

DEAR DEACON BULLETIN INSERT

❖ Dear Deacon Jim,

My question is concerning Hell. Is it an actual burning of souls, besides never getting to see God? We know there is a Devil and Hell but no one says what Hell is. Can you give me some clarification?

❖ Response

In response to your interesting and thought-provoking questions, first, by definition, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1033), **hell** is "*the state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed.*" So, therefore, you are correct in that not accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God and never seeing Him forever by the individual's own free choice.

Most of what we know of hell and its eternity comes from our Lord, Jesus Christ, and he uses unequivocal terms. Our Lord often referred to "hell." He warned against "the hell of fire," "the unquenchable fire," and "the eternal fire." Our Lord also spoke of "the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 13:42). Also, we find phrases like "the lake of fire" (in Revelation 19:20, 20:10) representing hell. Gehenna is typically always used for the "hell" of "Catholic dogma" in Scripture.

Of the twelve times "Gehenna" is used to refer to "hell" in the New Testament, eleven of the twelve come from our Lord.

So, are the "flames of fire" of hell, the actual burning of souls' literal? We have no knowledge of fire which is unquenchable. It would seem that since the souls in "hell" do not presently have bodies that would be rather difficult to imagine.

Again, the Catechism (CCC 1033) emphasizes that "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 is absolute emptiness and isolation beyond anything we can fathom. These pains are quite real, quite literal, and consist of both the pain of loss and the pain of senses. They involve the body after the resurrection of the body and "follow from the very nature of sin," or they arise from the inside out, not from the outside in.

I would think that this would be the most agonizing pain to be cast into "the eternal fire" and surely refers to the keenest of suffering, but probably not being incinerated forever.

Deacon Jim