

Eschatology in the PNCC: A Clarification

Introduction

From time to time questions arise regarding the position of the Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) on eschatology – specifically, whether it officially accepts and teaches universalism (the affirmation that all without exception will attain salvation) or acknowledges the existence of eternal punishment. Notwithstanding the fact that the PNCC’s 18th General Synod (Toronto, 1990) approved statements adopted by the Church Doctrine Commission (CDC) that expressly denied any doctrinal adherence to universalism,¹ the periodic emergence of contrary views since that time, grounded in various opinions of the topic that have been expressed over the years, indicates a need again to clarify and to reaffirm the PNCC’s position on this topic. In order to dispel any confusion in the minds of the faithful, the CDC therefore deems it expedient to issue this Clarification, which is intended to serve as a guide in the development of catechesis on this topic.

Background

In March 1988, at the direction of the Prime Bishop, the CDC discussed in depth the topic of eschatology and approved the following motion: “Maintaining the teaching of the Undivided Church and conforming to the Declaration of Utrecht (1889), we, the members of the Church Doctrine Commission, recognize that the Polish National Catholic Church has not taught, and does not teach, the doctrine of universal salvation.”² The bishops soon thereafter formally adopted a similar position: “Maintaining the teachings of the undivided Church, we, the Bishops of the Polish National Catholic Church, in conformity with the *Declaration of Utrecht* (September 24, 1889), affirm the

¹ Polish National Catholic Church, Eighteenth General Synod...Proceedings (n.p., n.d.), pp. 209-10.

² “Synodal Church Doctrine Commission...Report to the 18th General Synod, 1-5 October 1990,” *Commission Reports to the XVIII General Synod of the Polish National Catholic Church* (n.p., 1990), p. 2.

following: ‘The Polish National Catholic Church has not taught and does not teach the so-called doctrine of Universal Salvation.’”³

The CDC returned to the subject in 1990, when it examined in considerable detail the Agreed Statements produced during the period 1975-1987 by the Mixed Theological Commission for the Orthodox-Old Catholic Dialogue. One of the Statements (“The Doctrine of the Last Things”) reaffirmed, “The eternal happiness of the righteous as well as the eternal punishment of the wicked is a constant teaching of Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church.”⁴ The CDC agreed that this Statement “represents the teaching of the Polish National Catholic Church,” yet went on to add the following significant observation, “Embracing the constant teaching of Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church, the Polish National Catholic Church hopes and prays for the salvation of all through Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁵

The CDC’s motion of 1988 and the subsequent bishops’ statement rejecting the doctrinally normative nature of universalism within the PNCC essentially affirmed a negative proposition. However, the acceptance in 1990 by both the CDC and the General Synod of “The Doctrine of the Last Things,” along with the appended observation, supplies the basis for a more positive statement on the topic, one that reflects biblical teaching, the writings of the Church Fathers, recent theological research and reflection, and the primary principle of the “Declaration of Utrecht” (1889) accepted by Bishop Franciszek Hodur in 1907 on behalf of the PNCC: “...we persevere in professing the faith of the primitive Church, as formulated in the ecumenical symbols and specified precisely by the unanimously accepted decisions of the Ecumenical Councils held in the undivided Church of the first thousand years.”⁶

The Scriptural Witness

Biblical references to the ultimate destiny of individuals at first glance embody a paradox. On the one hand, we confront the clear will of God to extend salvation to all

³ Quoted in Stanislaus J. Brzana and Anthony M Rysz, eds., *Journeying Together in Christ: The Report of the Polish National Catholic-Roman Catholic Dialogue* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1990), p. 31.

⁴ *The Road to Unity: A collection of agreed statements of the joint Old Catholic-Orthodox Theological Commissions* (Scranton: n.p., 1990), p. 226.

⁵ “Synodal Church Doctrine Commission ...Report to the 18th General Synod, 1-5 October 1990,” p. 8.

⁶ *The Constitution and Laws of the Polish National Catholic Church*, 1998 (n.p., n.d.), p. iii.

mankind: “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (*Luke* 3:6); the “mystery of his will” is “to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (*Ephesians* 1:9-10), and, above all, “God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 *Timothy* 2:3-4). But, on the other hand, we equally confront the clear words of Jesus Christ, who spoke of hell (Gehenna) as a place of “unquenchable fire” (*Mark* 9:43) and, in the parable of the sheep and the goats, unambiguously taught that the unrighteous “will go away into eternal punishment...” (*Matthew* 25:46). Moreover, speaking of his own “authority to execute judgment,” Christ said, “...the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment” (*John* 5:27-29). While St. Paul certainly acknowledged God’s desire to save all men, the same Apostle also noted that some “shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord...” (2 *Thessalonians* 1:9). We can attempt to resolve this apparent paradox by recognizing the possibility of eternal punishment (i.e. everlasting separation from God) while simultaneously hoping and praying “for the salvation of all through Jesus Christ our Lord,” as the CDC stated in 1990.

The Patristic Witness

In their interpretations of the scriptural data, a minority of Church Fathers adopted views that approximated what would subsequently be called universalism. This group included such prominent figures as Origen (in *First Principles* and *Against Celsus*), Clement of Alexandria (in *Miscellanies*), and Gregory of Nyssa (in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, *The Great Catechism*, and *On the Dead*). These writers regarded the punishment endured by the sinful after death as of finite duration and believed in the ultimate restoration (*apocatastasis*) of all souls to heavenly bliss. As Gregory of Nyssa explained it, “In like manner, when, after long periods of time, the evil of our nature, which now is mixed up with it and has grown with its growth, has been expelled, and when there has been a restoration of those who are now lying in Sin to their primal state, a harmony of thanksgiving will arise from all creation, as well as from those who in the

process of the purgation have suffered chastisement, as from those who needed not any purgation at all” (*The Great Catechism*, ch. 26).

