

Sin, Hell and the Devil – just not relevant anymore?

Dominic Baster – 21 March 2010

The hot topic for discussion today is not, perhaps, the most cheery of subjects – sin, hell and the devil – but it is pretty important because it helps to explain our need for religion. We are all, unfortunately, sinners. It's also quite fitting for this penitential season of Lent, when we are encouraged to think more about our own sinfulness and our need of God's forgiveness and mercy.

Now, I don't claim by any means to be an expert on this, and so I'll just try to explain what I understand the Church teaches about these things, with a few personal perspectives thrown in. It would be interesting to hear some of your own perspectives afterwards.

So, here goes. Sin, hell and the devil – and especially hell and the devil – are not spoken about very much anymore. This certainly wasn't the case in the past, but there has more recently been a move in some circles away from even admitting the existence of hell and the devil, and also many of us don't take our own personal sinfulness as seriously as perhaps we should. So, are the Catholic ideas of sin and the consequences of sin just not relevant anymore?

I'd like to start in a rather unlikely fashion by quoting from a well-known nineties sitcom. I don't know how many of you will be familiar with the programme 'Fr Ted', but in the very first episode there is a scene in which the main character Fr Ted is dismissing fortune telling. It goes like this, and I won't attempt the accents:

"It's a lot of rubbish. How could anyone believe any of that nonsense?" Fr Ted says, to which his rather less than intelligent curate Fr Dougal retorts, "Come on, Ted. Sure, it's no more peculiar than that stuff that they taught us in seminary. Heaven and Hell and everlasting life and that type of stuff. You're not meant to take it seriously."

"Dougal! You are meant to take it seriously!" replies Fr Ted, to Dougal's somewhat gormless surprise.

Now, this was funny even to non-Catholic and non-religious viewers because everyone knows really that "heaven, hell, everlasting life and that type of stuff" *are* taken seriously in Christianity, and are *really* what it's all about. They are as fundamental as it gets. Some people today like to say that what's *really* important is building heaven in this life, by pursuing social justice for example, and although this is undoubtedly important, each and every one of us *will* die and the Church is quite clear that we will

all face our own personal judgement day. The four last things – death, judgement, heaven and hell – are realities.

In this short talk, I'll firstly say some things about sin, followed by hell and then the devil. So, it's not exactly upbeat stuff I'm afraid!

Firstly to sin. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines sin as simply "an offense against God." It continues by saying that "sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become 'like gods', knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus love of oneself even to contempt of God."

Now sin is a common experience of all of us. We all rebel against God to some extent – and this goes for saints down through the ages as well as us here this evening. Yet it is also clearly the case that some sins are more serious, or grave, than others. As we know, the distinction made by the Church concerning the gravity of sins is between those that are venial and those that are mortal.

Mortal sin, as the Catechism explains, "destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law". Venial sin, on the other hand, "allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it".

Mortal sin usually requires absolution by a priest in Confession. It is considered so serious that if we die without being forgiven or absolved from it, we risk being unable to go to heaven. I've been told with some authority in the past that the Church doesn't believe in mortal sins anymore, but clearly it does – like it or like it not.

Now, in order for a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be met. The sin itself has to be grave matter and it has to be committed with full knowledge and deliberate, complete consent. So, force of habit, for example, may diminish a sin's gravity, as may unintentional ignorance.

I always thought that it was very difficult to commit a mortal sin, which I thought were reserved to the likes of murder, adultery and perjury. But the definition of grave matter is basically those sins that are forbidden explicitly or implicitly in the Ten Commandments. So, for example, intentionally missing Mass on a Sunday could fall within the scope of the commandment to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

The crucial point here, I think, is that a mortal sin signifies an explicit decision to go against God completely, a decision to choose something we know goes directly against God and so represents a choice to break off our friendship with him. It is an act of rejection and needs God's action in forgiving us, and our repentance, to make our relationship with him right again.

I think it's very easy to convince ourselves that a particular sin isn't really that serious, because we meant well or because there were various mitigating circumstances, or because God understands our weaknesses and won't hold them against us. However, this is a dangerous strategy because being in a state of mortal sin deprives us of grace, and makes keeping away from other sins much harder. We could easily find ourselves on a very slippery slope.

It's also wrong to talk about God 'holding our sins against us' - and Fr Paddy touched on this in his homily today. God wills all of us to be saved, but none of us can ever deserve to go to heaven on our own merits. It's not that *God* judges and condemns us, but that *we* fail to make use of God's freely offered forgiveness and mercy and therefore condemn ourselves. As Jesus said, there will be much rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.

Now, in talking about sin, I should say a short word about Original Sin. This is often misunderstood, but helps to explain why we sin in the first place. We find it so difficult - in fact impossible - to avoid sin in our lives and this can only be because we are in some sense alienated or distanced from God. We are in a *state* of rebellion against God and this is why we need God's saving grace so much. As I've said, none of us deserve salvation.

The Catechism explains that the inclination of men and women "towards evil and death cannot be understood apart from their connection with Adam's sin and the fact that he has transmitted to us a sin with which we are all born afflicted."

