, must he at some point in exhaustion lay down his arms? Is his strength inexhaustible for this hopeless and endless struggle with what is self-evident, such that it can fill the ages of ages, or is even such a supposition impossible because...Satan, in point of fact, is a creature and only a creature, making his strength and his capabilities limited? What can save him in this situation is precisely that same creaturehood he rejects as a reality outstripping his creaturely freedom. He can grow exhausted in this unequal struggle—rather, he cannot not grow exhausted from it, in the end capitulating before reality and acknowledging that not he himself, but rather God, is his creator, and this means falling down and worshipping him. Then will there occur an ontological coercion on the part of reality, by force of fact." *Ibid.*, p. 78-79.

persons whose identities in turn have been shaped by their histories—which at best I am familiar with only in tiny slivers and strands—, and so on and so forth. An individual person is a genuine mystery, forever knowable, never completely understood or comprehended. Too much escapes my own notice for me to confidently assert that I completely “know” someone. But I do know at least this: that I am indebted to more people than I am explicitly aware of; for I alone have not “made myself”; I have been made by God and by myriads of other creatures like myself. The way I choose to relate to all of them is the result of my own choice—how free those moral choices of mine or others are, and thus how responsible I am for them, is not possible for me to know with any certainty. But I can relate to that entire historical network with more or less gratitude, which implies a recognition of my creaturely dependency and limitations, or I can remain oblivious to this debt and continue to live without gratitude. In the latter case, I have become my own worst enemy. The hell I have created for myself is characterized by a deep and underlying anxiety, frustration, a constant confrontation with the reality of my own creatureliness and an absurd and insane rejection of it. Such a person is stubborn, arrogant, and in his own mind is always “the smartest person in the room”.

This is not a life of freedom, because it is an entirely unenlightened life. This is a life of the deepest spiritual slavery. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes:

The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ...And even though our gospel is veiled, it is veiled for those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they may not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor 3, 17; 4, 4).

This is a dark and exhausting existence. When its trajectory runs its course, this is what we mean by hell. Nicolas Berdyaev writes:

The distortion of the idea of hell in the human mind has led to its being identified with the fear of God's judgment and retribution. But hell is not God's action upon the soul, retributive and punitive as that action may be; it is the absence of any action of God upon the soul, the soul's incapacity to open itself to God's influence and its complete severance from God. Hell is nothing other than complete separation from God. The horror of hell is not inspired by the thought that God's judgment will be stern and implacable. God is love and mercy, and to give one's fate to Him means to overcome the horror. The horror is to have my fate left in my own hands. It is not what God will do to me that is terrible, but what I will do to myself. What is terrible is the judgment passed by the soul upon itself, upon its own impotence to enter eternal life. Hell really means not that man falls into the hands of God but that he is finally abandoned to his own devices.³

Is there a realistic hope for universal salvation?

In the chapter entitled “Does ‘Eternal Life’ Exist?”, in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II asks the question: “Can God, who has loved man so much, permit the man who rejects Him to be condemned to eternal torment?” Despite what the 5th Ecumenical Council has said with respect to a particular version of apokatastasis (universal restoration),⁴ “the problem

³ Nicolas Berdyaev. *The Destiny of Man*. trans. Natalie Duddington. San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009. p 277.

⁴ Ilaria Ramelli writes: “...while the notion of transmigration of souls (*metempsychosis*) was supported by both Pythagoras and Plato, it was not defended by Origen, who explicitly rejected it as being opposed to the “end of the world” foretold by Scripture. So against *metempsychosis* Origen set forth the Christian doctrine of *ensoulment* (which did

remains”, he says.⁵ And since the problem remains, I would like to provide just a brief introduction to a tradition in the Church with respect to this hope, one that extends as far back as St. Clement of Alexandria.⁶ In an interview back in 1993, regarding the new Catholic Catechism of that year, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I said: “Why say nothing of the hope and prayer for common salvation, which can be found in Ambrose of Milan, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Isaac of Nineveh, Juliana of Norwich and so many other great contemporary theologians, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar? These problems are significant for the man of today, tragically oscillating between the fear of void and delusive promises of reincarnation.”⁷ In that light, I would like to make sure that something is said here about this hope for common salvation.

