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# Shall All Be Saved? Current Orthodox Clarifications to Pope Francis' Statements

Alexandru LAZĂR

**Alexandru LAZĂR**

"Babeş-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
Email: alexandru.05.lazar@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

This piece of research is based on Pope Francis' statement: "This is not dogma, just my thought: I like to think of Hell as being empty. I hope it is". Since we felt We, the orthodox community, believe that these comments could not have accurately captured and encompassed the entire concept underlying the statement of the sovereign pontiff. This elaborated perspective outlines a current Orthodox response on the idea of universal salvation and its spiritual assumption in the life of the orthodox Christian. Here we will focus on analyzing three distinct concepts: in the first concept, the historical course of the idea of apocatastasis or, Christian universalism as it is used in today's theological discourse will be observed, second, a relevant modern day example of the impact produced by the pastoralism of fear implemented by the Catholic Church and the natural consequences will be outlined, and third, to demonstrate whether there is in fact a spiritual assumption of apocatastasis in the expressions proposed by Pope Francis.

## **Keywords**

universal salvation, apocatastasis, orthodox response, eschatology, final judgment, empty hell.

## **I. Introduction**

On January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024, an article signed by Eric Sammons the Editor-in-Chief of Crisis Magazine was published online, criticizing the statement made by Pope Francis on January 14 in an interview given to the Italian TV program “Che Tempo Che Fa” (“How’s the Weather”), who said: “This isn’t dogma, just my thought: I like to think of Hell as being empty. I hope it is”<sup>1</sup>. As it often happens in the wake of a controversial papal statement, an online debate erupted over whether this is a legitimate - i.e. orthodox – view or a Catholic.

Eric Sammons believes that the “hope that Hell is empty” though has a huge impact on how Catholics live. This paradigm shift took place in the last century among the Catholic faithful. Until the mid-twentieth century, most Catholics assumed that most (if not all) non-Catholics were destined for eternal hellfire. For this reason, “Mixed Marriages” were forbidden, and Catholics tended to live together in small neighborhoods (the Catholic “ghetto”) to protect the faith of their children. And in the end, most Catholics remained stubbornly Catholic, knowing that the alternative might be unthinkable and horrible. As soon as the emphasis changed and many Catholics believed that other religions could also obtain salvation, many Catholics left the Church. Eric Sammons makes a clear distinction between the hope that all will be saved and the actual scenario of universal salvation. The fact that man lives with the desire for loved ones to be saved does not change the situation of the eternity of hell and punishments. Thus, we can see that in Eric Sammons’ view, Pope Francis’ hope that Hell is empty is not a harmless wish. It turns Catholics away from a serious practice of faith and disarms them from bringing others to a serious practice of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> See full article: [https://crisismagazine.com/editors-desk/the-dangerous-hope-for-an-empty-hell?fbclid=IwAR3XY2Giy8LSnG9M5BLq8igyH5qYthqujX\\_EaIjnsE3j5DRk1\\_8zmSd95IM](https://crisismagazine.com/editors-desk/the-dangerous-hope-for-an-empty-hell?fbclid=IwAR3XY2Giy8LSnG9M5BLq8igyH5qYthqujX_EaIjnsE3j5DRk1_8zmSd95IM), accessed on 01.16.2024. The same article was also commented by Luiz Sergio Solimeo in The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, *Pope Francis Wishes Hell Were Empty*, [https://www.tfp.org/pope-francis-wishes-hell-were-empty/#:~:text=“I%20like%20to%20think%20hell,”\)%20on%20Italy’s%20channel%20Nove](https://www.tfp.org/pope-francis-wishes-hell-were-empty/#:~:text=“I%20like%20to%20think%20hell,”)%20on%20Italy’s%20channel%20Nove), accessed 04.01.2024.

This text outlines an elaborated perspective and response on the idea of universal salvation and its way of spiritual assumption in the life of the Orthodox Christian believer, ta current . In our research we touched on this part of theology and showed that the decrease in belief in the torments of hell and the turning of the world towards a convinced universalism is the byproduct of a pastoral fear often preached by the Catholic Church<sup>2</sup>. There will be three paths that will be explored: First, we observe the historical course of the idea of apocatastasis or, Christian universalism as it is used today in the current theological discourse, secondly, we will outline a current situation of the impact produced of the pastorate of fear implemented by the Catholic Church and the natural consequences, and third, to determine if there is in fact a spiritual assumption of the apocatastasis in the expressions proposed by Pope Francis.

