

[Readings: Acts 3:13-15; 17-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 2:1-5a; Luke 24:35-48]

It was widely reported last week that Pope Francis, in an interview with Eugenio Scalfari of **La Repubblica**, said that, “Hell does not exist.”

The Vatican quickly responded, in effect, that this “quotation” should not “be considered as a faithful transcription of the Holy Father’s words.” In fact, the Vatican clarified that Mr. Scalfari had not even officially **conducted** an interview with Pope Francis, though the two had met and had a conversation at the pope’s residence. Nevertheless, the story took on a life of its own, and the internet was ablaze with comments. John Clark is an author and speechwriter. This is what he writes about the quotation attributed to Pope Francis. He refers them to the Vatican’s official response. Though the Vatican’s response was prompt, one might speculate as to whether it was sufficient. One might further speculate as to whether the time was ripe for a “teachable moment,” as the kids say today. I would have been happier if the Vatican’s response had included the actual teaching on Hell; it would have given me something meatier to forward to my friends to answer their fundamental question about Hell.

In that spirit, I would reference the following.

In his **Catholic Dictionary**, Father John Hardon explains that **de fide** (“of faith”) teachings of the Catholic Church are “infallibly true” and that their “infallible certitude derives ultimately from divine revelation.”

Does the church have any **de fide** teachings regarding Hell? The answer is yes. Ludwig Ott, in his famous and oft-cited **Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma**, lists two specific **de fide** teachings that apply to our present conversation. **First**: “The souls of those who die in the condition of personal grievous sin enter Hell.” **Second**: “The punishment of Hell lasts for all eternity.”

Here is something unofficial that I learned from my dear Mom; I think it might be called “Catholic Karma.” She says that whatever blessing or curse we say to others comes back at us. So, if I tell YOU to “go to Hell,” guess where I am going to end up!

In rejecting God, we risk eternal punishment in Hell -- this is a consistent thread running throughout Scripture. Dire warnings about Hell appear in the Old Testament, and Ludwig Ott references several such passages, including Daniel 12:2, "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." There is also Judith 16:17, "Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the Day of Judgment; fire and worms he will give to their flesh; they shall weep in pain forever."

The New Testament contains many passages as well. Saint Paul's letters frequently reference Hell, as in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, "They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...."

Of course, the weightiest warnings come from the very lips of Jesus Christ, such as Matthew 25: 41 & 46, "Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'...And they will go away into eternal punishment..." In case one didn't get the point in the first six dozen books of Scripture, Revelation 20:10 reads, "...the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." So, yes, Virginia, there is a Hell!

One should note for the record that Pope Francis has hardly been shy about discussing Hell. In a morning meditation Nov. 22, 2017, for instance, when confronted with the idea that the talk of Hell might frighten people, [Pope Francis said](#): "It is the truth. Because if you... always live far away from the Lord, perhaps there is the danger, the danger of continuing in this way, far away from the Lord for eternity." Beyond that, [he has specifically warned members of the mafia](#), "Convert, there is still time, so that you don't end up in hell. That is what awaits you if you continue on this path." Of course, these are actual quotes, which are weightier than made-up stuff. This week, Pope Francis issued an apostolic exhortation on what we can do to grow in holiness: "Rejoice and Be Glad!"

Incredibly, we are living at a time in which journalists have re-invented the meaning of the quotation mark. But authentic journalism is less an art than it is a science, it is prose rather than poetry, it is fact rather than fiction. Either it is precise or it is wrong. Something to consider the next time we read an “interview.”

All three of our readings today call us to repent of our sins and to be converted. If we say we are friends of Jesus, but still sin, we are liars. And if we do sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ. When you and I repent, we are forgiven, converted, and missioned to preach in His name to all nations. In today’s readings we hear of how we come to love. Repentance, conversion, and forgiveness -- these experiences are met by God’s love and lead us to return that love to God and others. We encounter this love in the person of Jesus, the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Those who keep the Commandments will know God. How do I understand keeping the Commandments? As simply a matter of following the rules and doing one’s duty? Or is it something more? How can I ground fulfilling obligations more deeply in the love of God?

What do I believe I have been promised by God, the church, my family, the people I love and serve? What do I promise them in return?

From what have I needed to be converted? How did that conversion come about? How can I most effectively communicate the possibility and power of conversion?

Even when I feel most unworthy, I am loved. When in my life have I been forgiven in a way that transformed me? What did this experience tell me about forgiving others?

Lent has brought us to Easter. Easter brings us to a new chapter in our lives of faith, to a renewed commitment to follow God’s commandments, and to the hope that one day, our eternal home will be Heaven, and not Hell.

ALLELUIA! AMEN!