I believe the problem we are addressing can be looked upon from two different angles or sides: 1) from the side of man and his freedom, and 2) from the side of God and His grace. First, consider this from the side of man. Berdyaev writes:

Hell is the state of the soul powerless to come out of itself, absolute self-centeredness, dark and evil isolation, i.e., final inability to love. It means being engulfed in an agonizing moment which opens up on a yawning abyss of infinity, so that the moment becomes endless time. Hell creates and organizes the separation of the soul from God, from God's world and from other

not imply the transmigration of a soul from one body to another). It is a doctrine of apokatastasis *embedded within that of the transmigration of souls* that was condemned by Justinian’s Fifth Ecumenical Council (553), *not* Origen’s own doctrine of apokatastasis.... the doctrine of apokatastasis was also held by Gregory Nyssen, yet no mention is made of him in either 543 or 553. Certainly, Gregory did not embrace a doctrine of apokatastasis embedded within that of the transmigration of souls—but neither did Origen. *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019. Appendix I: *The Meaning of Aionios*. P. 171.

⁵ *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Toronto, Canada: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994. p. 185.

⁶ St. Clement writes: “The God of the universe has disposed everything for universal salvation, in general and singularly. Thus, God did whatever did not prevent the voluntary nature of human choice, and showed this as a help to attain virtue, that in some way even those who are endowed only of weak vision the sole true Omnipotent could be revealed a good God who from eternity and forever saves through the Son and is absolutely not responsible for evil. Thus, it is a work of God's salvific justice to lead everything to the best in so far as possible.” *Strom* 7:2:12. Quoted in Ilaria L. E. Ramelli. *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019, p. 26. St. Didymus the Blind writes: “The Savior in fact came to look for what was lost and save it. He looks for the soul, in order to lead it to salvation, to bring it back to its original condition. Now, just as the Savior does this by means of instruction and perfecting into what is good, likewise the disciples of the Savior, angels and human beings, do so. *Comm. in Ps. 35-39 col. 267:20*, quoted in Ramelli: *A Larger Hope?* P. 97. He also writes: “The Father has given to Christ the power and dominion over all beings, that no being that has been handed to him should perish: for this glory, too, passes through us, because it was necessary that the totality of those who will have submitted to him and have arrived in the hands of the omnipotent Logos of God be saved and remain among the goods that have no end, so that it need no longer suffer the tyranny of death, nor be liable to corruption and sins, nor have to undergo punishment for ancient evils.” *On John 17: 1*, quoted in Ramelli: *A Larger Hope?* P. 97. St. Gregory of Nyssa writes: “No being will remain outside the number of the saved”; “Every being that had its origin from God will return such as it was from the beginning, when it had not yet received evil” (*In Illud*, 14D).

⁷ A propos du nouveau Catéchisme catholique: Convergences et divergences entre catholiques et orthodoxes. Un entretien avec Bartholomée Ier, patriarche oecuménique [About the new Catholic Catechism: Convergences and Divergences between Catholics and Orthodoxes. Meeting with Ecumenic Patriarch Bartholomew I], Service Orthodoxe de Presse – SOP, 1993, no. 178, pp. 21–26, fragment from p. 22 [own translation]. Quoted in “BUT THE PROBLEM REMAINS”. John Paul II and the universalism of the hope for salvation, by Waclaw Hryniewicz. DIALOGUE AND UNIVERSALISM No. 7–8/2007 <https://afkimel.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/waclaw-hryniewicz-on-john-paul-ii-on-universalism.pdf>

men. In hell the soul is separated from everyone and from everything, completely isolated and at the same time enslaved by everything and everyone.⁸

Such a person has killed the grace of God within, completely severing himself from divine friendship, and so he is incapable, on his own, of opening himself to God's influence, unable to extricate himself from his own darkness. If we stop at this point, however, and limit ourselves to the consideration of man and his freedom alone, which most Christians do, then all we are left with is never ending despair: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here", as inscribed on Hell's gate in Dante's *Inferno*. But why should we stop here? To do so, it seems to me, is theologically unwarranted; it is what Berdyaev refers to as "reckoning without Christ". And I believe this is what St. Edith Stein meant when she wrote: "It is not enough to consider freedom by itself. One must also examine what Grace can accomplish, and whether there are any absolute limits to it. We have already seen that Grace must come to human beings. At best, human beings can reach the door, but no one can force their entry. Furthermore, Grace can come to them, without their searching, without their willing."⁹

