



THE YEAR OF  
**DISCIPLESHIP**

## Is Hell Real?

Over the years, I have found that many believing Catholics struggle with the reality of hell. First, we should be clear about what the Church teaches: Hell is real and eternal, and its chief punishment is a permanent separation from God, the ultimate good who alone can make us truly happy (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1035). So, the chief pain is not “fire,” but the permanent un-fulfillment of our deepest desires.

We should also be clear that most of our imagery on hell comes straight from the lips of Jesus (see Matthew 5:22, 29; 10:28; 13:42, 50; 25:31-46; Mark 9:43-48); that is, hell is decidedly not primarily an “Old Testament” concept. Rather, the movement from the Old to the New is a movement from the earthly to the heavenly; so while earthly rewards and earthly punishments often dominate the Old, these foreshadow the prospects of eternal life and eternal death (i.e., heaven and hell) in the New.

Jesus is very clear and very serious about the possibility of hell for each of us: *“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few”* (Matthew 7:13-14).

We make a grave pastoral and spiritual mistake if we do not fear (and teach) the reality of hell. We don’t need to calculate or estimate how many will be saved; but we do need to hold before our minds and hearts the reality that hell is a real possibility *for me*, if I do not persevere in charity—for to die in a state of unrepentant mortal sin is to place myself in hell (see CCC 1033).

Revelation 21:27 teaches that “nothing unclean” can enter heaven. This is not because God doesn’t want anything unclean around him, as if it were the result of a whimsical choice. Rather, it follows on the very nature of things: any vestige of sin that remains will—because of the very nature of God himself—preclude our full union with him.

This is also the logic behind purgatory: God wants not only to forgive our sins, but to heal and transform us; so the temporal consequences of sin (the way in which our sin has wounded us) must be dealt with in order to make our union with God complete and our happiness full (see CCC 1472).