## II. Apocatastasis in History

An important characteristic of the Last Judgment event, in addition to many others presented in dogmatic theology, is that it will be the final and eternal event. These features are expressed by the Savior Christ Himself in His Gospel captured by Matthew: “And these shall go away into eternal damnation, and the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25, 46). Continuing the thought as “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire, which is the devil’s and his angels’ cooking” (Matthew 25, 31). The fact that the devil will be condemned to eternal damnation is also mentioned in the Holy Scripture: “And the devil who deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and there they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Revelation 20, 10).

These passages cannot be interpreted merely as a pedagogical reiteration of some of the Old Testament threats that were ingrained in the apocalyptic consciousness of the Jews (from Isaiah 30, 33; Daniel 12, 2,

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<sup>2</sup> See: Alexandru LAZĂR, “Sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea și începutul «secolului salvării universale». Posibile cauze ale dezvoltării conceptului de universalism creștin”, in: *Studia Doctoralia Andreiana*, Anul X / Nr. 1 (ianuarie-iunie) 2021.

etc.), but as an anticipation of the real, frightening possibility of eternal perdition. Marking, that this possibility is not just a “scare” designed to impress the weak in faith and thus lead them to future good follows in that it demands extreme sacrifice to the point of losing one’s life and soul for Christ as captured by Mark: “And if your hand is weak, cut it off, for it is better for you to enter into life blind, than with both hands to go down into hell” (Mark 9, 43) and reiterated by Matthew as “Whoever will lose his soul will lose it, but whoever loses his soul for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16, 25). To the question: Lord, are there few who are saved? Jesus answered them, “Be careful to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When the master of the house has risen and locked the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying: Lord, open to us - and he will answer and say to you: I do not know you or where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity.” (Luke 13, 23-27).

Based on these scriptural testimonies, the Ecumenical Council meeting of Constantinople in 553 decided altogether that anyone who teaches that the damnation of devils and sinners is only temporary and will one day come to an end should be considered anathema. However, some Christian theologians and philosophers, relying rather loosely and questionably on interpretations of scriptural texts, especially Pauline in (1 Corinthians 3, 13-15; 1 Corinthians 15, 24-28; Romans 11, 32-35; Romans 11, 25-26; Colossians 1, 19-20), but also evangelical such as in (Matthew 5, 25-26; Luke 12, 58-59; Matthew 18, 34-35; Matthew 19, 23-26; Luke 12, 47-48) and some Holy Fathers who taught the doctrine of apocatastasis, offered restrictive interpretations of the decision of the fifth Ecumenical Council. Among these interpretations, has been that the Church at the fifth Synod, carrying a widespread view (especially among Russian or Russian-born theologians in the West)<sup>3</sup> having condemned the affirmation of apocatastasis with certainty, but not its possibility<sup>4</sup>, a possibility which

<sup>3</sup> See the study Alexandru LAZĂR, “The Politico-Dogmatic Stage of the Apocatastasis’ Condemnation. Post-synodal Perspectives”, in: *Teologia*, Nr. (92) 3/2022, p.136-154.

<sup>4</sup> Laria RAMELLI, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: a Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, coll. *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 120, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2013, p. 724.

would have inspired the prayer of so many saints for the salvation of all.

Isolated attempts to legitimize Christian universalism have always existed, every century has had a vocal personality who has tried to impose this view de facto as official Church teaching. Among them, are the more notable, John Scottus Eriugena – of the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>, Anselm of Canterbury<sup>6</sup> and Amalric of Bena – of the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup>, Meister Eckhart – of the late 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>, Julian of Norwich of the – 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>, and Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola – of the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>.

The twentieth century has been categorized by contemporary theologians as the century of universalism par excellence<sup>11</sup>. Characteristics such as the ardent desire for wealth<sup>12</sup>, added to the exaggerated preaching about hell promoted in the West produced a decline of faith in eternal torment and encouraged the possibility of personal interpretations without scriptural and/or patristic foundations<sup>13</sup>. These along with the ethic of civility promoted at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sought to camouflage

<sup>5</sup> John Scottus ERIUGEA, *Treatise on Divine Predestination*, translated by Mary Brennan, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> ANSELM OF CANTERBURY, “Why God Became a Man?”, in: *The Major Works*, Edited with an Introduction by Brian Davies and G.R. Evans, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998

<sup>7</sup> Michael McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption, A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, Vol I-II, Baker Academic, 2018, p. 392.