Christ's fullness is "grace upon grace" (Jn 1, 16), and he has revealed himself as "savior", the good shepherd who goes in search of the lost, who came to save what is lost, to raise the dead to life; for the name 'Jesus' is the late form of the Hebrew name 'Joshua', which means 'Yahweh is salvation'.

In the prologue of the gospel of John, we read: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1, 4-5). But what exactly is this "life" that is the "light of men" which darkness has failed to overcome? George MacDonald says it quite beautifully:

The life of Christ is this—negatively, that he does nothing, cares for nothing for his own sake; positively, that he cares with his whole soul for the will, the pleasure of his father. Because his father is his father, therefore he will be his child. The truth in Jesus is his relation to his father; the righteousness of Jesus is his fulfilment of that relation. Meeting this relation, loving his father with his whole being, he is not merely alive as born of God; but, giving himself with perfect will to God, choosing to die to himself and live to God, he therein creates in himself a new and higher life; and, standing upon himself, has gained the power to awake life, the divine shadow of his own, in the hearts of us his brothers and sisters, who have come from the same birth-home as himself, namely, the heart of his God and our God, his father and our father, but who, without our elder brother to do it first, would never have chosen that self-adjunction which is life, never have become alive like him. To will, not from self, but with the Eternal, is to live.¹⁰

As we approach a person in daylight, our shadow is cast over him, and as God approaches us, we are covered by the divine shadow of His own life, which awakens us to the new life of grace: "The waters are frozen at his touch; he sends forth his word and it melts them: at the breath of his mouth the waters flow" (Ps 147, 18). In joining a human nature, the Son joined himself to every

⁸ Nicolas Berdyaev. *The Destiny of Man*. trans. Natalie Duddington. San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009. p 277.

⁹ Edith Stein, "*Freiheit und Gnade*" und weitere Beiträge zu Phanomenologie und Ontologie: (1917 bis 1937) (Freiburg: Herder, 2024), 158-159. Quoted in Christoph Wrembek, S. J. *Hope for Judas: God's Boundless Mercy for Us All*. N.Y.: New York City Press, p. 148.

¹⁰ *The Complete Works of George MacDonald*, e-artnow, 2015. "The Creation in Christ". [Kobo version]. Retrieved from <http://www.kobo.com>.

man, as it were.¹¹ If this is the case, then our humanity has become the Father's "Other Self". The result of this is that when the Father looks upon humanity, he sees his Son, His 'Other Self', and when He beholds His Son, he beholds our humanity and every individual who participates in that humanity. Now what we know of the Father is this: "...who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2, 4). We know this because God the Son, who is everything that the Father can say about Himself, has joined humanity to Himself in order to save it. Christ is savior, he has come to search out the lost, to deliver from slavery, to shine light into darkness, to raise the dead to life.

The parables that best illustrate this relation in the action of seeking out the lost are the parables of the divine mercy in the gospel of Luke, which are best considered in relation to one another. In fact, the two of them ought to be read against the backdrop of the parable of the prodigal son. The reason is that in the parable of the prodigal son, the son eventually comes to his senses and makes plans to return to his father. But what is dead cannot "come to its senses", because to "come to one's senses" presupposes life, and indeed the father said: "...for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Lk 15, 24). In this parable, the divine life that went in search of him, found him and raised him from the dead, was hidden, not explicit. However, in the parable of the lost sheep, the active searching on the part of the man who loses one of the ninety-nine is brought out explicitly: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing" (Lk 15, 4-5). The emphasis here is not so much on the one who is found as it is upon the one who goes looking—the man has to go searching for the lost sheep because unlike the prodigal son, it does not return on its own. But what the prodigal son and the lost sheep have in common is clear evidence of life; for the prodigal son considers his predicament and makes his way back to the father; the sheep does not return home, but perhaps it cries out so that it can be found. But it is the parable of the lost coin that is rather remarkable against the background of these two parables: "What woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?" (Lk 15, 8). A coin cannot return on its own, nor can it cry out in the wilderness; it is nothing more than a piece of inert matter, that is, it is dead. Nonetheless, the woman lights a lamp and sweeps the house and seeks diligently *until she finds it*. She does not give up, in other words.¹² This is a very important theological datum that must not be overlooked—she lights a lamp and sweeps, looking diligently until what she is looking for, a precious piece of metal that is nevertheless inert and lifeless, is found.