Original sin isn't a sin we *commit*, but is a state. Baptism forgives, or removes, original sin, but does not remove certain temporal consequences of original sin - including an inclination to commit sin.

Unfortunately we all give in to this inclination to sin, but sin has implications and if we do not repent and never seek forgiveness, we have the radical freedom to separate ourselves from God forever. This brings me on to talk about hell - a topic that has in recent decades become almost a taboo. Just as our awareness of sin has waned, so has our awareness of the ultimate penalty for remaining in our sins. Unfortunately, though, as Catholics, we are bound to believe in hell.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that, and I quote, "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."

It's true, I think, that the idea of hell was misused in the Middle Ages to scare the uneducated and impressionable masses with horrific visions of damnation. Mind you, Jesus's own description in the Gospel of Matthew of a "furnace of fire" where "there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth" is also pretty frightening.

Medieval perceptions of hell have, over time, been replaced by a concept of hell as a place of utter loneliness, separated from the presence of God. In 1999 Pope John Paul II said that hell was "the ultimate consequence of sin itself... Rather than a place, [it was] the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy".

Yet today, fear of hell has declined to such an extent that many people don't really believe in hell anymore, or at least they don't believe that there's any chance they might end up there. After all, God understands us all, and he is love. How could a loving, merciful God consign anyone, or allow anyone to be consigned, to live in separation from him forever?

When asked about this a few years ago, the former Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, conceded that we're bound to believe in hell, but added that we're *not* bound to believe anyone's there. This sounds very nice and reassuring, but I'm afraid it is very much at odds with Catholic tradition. I'd suggest that the implication of suggesting that hell is empty is that there's very little need to worry too much about sin and repentance, because we'll all go to heaven in the end anyway. The only consequence might be a slightly longer interval in purgatory - although even belief in purgatory seems to have declined markedly.

We all like to think that our deceased relatives and friends have gone straight to heaven, and that we will surely join them there immediately when we die, but I'm afraid this might not necessarily be the case. That's why Catholics are urged to pray for the dead, as they may need our prayers in purgatory, and not just pray to them. Hopefully it's unlikely that any of them have gone to hell, but perhaps we can't discount this.

Far from believing that anyone goes to hell, there seems to be a movement even within the Church towards believing that we all just go straight to heaven. I once went to a memorial Mass for a young journalist who had died suddenly the previous day. This journalist was a Jew and a good man, by all accounts, but also an avowed atheist. At the Mass the priest wore white vestments (instead of purple) and told us in the congregation that while *we* were all sad about the death, there was one person who most certainly was not sad at that moment and he was the deceased journalist himself, who was now surely in the joy and peace of heaven, seeing God face to face and praying for all of us.

Now, I certainly hope this was true, but surely, at the very least, the deceased needed our prayers? The impression that we all go straight to heaven, regardless of anything, is popular but un-Catholic and dangerous.

So, just as hell seems to have been swept under the carpet, so purgatory seems to have been swept there as well. This might be a natural consequence of rejecting the relevance of hell.

Who, then, goes to hell? Is it empty, as Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor suggests, or just for the most bad, most notorious sinners? Pope Benedict has speculated that the condemned might not be numerous. For the rest, he said, purgatory offers hope to men with a "final willingness" to live according to God.

The older tradition of the Church is less hopeful, though. St Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury until 1109, once taught that few would be saved, and that most of them would be monks. Of course, he was all right in this respect, being a monk himself (and a saint to boot!) but there are many other saints who have taught that only a small percentage of people are saved, including among most adult Catholics.

More recently, in 1917, the three Fatima visionaries were apparently shown a horrifying vision of the reality of hell that contained many, many people. There is a story that Lucia found her co-visionary Jacinta sitting alone, still and very pensive, gazing at nothing. "What are you thinking of, Jacinta?" asked Lucia. Jacinta replied, "Of the war that is going to come. So many people are going to die. And almost all of them are going to hell."

So, however we might speculate about what hell is like and how many people end up there, I think it's clear that hell shouldn't just be put on one side as an inconvenient or embarrassing aspect of our faith. It's pretty serious.

What, however, of the devil? Many in this 'enlightened' age would say that he's simply a mythological figure, *representing* the evil in the world and in each of us. The figure of a monster dressed in red with two horns, a tail and a pitch fork in his hand surely belongs to the Middle Ages, but does this mean that the devil as a force, as a real character, is no longer relevant?

I personally have always found belief in the devil, and his active role or influence, to be problematic and troubling. One big concern I've had, and this goes even more for belief in demons and evil spirits, is that it seems to lessen personal responsibility for bad deeds. We all sin, and we're all affected by Original Sin, but where does the devil fit into this? Does the devil make us sin? Surely saying "The devil made me do it," can and should be no defence.

Another problem I've had with the devil is that he just doesn't fit in to my understanding of the goodness of God and the purpose of life. God loves us and wants to save us, so he came to die for us so that we could be forgiven and go to heaven. The thought that God would also create the devil, or allow him influence over our souls, doesn't really fit. It's far more palatable to see the devil as a *symbol* for evil – or a symbol of our alienation from God – rather like the forbidden fruit in the Genesis account of Adam's fall.