<sup>8</sup> Meister ECKHART, *Despre omul nobil, cupa din care bea regele. Tratatate*, translation and notes by Gabriel H. Decuble, Foreword by Anca Manolescu, București, Editura Humanitas, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> JULIAN OF NORWICH, *Revelations of Divine Love*, translated by Grace Warrack, Grand Rapids, MI, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> M. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption...*, p. 397.

<sup>11</sup> M. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption...*, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Romanian Orthodox theologian Adrian Lemeni points out that in contemporary society there is a tendency to reject the torments of hell and there is a desire to fortify through human powers a modern, safe and prosperous earthly paradise. This ploy only deepens the tragedy of a ‘personal hell and that of a generalised hell on a planetary scale’, and in this way changes *in capite et membris* all the fundamental values of society, installing a primacy of matter that subordinates the spirit. Cf. Adrian LEMENI, *Sensul eshatologic al creației*, Ediția a II-a revizuită, București, Editura ASAB, 2007, p. 224.

<sup>13</sup> Alexandru LAZĂR, “Maran Atha and the Soteriological Consequence of the Eshaton”, in: *Research & Science Today*, Vol. 26, Issue 2/2023.

scriptural language<sup>14</sup> so as not to offend other confessions or faiths, focused on issues of pluralism/exclusivity, sexuality and especially eschatology<sup>15</sup>, urged believers to move towards universalism, which, in the apologetic interest of making Christianity credible in a secular and hostile world, presented a faith to be embraced even by atheists<sup>16</sup>.

### **III. The 20th Century - the Collapse of the Belief in the Existence of Hell**

The collapse of the belief in the existence of hell did not begin ex abrupto but has its roots in the exaggerated sermons about hell and fear inoculated by the ministers of the Catholic Church and in the exclusivist vision of salvation. Uninspired actions in the pastorate of priests led to the collapse of faith in eternal hell: Frenchmen, Jean Marie de Lamennais terrorized the community by walking with a coffin of bones among the people, while Abbot Antoine Le Reux imitated in his Sunday sermon the devil who comes and takes a slutty woman to lead her to the torments of hell, as told by the author that the priest was so evil that even his parishioners ran out of all the church doors.

Jean-Marie Vianney, a French saint of the Catholic Church, died in 1859, and canonized in 1925. He was a model priest of his Church, famous for his sickening horror of sensuality, austerity, and the exaggerated fear of hell he induced upon his faithful. He believed that most people would be condemned to hell, starting with the married contemplating over: “How can you imagine that you will reach heaven, when every night you submit to the temptation of the odious sin of the flesh?”<sup>17</sup>. In his conception there are only certain married people who can be saved, but they depend only on the arbitrary choice of God: “Although it is so difficult to obtain salvation when you are married, and although most people without doubting for a

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<sup>14</sup> To some, such a shift in perspective may seem to be just another example of the relentless dilution of modernity in the Gospel, a shallow optimism that refuses to acknowledge the power of evil in our world and our responsibility for it.

<sup>15</sup> Michael McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption...*, p. 1012.

<sup>16</sup> Alexandru LAZĂR, “Salvarea Universală. Noi opinii în Teologia contemporană”, in: *Astra Salvensis*, Vol. VIII, No. 16, pp. 253-264.

<sup>17</sup> St. John Marie VIANNEY, *The sermons of the Curé D'Ars*, Editura Lulu Pr, 2016, p. 18.

single moment the fate that awaits them, may be damned, but those whom God calls to them can be saved”<sup>18</sup>. In his thinking, man cannot be saved unless he unhappily suffers all his life noting, “if all your happiness has consisted in suffering and struggle”<sup>19</sup>.

It presents Christ in the judgment seat at the end of history as a God eager to punish everyone according to his sins:

“He is a righteously angry judge, who judges men with all the harshness of his justice. He is no longer the merciful shepherd who comes to seek out the lost sheep and forgive them, but a vengeful God who comes to separate the sinners from the righteous forever, to crush the wicked under his most grievous vengeance, and to pour out upon the righteous an uninterrupted wave of joy”<sup>20</sup>.