We know that those trapped in the depths of their own hell are in that state as a result of the choices they have made, but that is not the whole story of the good news of the gospel. The good news is that they are the objects of a divine search, a search that does not end until the dead are found: "In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins" (1 Jn 4, 9-10). That search for us begins here, but the question is: does God ever stop searching? Are there limits to His mercy? Or more to the point, can God's universal salvific will be ultimately frustrated, that is, defeated?

Every Holy Saturday morning, year after year, those who are required to pray the Liturgy of the Hours read the following *From an Ancient Homily on Holy Saturday*, in the Office of Readings:

¹¹ "By his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being". *Gaudium et Spes*, 22. See also, *Evangelium Vitae*, 2).

¹² See Christoph Wrembek, S. J. *Hope for Judas: God's Boundless Mercy for Us All*. N.Y.: New York City Press. P. 64-80.

Something strange is happening—there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and hell trembles with fear.

He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, he who is both God and the son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the cross, the weapon that had won him the victory. At the sight of him Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone: “My Lord be with you all.” Christ answered him: “And with your spirit.” He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: “Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.”

I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and for your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.¹³

Christ came to destroy death, and his victory is precisely in its complete destruction. On Friday of the third week of Easter, the Office of Readings includes the following from St. Ephrem, who writes:

Death could not devour our Lord unless he possessed a body, neither could hell swallow him up unless he bore our flesh; and so he came in search of a chariot in which to ride to the underworld. This chariot was the body which he received from the Virgin; in it he invaded death's fortress, broke open its strong-room and scattered all its treasure.

At length he came upon Eve, the mother of all the living. She was that vineyard whose enclosure her own hands had enabled death to violate, so that she could taste its fruit; thus the mother of all the living became the source of death for every living creature. But in her stead Mary grew up, a new vine in place of the old. Christ, the new life, dwelt within her. When death, with its customary impudence, came foraging for her mortal fruit, it encountered its own destruction in the hidden life that fruit contained. All unsuspecting, it swallowed him up, and in so doing released life itself and set free a multitude of men.¹⁴

There cannot be any doubt, “the problem remains”, as Pope John Paul II pointed out. It seems to me that a serious difficulty with the infernalist perspective (i.e., eternal torments in hell for the damned) is that within that frame of mind, such readings from the Divine Office, among others, cause a certain degree of cognitive dissonance. This is especially the case with respect to a number of scriptural texts from St. Paul: "God has imprisoned all in disobedience that he might have mercy on all" (Rom 11, 32); "Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is

¹³ *The Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol II. p. 496-498. PG 43, 439. 451, 462-463.

¹⁴ *The Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol II. p. 735-736. *Sermo de Domino nostro*, 3-4; Opera edit. Lamy, 1, 152-158. Note that it is not necessarily the case that "multitude of men" implies "not all" ($I \rightarrow \sim A$). If I see a multitude of people standing outside a building, I cannot say with certainty that less than 100% of the building's occupants are outside, while some remain inside. It may be the case that all of them are outside, as a result of a fire alarm.

above every name, that at the name of Jesus *every knee should bend*, of those in heaven and on earth *and under the earth*, and *every tongue confess* that Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory* of God the Father” (Phil 2, 9-11).¹⁵ The problem, of course, is that the spiritually dead do not bend their knees and confess the Lordship of Jesus to the glory of God, only the living do (Ps 115, 17). Nor is God “all in all” for those who have rejected Him. However, St. Paul writes:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ *shall all be brought to life*, but each one in proper order: Christ the first fruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ; then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. *The last enemy to be destroyed is death*, for “he subjected everything under his feet.” But when it says that everything has been subjected, it is clear that it excludes the one who subjected everything to him. When everything is subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that *God may be all in all*. (1 Co 15, 20-28)

