

Is Hell Empty or Full? A Catholic Perspective

By Bishop Robert Baron



An internet controversy in 2011 percolated around a book published by well-known evangelical preacher Rob Bell. In this text, Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived, Bell apparently advocates the “universalist” position on salvation, according to which everyone in the end is saved and that Hell, accordingly, is empty. Many of his evangelical co-religionists are arguing that this doctrine runs counter to classical biblical Christianity and is designed to appeal to a trendy post-modern audience for whom the only unforgiveable sin is to be “exclusive.” This dust-up over Hell made the main page of the CNN website and has prompted tens of thousands of responses and questions. Obviously, Hell is still (forgive the pun) a burning question among both believers and non-believers.

Of course, there is nothing new about this controversy. It has raged on and off for almost the whole of Christian history. Though many find this distasteful even to contemplate, the Biblical figure who speaks most often of Hell and damnation is none other than Jesus himself. Time and again in the Gospels, Jesus warns about “Gehenna” and its everlasting fire; he also tells the parable of Dives and Lazarus in which the rich man is forever separated from the bosom of Abraham; and, in Matthew 25, he warns that those who neglect the needs of the poor will go off “to eternal punishment.”

In the third century, Origen of Alexandria, one of the most remarkable and influential theologians in the entire tradition, formulated a teaching he termed *apokatastasis* (restoration). According to this doctrine, all sinners—and indeed all of the fallen angels, including Satan himself—would be, through Christ’s grace, brought to salvation in the end. There might be hellfire, Origen thought, but it cannot be everlasting, for if it were, sin would prove more powerful than grace. Well, the official church reacted against Origen’s universalism, for she saw it as insufficiently respectful of freedom, both human and angelic. If God’s grace is simply irresistible, then the real freedom to reject God’s love appears compromised.

Now in the wake of this condemnation, other theologians moved practically to the other extreme. St. Augustine, fifth century bishop of Hippo, held that original sin had produced a *massa damnata* (a damned mass) of human beings, out of which God, in his inscrutable grace, has deigned to pick a few privileged souls. Thus, Augustine clearly believed that the vast majority of the human race would be damned to Hell. And though it makes me uncomfortable to admit it, my hero, St. Thomas Aquinas, followed Augustine in holding that a very large number of people

are Hell-bound; he even taught that among the pleasures that the saints in heaven enjoy is the contemplation of the suffering of the damned!

In the twentieth century, the Protestant theologian Karl Barth moved back in Origen's direction and articulated a more or less universalist position on salvation. He maintained that the cross of Jesus had saved the world and that the church's task was to announce this joyful truth to everyone. The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar was a friend of Barth's and a fellow Swiss, and he presented a somewhat Barthian teaching on this score, though he pulled back from complete universalism. Balthasar argued that, given what God has accomplished in Christ, we may reasonably hope that all people will be saved. The condemnation of apokatastasis compelled him to draw back from saying that we know all will be saved, but his keen sensitivity to the dramatic power of the cross convinced him that we may entertain the lively and realistic hope that all people will eventually be drawn into the divine love.

My own conviction is that Balthasar has this more or less right. Catholic doctrine is that Hell exists, but yet the Church has never claimed to know if any human being is actually in Hell. When the Church says that Hell exists, it means that the definitive rejection of God's love is a real possibility. "Hell" or "Gehenna" are spatial metaphors for the lonely and sad condition of having definitively refused the offer of the divine life. But is there anyone in this state of being? We don't know for sure. We are in fact permitted to hope and to pray that all people will finally surrender to the alluring beauty of God's grace.

Think of God's life as a party to which everyone is invited, and think of Hell as the sullen corner into which someone who resolutely refuses to join the fun has sadly slunk. What this image helps us to understand is that language which suggests that God "sends" people to Hell is misleading. As C.S. Lewis put it so memorably: *the door that closes one into Hell (if there is anyone there) is locked from the inside not from the outside*. The existence of Hell as a real possibility is a corollary of two more fundamental convictions, namely, that God is love and that human beings are free. The divine love, freely rejected, results in suffering. And yet, we may, indeed we should, hope that God's grace will, in the end, wear down the even the most recalcitrant sinner.

[I added the photo above of my Greek Orthodox icon "The Resurrection." I love that it shows Jesus reaching down into Hades grasping Adam's wrist and Eve reaching out to Christ. I too believe, I too hope, that Hell is empty...that's how powerful Christ's love and mercy are!

As Romans 8:35-39 says: *"What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us *“CCC1035 The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, “eternal fire.” The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.”*

In my mind embracing this teaching that Hell exists doesn't deny that Jesus Christ is our “one path to Heaven”, or that *“Universalism, is a theological position condemned for heresy by the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 543. The doctrine teaches, at its most basic roots, all will be saved in the end. It says there is no final judgement, where the determination of eternal death will be carried out, but everyone will come to a saving knowledge of the Lord.”*

I believe that “final judgement” is not a one-time event at our death, rather it is a process of salvation. The love of Jesus is eternal and we are never separated from His love! We stubbornly condemned ourselves in this life and the next to the suffering of Hell, God doesn't condemn us!...As the notable writer C. S. Lewis said: “it's gates are locked from the inside.”

In short, Hell still exists, but it's empty. Despite our sin and inflexible choice, our damned condition is NOT eternal because Jesus is there loving us...wearing down our sin and stubbornness! Eternally inviting us into relationship.

When I'm told that's not the case, I must ask, “did not Jesus die for our sins and conquer death... eternally?” Romans 5:6-10: *“For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath. Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life.”*

So yes, I say that everyone will come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ... eventually!

1 Timothy 2:3-6 *“This is good and pleasing to God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as ransom for all.”*

I trust that if Jesus wants us to be in Heaven, we will be in Heaven!

You see, I saw an icon of Jesus reaching into Hades to save Adam and Eve...even original sin isn't stronger than Jesus' love and mercy!]