Father Jean Marie Vianney tells us that the judgment is as just as possible: “the sentence is terrible, but unendingly just. For what can be more just than this judgment?”<sup>21</sup> He believes that all the pagans who have not known Christ will be unfailingly punished for not having known the good news of Christ. He blames all this on bad luck, but even so, their fate cannot be changed, because there is no salvation outside the Church.

The critical situation reached by the conception of hell at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is embodied in the sermon of Father Jaques Monsabre, a minister at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris who died in 1907. In his sermon, he preached eternal damnation with a desire to defend the social order.

Even statistically one can monitor the significant decrease in the belief in eternal hell. Following a sociological survey, Yves Lambert, a French sociologist, found that since the beginning of the last century, in the province of Brittany, where he studied this phenomenon, believers were no longer sensitized to the fear of hell. This is why certain expressions

<sup>18</sup> St. J. M. VIANNEY, *The sermons of the Curé D’Ars*, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Marie Baptiste VIANNEY, *Thoughts of the Curé D’Ars*, TAN Books & Publishers, București, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> Georges MINOIS, *Istoria infernurilor*, Humanitas, București, 1998, p. 311.

<sup>21</sup> G. MINOIS, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 312.

have emerged to allay the fears of some, such as, “No one has come back from there to tell us what it’s like“, or “If we go to hell, almost everyone goes there”. After another 80 years, the author finds that there is almost no belief in the possible existence of hell, and expressions such as “Hell? We don’t know if there is one” or “People don’t believe in hell anymore” are commonplace. If this is the case in France, we can see that in other European countries the situation is similar. In Germany, for example, a survey by Der Spiegel newspaper shows a rapid decline in belief of hell. In 1967, 78% of Protestants answered negatively to the question whether there is a hell, and in 1980 the percentage rose to 83%, while 47% of Roman Catholics believed that there is no hell in 1967, and 59% in 1980. The same is true in the Netherlands: where 28% still believed in hell in 1968 and 15% in 1981<sup>22</sup>.

In 1986, Le Monde publishes a survey carried out by SOFRES in France, the figures are different, but the trends are the same. To the question of believing in hell, 53% of practicing Catholics answered yes, 32% answered no and 15% abstained. Among casual churchgoers 28% said yes, 54% said no and 18% abstained. For non-practicing Catholics 18% still believed in hell, 67% said no and 15% abstained. Among the non-religious 4% said yes, 82% said no and 14% abstained. Thus, in a country with long-standing Christian traditions, less than a quarter of the population believes in hell at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>23</sup>.

#### **IV. The Spiritual Assumption of the Apocatastasis: The Only Condition of Acceptance?**

Until the Last Judgement, man goes through a long process of contradictions and oppositions in history. The whole of history, consciously or not, is moving towards Christ, the Center of the world. Human history will end with the second coming of the Savior Jesus Christ. Until that time, the divine Logos has been the meaning, and now all mankind will see Him as the Judge. On the one hand, Christianity is messianic, and on the other

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<sup>22</sup> G. MINOIS, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 342

<sup>23</sup> G. MINOIS, *Istoria infernurilor*, p. 351.



eschatological. The first stage is over, and the second will follow. It is the eschaton that shows the total resolution of the world. The fulfilment of Christianity lies precisely in the second coming of the Savior, who will divide “universal history into two fundamental periods, into two cosmic eons, each of which in turn may be subject to various subdivisions”<sup>24</sup>. The eternity to come brings with it a new experience: that of the Infinite, where the light of the Holy Trinity will shine to the depths of being. Man was ab initio created with a view to transfiguration, and in the eschaton this transfiguration will take place, so that man in his wholeness will develop, but not in a superficial sense of the word; there development involves the depths of being, because divine grace is within man, transfiguring him.

What can hinder man is precisely an avoidance of his desire to save all creation. Possessing an egocentric nature, man wants to secure salvation for himself alone, but the true Christian desires the salvation of all creation. It is certain that the question of the salvation of all creation cannot be known by man, even if it existed. Nor can the realization of the coming of the Kingdom of God be known, since this question remains a mystery that is rationally insoluble. However, the desire for the whole cosmos to be saved is a manifestation of fragility. Even if the whole cosmos were not saved, the idea of hell is not justified by the judgment of God and punishment, nor by the idea of justice, but by human freedom.