But how does this square with human freedom, the freedom to reject God’s advances for all eternity? Love is not love unless it is freely given, and God is Love; so will God allow us to reject Him for all eternity, especially given that love does not compel? A hasty response in the affirmative overlooks too much with respect to the genius of the divine love. As Edith Stein points out: “Human freedom cannot be broken by the divine, nor suppressed, *but it can be outwitted*, as it were. The descent of Grace into the human soul is a free act of divine love. And there are no limits to its expansion” [emphasis mine].¹⁶

A mother does not stop searching for her lost son, and it is love that provides the light needed to “outwit” her son’s rebellion (Is 49, 15). As the mother, like the woman in the parable, approaches her lost son, a shadow is cast upon him because she does not walk in darkness—the shadow is, of course, the life of the Son, the life of grace, which can “worm its way in” so to speak. St. Edith Stein continues:

All merciful love can descend upon anyone. We believe that it does. And now, should there be souls who exclude themselves from it permanently? In principle, the possibility is not excluded. In fact, it can become *infinitely unlikely*, precisely through what prevenient Grace is able to accomplish in the soul. This Grace can only knock, and there are souls that open themselves at even this quiet call. Others let it go unheeded. But then this Grace *can worm its way into these souls*, and more and more expand itself in them. The greater the space that it occupies in such an illegitimate way, the more unlikely it will be that the soul closes itself off. It already sees the world now in the light of Grace...The more ground that Grace wins from that which occupied it before, the more ground it deprives from the free acts directed against it. And, in principle, there are no limits to this displacement. When all the impulses against the spirit of light are displaced

¹⁵ "By myself I swear, uttering my just decree, a word that will not return: to me every knee shall bend; by me every tongue shall swear, saying, "Only in the Lord are just deeds and power" (Is 45, 23-24).

¹⁶ Edith Stein, “Freiheit und Gnade” und weitere Beiträge zu Phänomenologie und Ontologie: (1917 bis 1937) (Freiburg: Herder, 2024), 158-159. Quoted in Christoph Wrembek, S. J. *Hope for Judas: God’s Boundless Mercy for Us All*. N.Y.: New York City Press. P. 140.

from the soul, then a free decision against it [the spirit of light] becomes infinitely unlikely. For this reason, *the belief in the boundlessness of God's love and Grace, as well as the hope for universal salvation, are justified...* [emphasis mine].¹⁷

This is an interesting and mysterious paradox: that grace slowly and gradually deprives a soul of the ground for the free acts directed against it, and yet such displacement in fact marks an increase in freedom, for “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Co 3, 17). Those in darkness are slaves to sin, and they really do not understand the full implications of the choices they make. Indeed, Christ himself said: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23, 34), and for the most part, we don’t know what we are doing, especially when our choices plunge us more and more deeply into darkness.

The problem many people have with these points, it seems to me, stems from the tendency to regard this issue within an exclusively juridical model. As Berdyaev writes: “The idea of hell must be completely freed from all association with criminal law transferred to the heavenly world. Hell as a subjective realm, as the absorption of the soul in its own darkness, is the immanent result of sinful existence and not a transcendental punishment for sin. Hell is absorption in the immanent and the impossibility of passing to the transcendental. *The descent of the Son of God into hell can alone liberate man from it.* Hell is the consequence of the natural world being closed to Divine intervention and to the descent of God into it. All Divine action in the world is directed towards freeing man from hell.”¹⁸

Some Final Thoughts

If the hope for universal salvation has some theological justification, then universal salvation is a real possibility, which in turn means that it is really possible that hell is not eternal. Of course, some people just will not hear of this, but the few scriptural passages that seem to indicate that hell is eternal might, on closer analysis, suggest otherwise. The two scriptural texts appealed to in defense of hell's eternity are Matthew 25, 46: “And these will go off to eternal punishment”, and Revelation 20, 10: “There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever”. In both texts, however, the original Greek word here translated—or perhaps mistranslated—as “eternal” is *aionion*, which is properly translated as “ages of ages” (eons, as well as “other worldly”), and the word for punishment in Mt 25, 46 is *kolasin*, which is best translated as “chastening”, which is “remedial punishment”, not

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 148-149.

