

## CONTINUED...

## Hell, purgatory

Continued from page 1

*Life*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger contended, "Purgatory is not, as Tertullian thought, some kind of supra-worldly concentration camp where man is forced to undergo punishment in a more or less arbitrary fashion. Rather is it the inward necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ, capable of God and thus capable of unity with the whole communion of saints. ... Purgatory follows by an inner necessity from the idea of penance, the idea of the constant readiness for reform which marks the forgiven sinner."

Father Hart used the image of an apple to help explain this process of reform.

"An apple picked doesn't become any larger, but it becomes riper," Father Hart noted. "We are what we are, we become fully what we are."

Father Hayes in Chicago speculated that that process takes place when we encounter the divine at the moment of death.

"It's a part of the dying process itself," he contended. "To the extent that we build up walls of resistance to God's love, as we die we have all these obstacles built up. We have to work through them."

Such an argument is a far cry from the popular notion that one must spend a lengthy period of time in purgatory.

That notion, SBI's Father Hart pointed out, grew out of past penitential practices in the church. At one time, for example, a person might have been required to spend a certain period of time — sometimes years — in penance. If the person died before completing that period of penance, then that time could be undergone in purgatory.

But purgatory is the moment of facing God, a moment not subject to time as we

know it, Cardinal Ratzinger argued.

"The transforming 'moment' of this encounter cannot be quantified by the measurements of earthly time," the cardinal wrote. "It is, indeed, not eternal but a transition, and yet trying to qualify it as of 'short' or 'long' duration on the basis of temporal measurements derived from physics would be naive and unproductive."

Father Hart cited Jesus' parable of the wedding feast to help explain the nature of this encounter.

When the initial guests refused to come, the king sent out servants to bring in all they encountered, Father Hart noted. Many of these guests would have arrived as they were, having been pulled in from the highways and byways, and were not likely to be properly dressed for a wedding. Thus the king and his servants likely took care of that need.

"If we simply take the image of preparing people for the banquet — bathing, perfuming, dressing them in fresh garment, none of which is their own, that's a proper image for purgatory," Father Hart suggested. "As we leave this life, it is not to be as we are forever. We are to be completed, we are to be made whole. We are to be fully vessels of God's love."

Peter Kreeft, a professor of philosophy at Boston College, noted in his 1990 book, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven ... But Never Dreamed of Asking*, that purgatory is about becoming complete.

"The completion we need is internal, not external — not to do all the things in Purgatory that we should have done on earth, but to become the persons God longs for and in our heart of hearts we longed to become," Kreeft wrote.

But allowing this process to take place requires our cooperation, Kreeft notes. Hell is for those who do not wish to provide this cooperation.

"Hell is God's greatest compliment to hu-

man free will and responsibility," he stated.

"Hell is not thrust upon us from without," Kreeft wrote. "Hell grows up from within, a spiritual cancer. It emerges from our freedom and eats away that freedom, just as cancer eats its host."

The reality, Kreeft speculated, is that "the damned are in the same place as the saved ... But they hate it; it is their Hell. The saved love it, and it is their heaven."

One of the keys to dictating whether we go to heaven or hell is the direction we set in our own lives, both Fathers Hayes and Hart noted.

"The way we experience it is the way we have prepared ourselves by our lifestyle," Father Hayes remarked.

In his book, Father Hayes observes that "Hell is the result of choosing to live for and by oneself alone. It is a deliberate choice to live in a manner contrary to our nature as created persons."

"Hell is much more something we do to ourselves rather than something God does to us," Father Hayes observed in his interview with the *Courier*. "Heaven would be the ultimate fulfillment of our desire for community and love. Hell is the opposite."

"The act of turning away from God and love is an act of isolation," Father Hart noted in agreement. "If one leaves the world in an act of isolation, one becomes in death solely what one was in life."

Thus, he contended, the discussions of hell in Scriptures come in the context of "threat discourses," which, in effect say that we should live in a certain way or suffer the consequences.

"The purpose of Scriptures is not to give us details about the end, but to bring us to a decision now," Father Hart said.

"Hell and its eternity must be a real possibility," Father Hart argued. "One who had truly made the choice of mortal sin, which is to say, to totally turn away from God, they can't be refused in this choice."

Indeed, this guarantee of freedom of choice counters some of the arguments that an all-just, all-loving God simply could not allow hell to exist in the end, Kreeft noted. He cited C.S. Lewis' contention in *The Problem of Pain* that eternal happiness comes from surrender to God, but that the individual must choose to surrender. What happens when an individual refuses to make that surrender? If God ignored that refusal, then there is no true free will.

"In fact," Kreeft argued, "the answer to the question 'If God is love how can there be Hell?' is that only because God is love can there be Hell! God's love created the highest creatures, free creatures, creatures who were also creatures of their own destinies, and some of them created Hell."

The source of the pain of hell is the refusal to accept God's love, Kreeft stated.

"Though the damned do not love God, God loves them, and this is their torture," he wrote. "The very fires of Hell are made of the love of God! Love received by one who only wants to hate and fight thwarts his deepest want is therefore torture."

Father Hayes pointed out that the church avoids making any judgments about who has made such a choice.

"Nowhere does the magisterium make the judgment that any particular person has died in this state (mortal sin) and that consequently he or she is condemned to hell," Father Hayes wrote in *Visions of a Future*. "The church has canonized individual saints. But it has never judged that a particular individual is, in fact, in a state of eternal condemnation."

"We don't know if anyone is in hell," Father Hart also acknowledged. "We can't make a judgment about anyone."

"What I do know is the choices set out for me," he added. "The choices of life or death, to feed the hungry to deny them food, to give drink to the thirsty or not — that's up to me."

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