

STEPPING-STONES OVER BIG DIFFICULTIES.

ROUND ABOUT HELL.

(BY REV. FATHER CASSIDY, NEW PLYMOUTH.)

(Continued.)

THE Church tells us that those who die in bad state, that is in mortal sin, shall suffer punishment without end. This is the dogma whatever may be said about the site of this place of punishment, or about the degrees and quality of its pains; neither one nor the other is a matter of necessary faith, and belongs to those points on which it is lawful to hold different opinions, without wandering from the Catholic faith. This is the doctrine as it is revealed by God and established beyond all reasonable doubt by scriptural evidence. The doctrine of everlasting punishment was promulgated by the mildest Teacher that the world ever saw; a teacher the most merciful, kind, and most compassionate, who everywhere manifested the most refined humanity to everyone consistent with justice. He has laid down the law and, in advance, warned its violators of the punishment that was in store for them and all the consequences that would follow their wilful and unrepented transgressions. Since we only occupy the position of the parties to be judged, we cannot judge impartially in our own case, we cannot draw correct conclusions from facts we know so imperfectly. We neither know the nature of the offence nor the dignity of the Person offended, and we then must admit that the question from its very nature rises far above all human right and capacity to judge. But though we believe that the doctrine of everlasting punishment rests on Revelation and the unerring word of Christ and His Church, and though we believe we have no right or capacity to determine such a question, still it may be well to give some common sense reasons for the faith that is in us respecting it. We must remember that there is a vast difference between everlasting punishment and infinite punishment. Everlasting punishment is simply punishment that is endless in duration, but may be only very trifling in intensity, while infinite punishment is not only endless as to duration but endless as to intensity. No infinite being could commit an offence deserving of infinite punishment, neither could any finite person be capable of enduring it. So the punishment of hell is finite, and the offence that consigns one to it is a finite offence, but an act of final rebellion against God, and a serious, wilful, conscious and deliberate transgression of His law. Of the final rebellion and the final chastisement that consigns the rebel to it, Bishop Ullathorne says, "If all chastisement, with all the tender touches of mercy that come to open the heart with its visitations fail to soften the hardness and subdue the swelling of the rebel heart, if the malice of sin is ungratefully fostered against God to the end; then as chastisement has utterly failed to conquer odourate evil justice must change the mercy of chastisement to that inevitable punishment which to preserve the due order of things must separate unchangeable evil from unchangeable good for everlasting." When mercy is despised justice must take its course. Any sin that mercy has not pardoned justice must oppose and punish it, and when the criminal dies impenitent and in confirmed malice, then his final punishment begins. He was permitted a long period of probation; all that mercy and love could do or suggest to soften his heart, and bring him back again to love what God loves, and hate what God hates was done but in vain, He would die obdurate, defiant, rebel, and impenitent, and so he wants separation from God, he does not want His love or His home, he does not want His mercy or His forgiveness, he does not want His sanctity or His light, what then does he want but to be cast into the exterior darkness. Let him have his choice. His choice is hell. The laws of any country or society will proceed at once to punish the offender for his first and other offences as they occur; but the law of Christ forgives, and forgives till forgiveness is impossible; for it will never be asked, and in consequence it will never be given. Hell is the state of permanent and insolent rebellion against God, who is a Lawgiver of infinite majesty and perfection, and whose right to rule and govern is founded on the highest possible grounds. God is the Creator of everything; and a state of wilful and obstinate defiance to His right to rule every thing must be a state of insolent madness, and a great crime, for God being infinitely powerful, it is folly for man to oppose Him; and God being infinitely wise, it is absurd to think he would govern unjustly, or promulgate laws to be broken with impunity by His subjects. God loves His own infinite perfections because they are worthy of being infinitely loved. In loving Himself infinitely, and in requiring all rational creatures who know that He is infinitely loveable to love Him above every thing else, God is only claiming the right of being just to Himself, and requiring others to give Him all that is due. In loving Himself, He wrongs no one, and in demanding obedience and love from men; He only demands justice, and nothing more. Rational beings are then bound to love God supremely, not only on account of His infinite perfections that are intrinsically worthy of their greatest possible love; but also, as on account of God being their Creator, their Father, and their Friend. If we consider the magnificence of Creation; if we look at the sun and system, if we look on the least or the greatest work of God, we must feel the debt of gratitude we owe Him is beyond all possible conception. Even the natural life with all its clouds and sunshine, with its storms and peaceful moments, with its scars and triumphs, is something we can never fully thank the great God for. But when the cross of Golgotha shines over all this majestic kindness; when we hear the angels' song, as it comes ringing down from the skies of Bethlehem; and we see the brilliant column of the angelic ones that in their upward flight sing, "Glory to God in highest, and peace on earth to men of goodwill," we must feel in the light of such unspeakable love that we would be most unworthy and ungrateful wretches not to cherish God with all our hearts, with our whole strength, and with our whole minds. When we consider what great and supernatural gifts God has bestowed on man; and how after man's wilful and deliberate abuse of them, God still gave him an opportunity of repairing his loss and his misfortune by the