¹⁸ Nicolas Berdyaev. *The Destiny of Man*. trans. Natalie Duddington. San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009. p 278. He also writes: “A higher and maturer consciousness cannot accept the old fashioned idea of hell; but a too light hearted, sentimentally optimistic rejection of it is equally untenable. Hell unquestionably exists, it is revealed to us in experience, it may be our own lot. But it belongs to time and is therefore temporal. Everything that is in time is temporal. The victory of eternity over time, for example the bringing-in of the temporal into eternity, is victory over hell and its powers. Hell is an aeon or an aeon of aeons, as it says in the Gospel, but not eternity. Only those are in hell who have not entered eternity but have remained in time. It is impossible, however, to remain in time forever: one can only remain in time for a time. The perspective of a bad Infinity is not an ontological reality, but a phantasm and a subjective illusion. There is something hideous and morally revolting in the idea of eternal torments as a just retribution for the crimes and sins of a short moment of life. Eternal damnation as the result of things done in a short period of time is one of the most disgusting of human nightmares. The doctrine of reincarnation, which has obvious advantages, involves, however, another nightmare, the nightmare of endless incarnations, of infinite wanderings along dark passages; it finds the solution of man's destiny in the cosmos and not in God. But one thing is unquestionably true: after death the soul goes on living on other planes of being, just as it had lived on other planes before birth. The life in our world between birth and death is merely a small fragment of the human destiny, incomprehensible when regarded by itself, apart from the eternal destiny of man.” *Ibid.*, p. 279.

retribution (*timoria*).¹⁹ In fact, “chastening”, that is, remedial punishment, is the only kind of punishment that really has any meaning in this context. Eternal (*aidios*) retribution (*timoria*), which does not appear in scripture, would be utterly senseless. Consider the word “meaning”. In French, ‘meaning’ is *sens*, which is also translated as ‘direction’. What moves in a particular direction is meaningful and intelligible by virtue of that direction, for it is movement for the sake of an end—a life that is “going nowhere” is experienced as “meaningless”. Since final cause (end) coincides with formal cause (that for the sake of which there is coming to be), a movement without an end is unintelligible and meaningless. Torment (punishment) that is eternal and without a purpose (such as remediation or the good of the punished) is utterly without point, that is, without meaning.²⁰ Moreover, it is inconsistent with love, since love is intrinsically meaningful, for it “wills the good”. But *kolasis* that lasts “ages of ages” (eons) is consistent with the divine love, for it is punishment or chastening with a point—namely, eventual salvation. Moreover, according to St. Isaac of Nineveh, it is precisely the fire of the divine love that torments the damned:

...I say that even those who are scourged in Hell are tormented with the scourgings of love. Scourgings for love’s sake, namely of those who perceive that they have sinned against love, are more hard and bitter than tortures through fear. The suffering which takes hold of the heart through the sinning against love is more acute than any other torture. *It is evil for a man to think that the sinners in Hell are destitute of love for the Creator.* For love is a child of true knowledge such as is professed to be given to all people. Love works with its force in a double way. It tortures those who have sinned, as happens also in the world between friends. And it gives delight to those who have kept its decrees. Thus it is also in Hell. I say that the hard tortures are grief for love. The inhabitants of heaven, however, make drunk their soul with the delight of love.²¹

A good case can be made that *aionios*, properly translated as “ages of ages”, or eons, as opposed to “eternal” (which in Greek is *aidios*), restores, with respect of the entire scriptural body of divine revelation, the basic elements that constitute the parameters of cognitive systematicity: completeness, cohesiveness, consonance, consistency and compatibility, functional regularity,

¹⁹ See Ilaria L. E. Ramelli. *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019. Appendix I: *The Meaning of Aionios*. P. 215-221.

