

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

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POPE FRANCIS: NO HELL YOU SAY...?

A few weeks ago it was widely reported in the media the stunning assertion that Pope Francis has denied the existence of hell. In fact, "The Drudge Report", one of the internet most read sites had this shocking commentary on Good Friday: "Pope Francis declares no Hell." Quite a few parishioners on Holy Saturday approached me and asked if this is what the Pope had truly said. One man was very upset.

Actually, we don't really know what the Holy Father said at all. As it turns out, the Pope had a discussion with a 93 year old atheistic journalist by the name of Eugene Scalfari. It was the atheist who informed the media about their conversation and his assertion that Pope Francis had stated that there is no eternal punishment after death. Souls do not go to hell but are simply "annihilated."

The Vatican stated that no part of the conversation could be considered as a faithful transcription of the Holy Father's words and that he does believe in hell. It's quite a mix-up!

Personally speaking, I do believe that Pope Francis believes in the Catholic teaching on hell. After all, the Pope often enough speaks about the devil. A couple of years ago, Francis said this in a homily at the Vatican: "the devil exists in the twenty first century and we need to learn from the gospel how to battle against him." If there is no hell then the devil is really a "Man without a country!"

It is true to say that in the current Church we hear little about hell and the consequences of sin. Of course, this was not true in earlier times. In A.J. Cronin's great novel, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, the central character, a priest by the name of Father Francis Chisholm is sent on his first assignment to a very strict curmudgeon of a pastor whose theology was described this way: "There were certain things (sacraments) to be accomplished with oil, water, and salt. Without them hell was waiting-hot and gaping!" Not such a nice picture of the Lord's mercy!

In that line too, Pope John XXIII once told a story about a very fiery Italian pastor in his hometown who preached about hell at a parish mission. The priest kept yelling out to the congregation: "Fire! Fire! Fire!" His words were loud enough outside to summon the local fire department!

We know that Our Lord Jesus Christ spoke about hell in the gospel several times for those who refuse to repent and believe. The Catechism of the Church puts it this way: "The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity...The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone we can possess the life and happiness for which we are created." (Catechism #1033).

Those who commit serious sins and don't repent are in danger of going to hell and none of us want to wind up there. Of course, we don't have to go there if we pray, frequent the sacraments and live a moral life. If we fail, there is still the Sacrament of Penance described as the "Plank held out to us after shipwreck."

It strikes me that Pope Francis is a very merciful priest who wants none to perish and all to be saved. I suppose if you are too nice you can truly "throw out the baby with the bath water." If there are no consequences for our actions why bother to live a good life?

Perhaps a helpful prayer to say this week is the little aspiration that is said in the Rosary at the conclusion of each decade: "O my Jesus forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell and lead all souls into heaven."

Sincerely in Christ,
Father Jerome