



3. March 2020

“Catholic and Orthodox doctrine about Heaven and Hell”

Answering questions

Part 3

One of our listeners from China asked what would be the difference between Catholic and Orthodox doctrine with respect to heaven and hell.

First of all, it should be noted that in the Orthodox Church, to my knowledge, there is no binding catechism for all believers. The Orthodox Church consists - as is well known - as different national churches, so that there may be slight differences within Orthodoxy in the answer to this question, but they will hardly be significant.

Within this question, we should also cover Purgatory, that is to say the place of purification, whose existence is Catholic doctrine, while it is denied in Orthodoxy. This indicates that, according to Orthodox doctrine, there would be no possibility of reaching a definitive purification after death.

Instead, after the return of Christ, all people would see Him in His uncreated light, as a "consuming fire and radiant light", which for some will mean the Resurrection to life and for others, the Resurrection to judgment and fire. Each one will receive what he deserves according to his conditions.

The conception that heaven and hell would simply be places of reward and condemnation is rejected. Rather, they would be the way each one experiences the sight of Christ according to the condition of his heart.

According to Orthodox teaching, heaven or hell are an uncreated reality; they are two different "states of the soul" and should not be understood as physical places. Even the damned would see God as a consuming fire, but not in an enlightened state. Hell would thus be the state of a person who refused to cooperate with divine grace and therefore would not reach the "enlightened vision" of God and unconditional love. The damned are thus those who have a hardened heart, who have done evil.

The state of man (pure or impure; repentant or not) therefore determines how he experiences God's light: either as heaven or as hell.

The Catholic doctrine agrees on essential points, but heaven and hell are not spoken of only as "states of the soul"; but also as (spiritual?) "places".

The worst torment of hell is the eternal separation from God. Man excludes himself from the presence of God, by free choice, when he remains obstinate in mortal sin and does not repent. Thus, it is not God who imposes a punishment from outside, but hell is the final consequence of sin. It is Man who rejects God's mercy until the last moment.

A real difference between Orthodox and Catholic eschatology consists, as I mentioned at the beginning, in purgatory. According to Catholic doctrine, even after death there is the possibility of purification. In Orthodoxy, on the other hand, there is no such consoling perspective, which allows a person who in life has not fully corresponded to God's love to still reach the beatific vision of God and share in eternal glory, by God's grace and thanks to the prayers of the Church. According to orthodox doctrine, man will participate in the enlightened vision of God in different ways, depending on how he responded to Christ in life.

Originally I wanted to finish answering questions now. But the spread of the coronavirus and its effects have caused some of our listeners to ask me to express my view on the current crisis. In particular, the question of the Church's action in relation to the reception of the Holy Communion is of special interest.

Tomorrow I will speak about that!