²⁰ George MacDonald writes: "When a man acknowledges the right he denied before; when he says to the wrong, 'I abjure, I loathe you; I see now what you are; I could not see it before because I would not; God forgive me; make me clean, or let me die!' then justice, that is God, has conquered—and not till then. ...Justice then requires that sin should be put an end to; and not that only, but that it should be atoned for; and where punishment can do anything to this end, where it can help the sinner to know what he has been guilty of, where it can soften his heart to see his pride and wrong and cruelty, justice requires that punishment shall not be spared. And the more we believe in God, the surer we shall be that he will spare nothing that suffering can do to deliver his child from death. If suffering cannot serve this end, we need look for no more hell, but for the destruction of sin by the destruction of the sinner. That, however, would, it appears to me, be for God to suffer defeat, blameless indeed, but defeat.

If God be defeated, he must destroy—that is, he must withdraw life. How can he go on sending forth his life into irreclaimable souls, to keep sin alive in them throughout the ages of eternity? But then, I say, no atonement would be made for the wrongs they have done; God remains defeated, for he has created that which sinned, and which would not repent and make up for its sin. But those who believe that God will thus be defeated by man souls, must surely be of those who do not believe he cares enough to do his very best for them. He *is* their Father; he had power to make them out of himself, separate from himself, and capable of being one with them: surely he will somehow save and keep them! Not the power of sin itself can close *all* the channels between creating and created." *Unspoken Sermons*, "Justice".

²¹ *The Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian*: Homily 27: “In How Many Different Ways the Sight of Incorporeal Being Is Received by Human Nature”. Omaha, NE: Patristic Publishing, 2019.

simplicity and efficacy. In other words, it makes for a much more consistent and coherent reading of the scriptures. For example, how can we maintain with any consistency that Christ had complete victory over death when a portion of humanity suffers eternal death?

For as long as a person exists, he acts. The rebellion of hell requires, as does all action, a degree of energy. Indeed, some people have a large reservoir of energy, and so their stubbornness can persist throughout their entire lives here. But evil is a “minus”, it is a lack, a kind of non-being, and so evil does not sustain, certainly not perpetually. It takes a great deal of energy to persist in the battle against oneself and against the real, continually diminishing in size, but the only eternal and inexhaustible source of energy is God, the One whose position evil wishes to usurp. It seems to me, therefore, that the battle is bound to run out of steam.

Moreover, human beings are generally slow to learn, particularly slow to acquire the insight that reflection upon life’s rich experience makes possible. To make an analogy with the teaching profession, in the best case scenario, when a person finally learns what it means to be a teacher and how to be a teacher, he’ll be just about ready to retire. That’s how long it takes, but of course, in his mind, he’s now just getting started. But most teachers do not even get to that point: upon retirement, it cannot be said that they’ve finally gotten a handle of what it is they are doing. But how much more is this the case with life in general? Our youth is spent, for the most part, in the land of dreams, and yet how many die in their youth? Furthermore, can it be said that most of those who live to a ripe old age have figured out, at even just a rudimentary level, what life is about and how to live it? Not in my experience. And how long it takes, when a person is finally on the right road, to overcome the delusions brought about by the inordinate love of self! These delusions can persist into the 90s, even for those devoutly religious and prayerful. We are always children. But somehow this short span is supposed to be enough time to learn what needs to be learned about life’s deepest meaning and on that basis choose freely our eternal lot? It is always the case that, for the most part or at least to some degree, we really do not know what we are doing. Christ’s words from the cross—“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”—are spoken over each one of us, always, to our last breath, and since Christ is the eternal Person of the Son, his words are spoken over us in the “other worldly” realm of *aionios*. As St. Isaac of Nineveh writes: “It is not the way of the compassionate Maker to create rational beings in order to deliver them over mercilessly to unending affliction and punishment for things of which He knew even before they were fashioned, aware how they would turn out when he created them— and whom nonetheless He created.”²²