Opening oneself to or towards God inevitably leads to an openness and fragility marked by love, towards one’s neighbor and towards the whole of creation. The person of the other will appear as the image of God to the one who knows how to break away from his or her individual limitations to rediscover the common nature and thereby realize his or her own person.

Orthodox theology makes a distinction of terms. What does the word “individual” mean and what does the word “person” mean? Why does theology speak of and use the noun “person” more than the noun “individual”? The individual is the expression of something that cannot be divided: me with me, me for me. In theology, there is the word “person” (*πρόσωπον*) which means among other things: being in dialogue, being in

<sup>24</sup> Nikolai BERDIAEV, *Spirit și libertate. Încercare de filosofie creștină*, coll. *Colecția de studii și eseuri - filosofie*, Editura Paideia, București, 2009, p. 322.

openness, in prosoponic dialogue (face-to-face dialogue). We are faces in dialogue with others, and primarily with God. Fragility means openness to others. To reach the state where you say: “This man is my salvation. If he walks away from me, I cannot stop him. But if he stays with me, this man is my salvation”.

Personally, self-assertion, in which the person is confused with nature and loses his true freedom, must be broken. In this sense, the Church, in her wisdom, places before us the paradigm of the monk who, by renouncing himself, embraces in his heart the whole world, the whole of Adam. This is why Saint Nil Sinai said that a perfect monk will honor all men after God as God Himself<sup>25</sup>, and why Father Petronius Tănase said that we must honor all men as God, because in every man is the image of God<sup>26</sup>.

In addition, the Christian who realizes that he is not the ultimate good and the other is not the absolute evil, becomes through frailty disposed towards a relationship. He who is aware of his own frailty is filled with love for his fellow human beings, and his sole purpose in relation to them is to see them saved, even if he should beat them to it. His mission is driven by compassion. He who is united with God, marked by divine love, cannot fail to show it outwardly. His mission is no longer a mission in itself but becomes a natural act of graceful inertia.

Olivier Clement inserts a well-known apophthegm in his book, *The Power of Faith: Avva Antony is sent by God to take an example of spiritual life from a curate in Alexandria*. Noticing that this curate was leading an ordinary life, living in a shabby hut with his wife, and that the money he earned was given to the church and the poor, Avva Antony asks him what else he does. The curate gives him a profound answer: he confesses that he does nothing else, but meditates nightly, on the following thought, “All will be saved, and he alone will go to hell”<sup>27</sup>. The affirmation opens the unlimited prospect of hope in the salvation of all, a hope which lies at the basis of that perfect work of the saints: prayer for universal salvation.

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<sup>25</sup> Vladimír LOSSKY, *Teologia Mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1997, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Petroniu TĂNASE, *Icoane smerite din Sfânta Ortodoxie Românească*, Editura Bizantină - Schitului Românesc Prodromu, 2003, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Olivier CLÉMENT, *Puterea credinței. Studii de spiritualitate*, Editura Pandora, Târgoviște, 1999, pp. 109–110.

Faith as the fruit of the work of grace in human souls is the response of man to the love of God: “We love God because He first loved us” (I John 4, 19). Therefore, between faith as a personal act and the content of the Gospel, there must be a synergy. For the content of faith determines the content of the Christian life, the rule of faith becomes the rule of life. Understanding what the content of our faith is, man has this awareness that he can acquire the Kingdom of Heaven only to the extent that his brother will enter, therefore, in all public and/or personal services, man prays for the salvation of all. This prayer for the salvation of all people, in our view, is rooted in the Adamic and Christological unity of humanity, but also in the spiritual stake of the apocatastasis, a stake that has empowered so many generations of saints.

The possibility of prayer for the salvation of all is based on the fact that we are all children of Adam, and Christ came to raise up this Adam. The Resurrection of Christ puts the world back on track. From here, there remains only one stage in the plan of God, when, at the eschatological end of history, God will be united with creation and will be all in all. From this point, the time of the Church has passed towards the last and crucial segment of the history of salvation. From this ontological point of view, the only novelty and therefore the only soteriological content of this segment is precisely the mission: the proclamation and communication of the eschaton, which is the being of the Church<sup>28</sup>.

