

The Disappearance of Hell

By Greg Witherow

Something struck me during a reading of the Gospel at a recent Mass, as the text was filled with repeated references to Gehenna¹. In the passage, Christ was admonishing his listeners to cease from their sins lest they be sent to Gehenna as punishment. Bibles have traditionally translated the Greek word Gehenna as Hell. In doing a little follow-up I discovered something surprising, yet consistent with an undercurrent I've noticed in segments of the Church since my conversion. I thought I'd share my thoughts.

The readings found in our lectionary are primarily from the New American Bible (NAB)². The NAB was first released in the early 1970's and is the most widely read Bible by Catholics in the United States today. The NAB uses a translation technique meant to make the meaning of scripture as understandable as possible³. Yet all the passages that refer to Hell are translated with the word Gehenna, a word that is unfamiliar to most Catholics⁴. As a result, **there is not one instance of the word Hell found anywhere in the NAB**. And as such, the NAB is the only English Bible in existence that has omitted the word Hell from its pages⁵. While the concept of Hell is found in the NAB, Hell has been veiled with language many listeners will not understand⁶.

But this absence of the word Hell in our Bibles is coupled with a larger problem. In many parishes today there is a spirit of Indifferentism, a belief that all religions are bridges to God if they are practiced faithfully. In other words, all "good people" go to heaven; no conversion to Christ is required. And as such, Hell is not only absent from our Bibles but it is nearly absent from the theology of many. With this type of worldview there is no urgency to catechize the laity or to warn the unsaved about Hell as nearly everyone will be saved anyway. The Church has always taught that it is possible for God to save people outside of the Church who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church⁷. But "if it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that *objectively speaking* they are in a **gravely deficient situation** in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation"⁸. The document *Dominus Iesus*, penned by Cardinal Ratzinger in the year 2000 addresses this very topic and can be read on the Vatican's web site⁹.

¹ Mark 9:38-48, read on October 1, 2006.

² The Vatican has ruled that the NAB is not an adequate translation for the liturgy. As such, our lectionary readings are comprised of the Confraternity Version (the last pre-Vatican II translation) for the Psalms and some of the New Testament (i.e. Luke 1:28 as one example) with the balance coming from the NAB.

³ The NAB is translated using a dynamic equivalence method, a thought-for-thought translation strategy. It is in contrast to the formal equivalence translation method, a word-for-word translation strategy. Formal equivalence is the method used in the Douay-Rheims and Revised Standard Version (more literal versions).

⁴ Have you ever heard **even once**, anybody exclaim, "What the Gehenna is going on!?"

⁵ In checking 24 other translations, all of them had multiple occurrences of the word hell.

⁶ Gehenna was the landfill for Jerusalem where dead animals and rubbish were burned in a perpetual fire.

⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, sections 846, 847 and 848.

⁸ *Dominus Iesus*, section 22. This sentence is taken verbatim from *Dominus Iesus*. Emphasis in bold mine.

⁹ The topic of salvation outside of the visible Church is complex, nuanced and for some, emotionally charged. It's best to read *Dominus Iesus* in its entirety at the following website.

The Gospel literally means **Good News**. But those who eliminate the Bad News from their explanation of Christ's work have drastically undermined the Good News. How so? Let me illustrate. Suppose two men have terminal cancer but only one knows it. On the evening news they both hear that a cure for cancer has been found and is available at the local hospital – all at no charge. What will the reactions of the two men be? It's easy to guess. The man who assumes he is healthy *will not* go to the hospital to get his free cure. But the man who knows he has terminal cancer will drive immediately to the hospital to receive his cure. It's easy to see that without the Bad News, the Good News is devoid of its necessity and its beauty. But we mustn't forget that as sons and daughters of Adam **we all have sinned, we all are lost and we are all in need of The Cure - Jesus Christ**. Is this not the truth? But how often is this message proclaimed in our parishes today?¹⁰

To further illustrate, what if the Catholic missionaries that came to the New World had the mindset described here? How might they have acted differently? Rather than calling on the Native American tribes to convert to Christianity they would have sought to engage in dialogue¹¹ and to foster mutual respect of each other's customs. Seeking converts to the one true faith and declaring Jesus to be the only name under heaven by which Man can be saved¹² would have been avoided, as it would have smacked of triumphalism and intolerance. Martyrdom to save souls would be unheard of.

If we wonder why we have lost so many Catholics to the world perhaps it's because we have garbled the Gospel message. We have not given the lost a reason to run to Christ. We have not given our cradle Catholics a reason to run to Christ. **And so they leave.** Cardinal Avery Dulles in his essay *The Population of Hell*, has commented that an almost thoughtless optimism has become the error of our time¹³. This is not to say that we should be assaulted from our pulpits with Hellfire and brimstone. But we need the Truth clearly explained. We need the Truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth. So help us God. The Church has The Truth¹⁴. Let her speak it¹⁵.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

¹⁰ I do not mean to impugn my local parish. I thank God for Holy Trinity's faithful and orthodox priests & laypeople that labor for the truth. If all parishes were like mine there would be no need for this essay.

¹¹ Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) writes the following in his book *Many Religions – One Covenant* (pp. 111, 112), “Does this mean that missionary activity should cease and be replaced by dialogue, where it is not a question of truth but of making one another better Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists? My answer is No... Dialogue is not aimless conversation: it aims at conviction, at finding the truth; **otherwise it is worthless**”. Emphasis mine. Also, the following quote is important in understanding the Church's goal in dialoguing with other faiths. “As against the reproach of intolerance a distinction must be made between dogmatic and civil tolerance. The Church rejects dogmatic tolerance, which would concede the same power of justification and the same value to all religions, or to all Christian confessions (Indifferentism); for there is only one truth. **But the Church recognizes the propriety of civil tolerance, by preaching the commandment of neighborly charity towards all men, even those in error.**” Emphasis mine. Taken from *The Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, page 313.

¹² See Acts 4:12. Would Peter and his tactics be tolerated in American dioceses today?

¹³ See Cardinal Avery Dulles's 2003 essay, *The Population of Hell* at this website:

<http://www.firstthings.com/firstthings/issues/ff0305/articles/dulles.html>

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 3:15

¹⁵ Romans 1:16