most merciful but costly theory of redemption, we can then form a feeble notion of the base and wilful ingratitude of him who rejects such great kindness, mercy, and love; and if man brings punishment on himself by his treason, his perfidy, and ingratitude, we feel convinced that he cannot blame God for the misfortune, and accuse him of not being good. For if God loves goodness, He must necessarily hate evil; and His hatred of evil must be as intense as His love of good. So God's hatred of evil or sin must be as great as His love, or goodness, or sanctity is great. He who loves harmony must hate discord; he who admires beauty must hate deformity; he who loves truth must abhor falsehood; and he who loves justice must hate iniquity. It is impossible, in the nature of things, to love two precise opposites; and if God loves goodness, and hates evil with equal intensity, His punishment of sin must be in due proportion to His reward of virtue. If the reward be everlasting, the punishment must also be the same; and if God manifests to man His love of virtue He must also manifest to him His hatred of vice; and so endless punishment is the natural and appropriate manifestation to man of the Divine Justice. God having an infinite love of infinite holiness and infinite good, must hate sin with a hatred as enduring as it is immeasurable. The endless life of heaven proclaims God's infinite love of good; the endless life of hell proclaims His infinite hatred of evil; and if the life of hell was not eternal, the symmetry of the divine nature as manifested to man would be destroyed; there would be a gap in the exhibition of the divine attributes; and the divine justice hating sin eternally and immeasurably, would not exist, or would be hidden from our sight. God must hate evil and punish it as long as it exists; and punishment will not always prevent evil, or bring about its reparation. Even in this life we know that punishment more frequently hardens than softens the heart. So the punishment of hell instead of softening the sinner's nature, and moving him to love what God loves, and hate what God hates, may only confirm him in his stubborn opposition and hatred of God. Must God then reward this further defiance of His Majesty, by opening heaven and inviting within its portals an enemy growing stronger and stronger in unrelenting hatred and blasphemous rebellion; or must God give in to the wretched sinner some time or other, if he will only be sufficiently persistent in his villainy; thus encouraging sin and rewarding revolt. The supposition is absurd. The restitution theory and the hypothesis of final annihilation overthrow God's justice; and when viewed in the light of the universe, bring with them their own refutation. If we ask why did God permit men to come into existence whom He knew would certainly be lost, we might enquire with equal astonishment why He permitted so many others to be born to be saved. God certainly foresaw the first fall of the first man. But God's foreknowledge of it was not the cause of it. God foresaw the last fall of the last man, but He will not be the cause of it, any more than our knowledge of the sun's rising to-morrow will actually cause him to rise. God foresees everything that will happen, but everything does not happen simply because he foresees it. God made man free, rational, and intelligent; God wished man to use his liberty, and his reason as a rational being. Had God left man no liberty we would say He dishonoured him. If He forced him to be good what honour to one or the other? Even J. J. Rousseau asks, "How could God reward him for doing good who had not the power of doing evil, or to prevent a man from being wicked should He take from him his liberty, and in its place give him only instinct, and thus make him a brute and a man at the same time?" God did not wish us to worship and obey Him as automaton or irrational beings, and if some abuse the noble gifts of reason and liberty they have received, should the others be deprived of them who use them well? It is foolish to quarrel with the present order of creation, to criticise the gifts of God, or to blame Him for our existing as we exist. It is foolish to ask why were we not made incapable of sinning, why we were not made absolutely perfect, why we were not made creators, why we were not made Gods, or why was not the whole creation, the present life and future enjoyment, sun, moon and stars, the beauties of nature, the majesty of music, every thrill of human pleasure, the light of noble friendship and every fair and magnificent existence in heaven and earth, on sea and land, suppressed because man was not made by God as perfect as Himself, or because He conferred on him the great honour of glorious freedom, giving him the power of saving or ruining himself, or because God did not make him a worm, or a blade of grass, or a blazing comet, dragging his useless tail of phosphorescent nothingness across the unknown stars, instead of the free intelligent being destined to know and love Him, He has made him. God gave man liberty to use and not abuse, and though man's nature possesses the possibility of going wrong, still it has, at the same time, the power of going right, and when man does wrong, it is not through necessity but simply because he wills it. All the lost ones of the human race who may suffer in the other life will bring punishment on themselves through their own fault, they will exclude themselves from heaven by their own choice, they will share the destiny they may have created for themselves, and God will be blameless for their misfortune. And should only one man of the whole race be saved, should only one man remain faithful to his Creator and his God, should only one man walk through life unswayed, shadowing ever in his heart and soul the bright image of his Maker, for that man's sake alone, the planets should take up their allotted courses, the sun should shower down his rivers of golden light, the ocean should breathe its ceaseless prayer, the bird should warble its softest note, and all creation should serve him for his fidelity. Then, by the reasonable use of liberty, even one man becomes eternally and perfectly happy, are we to deprive him of the reward he deserves, or the liberty he enjoys, because another despises the reward, or abuses the means of obtaining it, or should God burn up the earth, hurl sun, moon and stars into the fiery mass from which they sprang, leaving nothing but the everlasting throne and the bright faces of the faithful angelic host, because some will abuse a gift that so many others will praise and bless Him for ever for. St. Augustine puts the difficulty and answers it thus, "As God is the perfect good He envies no good whatever to His creatures. To all He gives the good they have, whether it be the less, the greater, or the greatest good. To