If this is the case, then what exactly would constitute the difference between hell as depicted here and purgatory? This is a good question, but probably not as difficult as it would appear at first glance. Purgatory is a part of heaven, hell is not. Purgatory is joyful, hell is not. The pain of purgatory, according to St. Catherine of Genoa, is more joyful than the greatest joys on earth; not so hell. Souls in purgatory died in a state of grace, and so they died spiritually alive; but a soul in hell is spiritually dead. Hell involves the pain of despair, not because the divine mercy has run its course and God has turned His back forever on them, but rather because the damned have trapped themselves in their own darkness—perhaps they project their own mercilessness upon God and despair accordingly. But what God does from here on in cannot be inferred on the basis of what we would do or believe should be done:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts higher than your thoughts. (Is 55, 8-9. Cf. Ps 103, 9-10; See also Mt 20, 1-16)

²² *Ibid.*

The question of hope for universal salvation is very similar to the question of the hope of salvation for infants who die without baptism. The latter has a history that reveals a great deal about the nature of the development of doctrine. For one, “common doctrine” should not be confused with genuine statements of faith.²³ In section 34 of the International Theological Commission’s document “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised”, we read:

In the Church's tradition, the affirmation that children who died unbaptised are deprived of the beatific vision has for a long time been “common doctrine”. This common doctrine followed upon a certain way of reconciling the received principles of revelation, but it did not possess the certitude of a statement of faith, or the same certitude as other affirmations whose rejection would entail the denial of a divinely revealed dogma or of a teaching proclaimed by a definitive act of the magisterium. The study of the history of the Church's reflection on this subject shows that it is necessary to make distinctions. In this summary we distinguish first, statements of faith and what pertains to the faith; second, common doctrine; and third, theological opinion.²⁴

Perhaps we are in a similar predicament when it comes to the question of universal salvation or restoration (apokatastasis), and perhaps the conditions will one day be in place for this question to be revisited in a future council. It took centuries before the Church was sufficiently ready to address the hope of salvation for infants who die without baptism, and the way it is currently addressed was simply beyond the Church’s reach in earlier centuries.²⁵ Although we may not at this time be able to solve this problem with absolute certainty, it seems to me that if it is a duty to hope and pray for the salvation of everyone—given that the Church prays in hope for “all men to be saved” and that “no one should be lost” (CCC §1821, §1058)—, then what we can be relatively certain of at this point is that the hope for universal salvation is fitting and reasonable.²⁶

²³ “Common doctrine” as it is used in this context is not the same thing as the teaching of the ordinary and universal Magisterium. See Catechism of the Catholic Church, #892.

²⁴ *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised*. International Theological Commission. 2007.

²⁵ “The history of theology and of magisterial teaching show in particular a development concerning the manner of understanding the universal saving will of God. The theological tradition of the past (antiquity, the Middle Ages, the beginning of modern times), in particular the Augustinian tradition, often presents what by comparison with modern theological developments would seem to be a “restrictive” conception of the universality of God's saving will. In theological research, the perception of the divine will to save as “quantitatively” universal is relatively recent. At the level of the magisterium, this larger perception was progressively affirmed. Without trying to date it exactly, one can observe that it appeared very clearly in the 19th century, especially in the teaching of Pius IX on the possible salvation of those who, without fault on their part, were unaware of the Catholic faith: those who “lead a virtuous and just life, can, with the aid of divine light and grace, attain eternal life; for God, who understands perfectly, scrutinizes and knows the minds, souls, thoughts and habits of all, in his very great goodness and patience, will not permit anyone who is not guilty of a voluntary fault to be punished with eternal torments”. This integration and maturation in Catholic doctrine meanwhile gave rise to a renewed reflection on the possible ways of salvation for unbaptised infants.” *Ibid.*, 33. We also read in *Dei Verbum*, 8: “This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.”

²⁶ “Christians are people of hope. They have set their hope “on the living God, who is the saviour of all, especially of those who believe” (1 Tim 4:10). They ardently desire that all human beings, unbaptised children included, may share in God’s glory and live with Christ (cf. 1 Thess 5:9-11; Rom 8:2-5; 23-35), in keeping with the recommendation of Theophylactus: “If he [our God] wants all men to be saved, you should also want it, and imitate God”. This Christian hope is a “hope ... against hope” (Rom 4:18), going far beyond any form of human hope.” *The Hope of Salvation for Infants*

Who Die Without Being Baptised. International Theological Commission. 2007, 68.
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_unbaptised-infants_en.html#*