However, despite my qualms, it's quite clear that the Church does indeed affirm the existence of the devil as an individual character with influence. The Catechism is quite clear that "Satan or the devil and the other demons are fallen angels who have freely refused to serve God and his plan". Cardinal Ratzinger, before he became pope, acknowledged that the devil is "puzzling" but affirmed that he *is* real and personal, not merely a symbolic presence. He said that the devil "is a powerful reality, a baneful superhuman freedom directed against God's freedom".

So, how does the devil show himself? The Catechism describes him a "seductive voice, opposed to God". The tradition of the Church is that he was at first a good angel, made by God. He and the other demons then became evil by their own doing and irrevocably rejected God and his reign. The devil is "a liar and the father of lies". He is the great deceiver, who seduces men and women to become their own gods and disobey the one true God.

The power of Satan is not infinite, and he cannot ultimately thwart God's plan. *Yet* when he acts in the world out of hatred for God, his action is permitted by divine providence. Why this is so is simply described in the Catechism as a great mystery, although it adds that we have St Paul's assurance "that in everything God works for good with those who love him."

Now, I find it really difficult to understand how the devil and diabolical activity can somehow be permitted by divine providence and form part of God's great plan – but I suppose the purpose of our being here is to choose to love God freely, and love can only be perfected through trial. Maybe if there was no external force of evil tempting us away from God and seeking to thwart God's mission, we couldn't so easily *choose* to love God positively and completely. I don't know – I'm sure there are other explanations.

I was going to say a few words here about demons and exorcism, but this is a pretty frightening subject. I'll limit myself here to mention that experts in exorcism seem to believe that only in a small minority of cases are so-called possessions full-blown – such as that represented in the film 'The Exorcist'. Far more common is demon infiltration, and people may be experiencing a mild form of demon infiltration if, for example, they find it

very difficult to free themselves from a particular sinful habit. One reason we cross ourselves with holy water is to protect ourselves from the powers of darkness. Let's also remember Pope Leo XIII's prayer asking St Michael to "cast into hell, satan and all the evil spirits, who roam throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls". It was recited after all Low Masses until Vatican II. Clearly evil spirits *are* taken seriously by the Church, or at least were taken seriously.

Whatever we might think about demons and the like, it seems to me that a safe interpretation of Church teaching on the role of the devil is to see his work happening on two levels - firstly on the personal level, quietly urging us as individual souls to prefer things that lead away from God towards a spiral of moral corruption. For example, many seminarians have described feeling under particular spiritual attack as they come towards ordination, and married couples often experience particular forces undermining their unions. Temptation can come from inside of us, but it can also come from the devil, who is the great tempter. We are still culpable when we give into temptation, however, whatever the source of that temptation.

Secondly, the devil works at the level of society or in institutions, including the Church - undermining them and causing them to veer away from their godly purpose. We have Christ's promise that the devil will never completely prevail against the Church, but we don't have the same assurance that the devil won't prevail in society. We might see him active in our society right now, undermining the sanctity of human life, undermining the institution of marriage, and driving the forces of secularism.

Critically, I think the devil is most active where he can do the most damage. It's no surprise, therefore, that the Church, the body of Christ, is under constant attack and so has been in a state of near-constant crisis for almost 2000 years. How else can we really explain the many scandals of today, or the corruptions in the Church of old - such as when popes had mistresses and sold indulgencies? Pope Paul VI famously said in 1972 that "from some crack the smoke of Satan has entered the temple of God".

It is hard to deny, it seems to me, that there is some kind of malevolent force active in history that seeks to thwart God's will. Perhaps the same force is also at work undermining the faith of Catholics, lessening reverence for the Blessed Sacrament or, indeed, lessening our awareness of sin and our recognition of our need for God's grace and forgiveness. Could it be that the fall in awareness of sin, the collapse in numbers going to confession and the denial of the devil's existence could all be the devil's work too - undermining our sense of need for God?

We *are* all sinners, and *we are* all in desperate need of God's grace. The *good news* is that, as Catholics, we have the sacraments of the Church freely given to us to help us. All this talk about sin, hell and the devil

might leave us a little downhearted, but our faith proclaims with great joy that Christ has *overcome* sin, hell, death and the devil. We have the Sacrament of Reconciliation available to give us the grace of a fresh start. In this sacrament, as Fr Paddy said in his homily last Sunday, our sins are not just forgiven but forgotten. We have the Eucharist to strengthen our defences against sin and the devil. And we have the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick which also wipes clean our sin and, when received close to death, fortifies and protects us as we prepare for judgement.

With these thoughts in mind, then, I thought it would be appropriate, and hopefully a little uplifting, to finish with those great words of the *Exultet*, traditionally sung during the Easter Vigil: "What good would life have been to us, had Christ not come as our Redeemer? Father, how wonderful your care for us! How boundless your merciful love! To ransom a slave you gave away your Son. O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!"