In the flow of time towards this goal, aware of the work of salvation accomplished in the Person of Christ, man who recognizes his own frailty has a duty of prayer for the whole of Adam: “For if by the error of one man many died, much more the grace of God and his gift was made sufficient for many through the grace of one man, Jesus Christ” (Romans 5, 15). The Apostle Paul, aware of this, prayed: “May the Lord have mercy on the house of Onesiphorus, for he has often inspired me and was not ashamed of my chains. May the Lord grant that He may find mercy from the Lord

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<sup>28</sup> The Orthodox, in contemplating the Church, sees it primarily as a divine gift. Secondly, he sees it as the human response to this gift. The Church can be described as an eschatological reality, because its essential role is to manifest and actualize in this world the eschaton, the ultimate reality of salvation and redemption. In and through the Church, the Kingdom of God is already present and is communicated to man.

on that day” (II Timothy 1, 18). The Church cares for each of her spiritual members, and therefore prays for the whole world: “I exhort you therefore, first of all, to make supplications, prayers, intercessions, giving of thanks, for all men” (I Timothy 2, 1). Only the truly frail will understand this mystery to which the Church calls us: to pray for the salvation of the whole Adam, and by the whole Adam we mean all people, regardless of their faith and nation. Religious bigotry and inflexibility even make us condemn to Hell some people who do not share our beliefs and practices. Only this antinomy of hell or universal restoration makes total love possible and covers all its extremes. Only it unites in an inseparable way the mystery of man and the mystery of God, the mystery of human freedom and the mystery of divine love, affirmed one in the other and never defeated. “Whoever considers the possibility of existence apart from himself, even if only of one lost for eternity, can hardly love without hope”<sup>29</sup> and will hardly decide in favor of a patience that never gives up on principle, but is ready to wait for the other forever. “Might not my eternal unhappiness consist precisely in the fact that I myself do not have the patience to wait endlessly for the other’s recovery?”<sup>30</sup>, Hans Urs Von Balthasar asks. He presents eschatology as a mystery that we must contemplate through faith, love, and hope. According to him, we do not have the right to affirm apocatastasis, but we do have the right, even the duty, to hope in the salvation of all.

Theologian Olivier Clement makes a bold statement, stating that the fate of Hell lies in the mercy of the saints who descend into darkness with Christ, to free the damned<sup>31</sup>. Simultaneously, however, no man can be constrained, therefore not even God, nor His saints can violate the freedom of the man who rejects God to the end.

“Perhaps only the Godman knows the secret of this unconstrained liberation, for in Him divine grace and freedom unite. This is the secret of the Kingdom, beyond Good and Evil, beyond dividing

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<sup>29</sup> Hans Urs Von BALTHASAR, *Mic discurs despre iad*, Editura Paideia, București 1997, pp. 63–64.

<sup>30</sup> H. U. Von BALTHASAR, *Mic discurs despre iad*, p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> Olivier CLÉMENT, *Puterea credinței...*, p. 109.

the good from the bad. Only He crucified by His mad love can accomplish what Nietzsche, this unenlightened prophet, only caricatured. The eschatological ethics of what we might call the Overgood demands not less, but infinitely more than that of the Good. She does not give up the enlightenment of sinners. The superior does not judge but radiates light<sup>32</sup>.

Thus, “From this perspective there is no limit to prayer and hope. Eternal hell is a contradiction in terms. Hell is the denial of eternity”<sup>33</sup>. Infinite torments can be unleashed in the one who closes in on himself, in pride and despair, even when he is enveloped in divine love. But through the centuries, the crucified prayer of Christ, together with the prayer of the saints, continues to resound in the invincible hope that the second death will not be of human beings, in their personal unity, but of the demonic elements that they carry within them and that in each of us, sins will be chosen on the one hand, and good deeds on the other<sup>34</sup>.

Clement concludes with this thought: “The last word is that of prayer, of hope. Let us not speculate about Hell, about the doctrine of apocatastasis. Let’s just pray that everyone will be saved!”<sup>35</sup>.

In Hilarion Alfeyev’s view, for whom this matter is a central point in eschatology, it is heresy to say that all people will be saved, regardless of their deeds and choices, but it is not heretical to hope and pray for the salvation of all<sup>36</sup>. Alfeyev, when he expresses these words, has in mind the dogma of Christ’s descent into Hell, which he interprets in a universal and eschatological sense.

