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Hell, purgatory flow from choices

Dante imagined circles of personalized suffering. C.S. Lewis envisioned a gray, shabby city that keeps getting bigger — and emptier — because the people are moving further and further out to avoid each other.

Jean-Paul Sartre conceived of a locked hotel room occupied eternally by three people who can't stand each other.

These authors provided fictional depictions of hell in, respectively, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Great Divorce* and "No Exit."

But anyone interested in the nature of hell can find many other images readily available — from burning flames and tormenting demons to total isolation — and, to a lesser degree, equally fanciful descriptions of purgatory. Indeed, the Dante and Lewis works cited above include such depictions.

But these depictions are, of necessity, imaginary, and are not meant to be factual accounts of the realities of hell and purgatory, according to Father Zachary Hayes, OFM. The priest wrote the 1989 book, *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology*.

"Those are images, metaphors," Father Hayes explained in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from the Catholic Theological Union of Chicago, where he is a professor of theology.

"They were used at different points in history. They are not to be taken literally.

"Dante's trip to the underworld, that's the source of so many of the metaphors in the Christian West," he added.

Father Joseph Hart, a professor of theology at St. Bernard's Institute, likewise noted that we know "nothing" about the literal nature of hell.

"It's part of the next life and all we can talk about the next life is in terms of images of this life," Father Hart told the *Courier*. "Hell is punishment for the damned. Beyond that, we can't tell anything from Scriptures."

Still, the church and Scriptures — including the words of Jesus — do teach the reality of hell, Father Hart noted.

"The purpose is for me to realize hell is a real possibility for me — not a hypothetical but a real possibility," Father Hart said.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is clear about the existence of hell and purgatory — but not their natures.

"Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of hell, 'eternal fire.' The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom man alone can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs," the catechism reads. (1035)

"To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called 'hell,'" it notes. (1033)

"God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end," the catechism adds. (1037)

Purgatory, meanwhile, is intended for the "final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned." (1031)

The doctrine concerning purgatory was formulated especially at the Councils of Florence (1439) and Trent (1563), growing out of Scriptures and tradition, the catechism notes. (1031) "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven," the catechism states. (1030)

Similarly, in his 1977 book, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, Father Hart writes: "Hell is a real possibility for me — not a hypothetical but a real possibility." (1033)

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ABANDON ALL HOPE