

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost *

Eternal Punishment

"There will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth" (Matt., 8:13)

In today's Gospel Our Lord refers by implication of the fate of those who disobey God's law and die in their sins. To them His words apply: "They will be put forth into the darkness outside; there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth." In other words, this statement of Jesus Christ is appropriately applied to hell, the place of eternal punishment, in which souls that leave this world in mortal sin are confined for all eternity.

It is indeed a most terrifying thought that God, who is so good, will punish some of His creatures forever. But we must remember that God is all-just as well as all-good, and since mortal sin is, in a sense, an infinite offence against God, strict justice calls for a punishment that is proportion-ate--a punishment that will last forever.

Today many non-Catholics scoff at the doctrine of hell and tell Catholics that they are too credulous and old-fashioned in accepting such a doctrine. To this we answer that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, clearly taught the existence and the eternity of hell when He declared that at the last judgement He will say to the wicked: "Depart from me, accursed ones, into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels" (*Matt., 25:41*).

Because of this clear and forceful statement of Our Divine Redeemer the Catholic Church has always taught that the punishment of the wicked is everlasting, and has never tolerated any compromise on this doctrine. According to Catholic belief, the punishment of hell is twofold--the pain of loss (the anguish of the soul in losing forever the possession of God for which it was created) and the pain of sense (punishment meted out by created means). The most terrible of the punishments contained under this second category is fire, which the Church holds to be true fire, not something metaphorical, even though it may be different from fire we experience on earth.

It is good for us to think of the doctrine of hell from time to time. Even if it were only a probable view, common sense would urge us to take no chances. But it is the teaching of God Himself.

Practical Application

Since hell is the fate of those who leave this life in mortal sin, it is most important to avoid mortal sin. If a Catholic commits mortal sin he should go to confession as soon as possible, and in the meantime make an act of perfect contrition.

* The enumeration of the remaining Sundays after Pentecost differs from year to year; hence, there must be a corresponding adjustment of the Gospels.