

PROCLAIMING THE BAD NEWS TO TEENAGERS

Certainly all of us who work with young people know that we are called to proclaim the “Good News.” But what about the bad news? Three years ago, a survey of American Christians showed that only 32% of Christians believe in hell. Though these surveys were directed towards Christian adults of all denominations, it is fair to assume that Catholic teenagers would respond in a similar way.

In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI spoke to a suburban parish outside of Rome and said, “Jesus came to tell us every one is wanted in paradise, and that hell, about which little gets said today, exists and is eternal for those who shut their hearts to his love.”

Talking about hell can pose a challenge for those who work with young people today. Inevitable questions are raised:

- “Who does the Church think is in hell?”
- “Does the Church think that all of those who are not Catholic are burning in eternal flames?”
- “If God loves everybody, then how can anybody be in hell?”

The difficult answers to these questions often discourage catechists from speaking to youth about this topic. But if young people don’t understand the horrors of hell, they can never appreciate in the same way what Christ went through to bring them to heaven.

Or to put it another way, the Good News isn’t really good unless the bad news is really bad.

Question 1

So who does the Church think is in hell? In his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul II wrote, “the Church has never made any pronouncements in this regard.”¹ That is not to say that the Church does not believe that people are in hell, it’s just that the Church has not mentioned *specific people* who are in hell. She canonizes saints but does not create a list of sinners. The Church is not about discovering who is in hell. The Church is about those who are in heaven.

We don’t know the names of individual people in hell, and there’s a good chance they don’t know their own names either. That is one of the horrors of hell. The Catechism tells us that those who live in heaven, “retain, or rather find, their true identity, their own name.”² In contrast, souls in hell are anonymous. This is a good teaching point for young people who are tempted with the anonymity that the Internet provides to do things they would never do if their name was attached to it.

Question 2

Does the Church think everyone who is not Catholic goes to hell? No. The Catechism tells us, “Every man who is ignorant of the gospel of Christ and of his Church but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.”³

But that doesn’t give everyone a “free pass.” We all have a responsibility to seek the truth and do the will of God. The revelation of Jesus Christ given through the Church is certain; to live a life without that revelation is uncertain. “Can be saved,” does not mean, “will be saved.” This is why we must continue to preach the Good News to all people. And all are saved only through the cross of Jesus Christ, whether we knew Him in this life or not.

Question 3

This leads us to the most common question. “If God is so loving, why does hell exist?” The answer is that hell exists *because* of God’s love. God does not force Himself upon us; He gives us a choice to follow Him or not. Hell is, “the state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God.”⁴ You’ll have to help young people get beyond the silly stereotypes of hell: fire, brimstone, pitchforks, or the idea that hell is a “party.” God is the source of love, peace, and happiness. Hell is the exclusion of all those things.

Hell is scary. But we don’t talk about hell to frighten teens into holiness. We do it because it helps us appreciate all that Christ did to save us from it. John Paul II commented that many times, “preachers, catechists, and teachers no longer have the courage to preach the threat of hell.” May we who work with young people have the courage to proclaim the “bad news,” so they more deeply may understand the beauty of the Good News. 🖱

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Notes

1. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 186.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1025.
3. CCC 1260.
4. CCC 1033.
5. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 183.

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