

My Brothers and Sisters,

Each year, as the Church year draws to a close, our Liturgies focus more on the end times, i.e., Jesus' return in glory. In fact, in pre-Vatican II Liturgies, the Gospels for the last Sunday of the Church year and the First Sunday of Advent were always Matthew's and Luke's versions of today's Gospel. Unfortunately, the images they conjured up in us were not so much images of Jesus' triumphant return in glory but of a catastrophic end of the world. Consequently, homilies on both Sundays tended to focus on sin, judgment, heaven, and hell.

Our thinking has changed a lot during the last sixty or seventy years. For example, sixty or seventy years ago, I think people thought a lot more about life after death than most of us do today. Back then, I think Catholics, young and old, thought more about the consequences of sin in terms of salvation or damnation than we do today. Today many people have very little sense of sin or sense of responsibility to God for their choices. For example, people today are often willing to admit mistakes, but they are not willing to admit sins. To acknowledge sin is to accept responsibility before God for our choices, and today many people are unable or unwilling to accept that responsibility. Scripture, however, is clear. Sin is real, and we are accountable to God for our lives. Catholics have always believed that when we die, we will be judged by our lives.

At the same time, some people today have real problems with the concept of hell. However, if there is a heaven, there has to be at least the possibility of hell. Love cannot be forced. It has to be free. However, it cannot be free if we are not free to refuse it, which is hell. We probably all have our own images of hell. One of the more common images of hell is the image of the condemned suffering together in a fiery furnace. I think that image of hell totally misses the point. Hell, I would suggest, is complete isolation, complete aloneness.

I probably have told this story before. One day a reporter was assigned to do a feature story about heaven and hell. He started in hell. When he arrived, he found a banquet hall with tables filled with the best foods, but everyone was starving. When he looked more closely, he saw that they had no working elbows, so they could not feed themselves. They were starving in the midst of plenty. When he arrived in heaven, he found the identical hall with the identical foods, but everyone was well fed. He assumed that they must have working elbows, but they did not. What was the difference? Those in heaven focused on feeding others rather than themselves.

My brothers and sisters, when I was a high school student, I vividly remember overhearing one of our older parishioners complaining that the homilies after Vatican II talked too much about love and not enough about sin. There is a famous story about St. John the Evangelist. When he was old and infirm, they would bring him to Sunday Eucharist and ask him to preach. Every week he gave the same short homily, "Little children, love one another." After several weeks, his disciples asked him why he kept saying the same thing, why he just kept telling them to love. His response was, "Love is all there is."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Commentary of St. Jerome on the Epistle to the Galatians*, Book 3, ch. 6.