The large majority of Church Fathers, however, acknowledged the existence of eternal punishment, the most prominent of which were Augustine (in *The City of God*, and *The Proceedings Against Pelagius*), Ignatius of Antioch (in *Letter to the Ephesians*), Justin Martyr (in *First Apology*), Athenagoras (in *Plea for the Christians*), Theophilus of Antioch (in *To Autolytus*), Irenaeus of Lyons (in *Against Heresies*), Tertullian (in *Apology*), Hippolytus (in *Against the Greeks*), and Cyprian of Carthage (in *Letters*). This group effectively reconciled the various scriptural references to the topic by positing the existence of eternal punishment as a necessary counterpart of eternal life and a motive for the avoidance of sin. In the words of the Second Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, “If we do the will of Christ, we shall obtain rest; but if not, if we neglect his commandments, nothing will rescue us from eternal punishment” (5:5). Certainly by the 6th century, if not earlier, the Undivided Church of the East and West had accorded doctrinal status to the existence of eternal punishment, and this constitutes the basis for its reaffirmation in the course of Orthodox-Old Catholic dialogue.

Recent Theological Reflection

The existence of eternal punishment remained virtually unchallenged among the majority of Christian churches and ecclesial communities until the 20th century. Most doctrinal treatises on the subject accepted the reality of hell in the afterlife and speculated on the numbers of the damned and the nature of their punishment.⁷ Bishop Franciszek Hodur, largely in reaction to lurid popular Roman Catholic portrayals of hell and the anathemas cast upon Polish National Catholics, certainly broke with this theological tradition (e.g. in *Nowe Drogi, Nasza Wiara, Apokalipsa Dwudziestego Wieku*, and *Jedynaście Wielkich Zasad*). However, his views on the subject, which contain much truth, leave many questions unanswered and are not doctrinally normative for the PNCC. Significantly, his successors generally referred to a rejection of eternal punishment and an implicit acceptance of universalism as a “schola” (opinion) rather than an official

⁷ See, e.g., Avery Cardinal Dulles, “The Population of Hell,” *First Things* (May 2003): 36-41.

Polish National Catholic doctrine – i.e., a theologoumenon.⁸ In the more recent past, some prominent theologians have advocated views that either directly or indirectly supplied a solid foundation for the qualifying statement appended by the CDC to its acceptance of “The Doctrine of the Last Things” and paralleled, to some extent, the views of Bishop Hodur.

The most prominent among these is the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who specifically address this issue in his work *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?*. He expressly rejected universalism, at least in part because it implicitly denied free will, but he also emphasized God’s desire to save all men. Given the teachings of Scripture and Tradition, man is certainly free to accept or to reject God’s offer of salvation, and the possibility surely exists that he may do so. At the same time, we cannot know with certainty that any human being has in fact definitively spurned God. Hence, von Balthasar writes, “I would like to request that one be permitted to hope that God’s redemptive work for his creation might succeed. *Certainty cannot be attained, but hope can be justified.*”⁹ Of note, Pope John Paul II, alluding favorably to von Balthasar’s work, cast the “problem” in the following terms and indirectly conceded that one may indeed justifiably hope for the salvation of all mankind: “Can God, who has loved man so much, permit the man who rejects Him to be condemned to eternal torment? And yet, the words of Christ are unequivocal. In Matthew’s Gospel He speaks clearly of those who will go to eternal punishment (cf. Mt 25:46). Who will these be? The Church has never made any pronouncement in this regard. This is a mystery, truly inscrutable, which embraces the holiness of God and the conscience of man.”¹⁰

Conclusion

⁸ See, e.g., the Foreword by Prime Bishop Leon Grochowski to an English translation of *Nasza Wiara: Our Way of Life* (Scranton: United Maria Konopnicka Societies, n.d.), n.p. This explanation also surfaced during the course of ecumenical dialogue between the PNCC and the Protestant Episcopal Church.

⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?* with *A Short Discourse on Hell*, tr. by David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 187 (emphasis supplied). His views on this subject have attracted some measure of criticism from those who believe that von Balthasar nonetheless comes quite close to embracing universalism. See, e.g., James T. O’Connor, “Von Balthasar and Salvation,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (July 1989), pp. 10-21.

¹⁰ *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* at <http://www.catholic.net/rcc/POPE/HopeBook/chap28.html>.

In light of previous statements issued by both the CDC and the Polish National Catholic bishops – which have been approved by the General Synod – as well as the summary analysis presented above, the CDC reaffirms the following propositions:

- (1) The PNCC rejects the doctrine of universalism (*apocatastasis*)
- (2) The PNCC accepts the possibility of eternal punishment, as taught in Scripture and Tradition, because man is endowed with a free will and may either accept or reject God's offer of salvation.
- (3) The PNCC acknowledges that God's infinite mercy extends to all people in all ages and therefore hopes and prays for the salvation of all through Jesus Christ our Lord.

These propositions represent an authentic development and interpretation of previous official statements on the subject made within the PNCC over the years rather than any repudiation of such statements. Within these bounds, further theological research and reflection are encouraged. However, clergy of whatever rank and others charged with the catechesis of young people and adults must take care both in their writings and public statements not to advance as official church teachings opinions that go beyond or are inconsistent with these propositions.

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