Paul Evdokimov, Russian émigré stated that: “apocatastasis can only be one dimension of our prayer, the daring work of our love. It can be said paradoxically that God expects apocatastasis from us”<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> O. CLÉMENT, *Puterea credinței...*, p. 109.

<sup>33</sup> O. CLÉMENT, *Puterea credinței...*, p. 109.

<sup>34</sup> O. CLÉMENT, *Puterea credinței...*, p. 109.

<sup>35</sup> O. CLÉMENT, *Puterea credinței...*, pp. 109–110.

<sup>36</sup> Ilarion ALFEYEV, *Hristos, biruitorul Iadului. Pogorârea la iad din perspectiva ortodoxă*, Editura Sophia, București, 2007, p. 256.

<sup>37</sup> Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, Asociația Filantropică Medicală Creștină Christiana, București, 1995, p. 205

The prayer for the salvation of all is of those who are fragile and perfect or who are just perfecting themselves through such a work of love. To this extent they themselves taste Hell and see themselves condemned. Only “hope against all hope” of a strong soul can overcome this extreme hellish experience: “Keep your mind in Hell and do not despair”, God revealed to Father Siluan, the Athonite. Hell is assumed to the end, as a self-condemnation, and thus it is overcome, because in such an experience the soul loses all support in itself and remains only in God in whom it puts all its hope. Knowing from his own experience the boundless love of God, but also the hell of despair of those who oppose him, Saint Siluan affirmed:

“Thank God for giving us repentance, and through repentance all will be saved, all without exception. Only those who do not want to repent will be saved, and in this I see their hopelessness and cry a lot, being sorry for them. They do not know through the Holy Spirit how great is the mercy of God. But, if every soul knew the Lord and knew how much he loves us, then no one would despair and no one would ever murmur again”<sup>38</sup>.

In such a state, human frailty that loses all support in itself plunges into the inferno of God’s love. Only this antinomy of hell or universal restoration, which we tried to highlight throughout the text, makes total love possible and covers all its extremes. Only it inseparably unites the mystery of man and the mystery of God, the mystery of human freedom and the mystery of divine love, affirmed in each other and never defeated.

The disciple of Saint Siluan, Father Sophrony of Essex, added:

“Thus the love of Christ hopes to attract all people to Him and that is why it descends to the depths of Hell. However, to this perfect love, and to this perfect sacrifice, man - who is he? We do not know; how many are these? also we do not know - he can answer him with a refusal even in eternity saying: I don’t want this. This frightening possibility of freedom, which the Church

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<sup>38</sup> CUVIOSUL SILUAN ATHONITUL, *Între iadul deznădejii și iadul smereniei*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1998, p. 109.

knows well from her spiritual experience, made her reject the teaching of the Origenists. Without any doubt, the prayer for the salvation of all that we see in the life of the Abbot could not be born in an Origenist consciousness”<sup>39</sup>.

This idea is also found in Maria Faustina Kowalska, to whom Christ tells that, since the loss of a soul causes God a “deadly sadness”, the prayer for the sinners in Hell is the most accepted and is always fulfilled by Him<sup>40</sup>.

In Gabriel Bunge’s view, the Church judged well by condemning the Origenist theory of apocatastasis, because on this topic we cannot make free statements and even less we cannot build a theoretical system. It is not given to man to know who is saved and who is not. Worse, by making such statements, man puts himself in the place of God<sup>41</sup>.

Edith Stein also expresses herself in support of this irrepressible possibility:

“God’s freedom, which we call omnipotence, finds a limit in man’s freedom. The grace of God that descends on the human soul cannot find a home here if it is not received willingly. This is a harsh truth. He expresses - outside the aforementioned barrier of divine omnipotence - the principle possibility of a self-exclusion from salvation and from the kingdom of mercy. He expresses no limit to divine mercy. [...] Should there still be souls who are persistently denied? We cannot dismiss such a possibility in principle. In fact, however, it can become infinitely improbable. Precisely through what the preparatory grace can arouse in the soul. It is also possible to sneak into souls and expand there more and more. The larger the space he occupies in this illegitimate way, the more improbable it becomes that his

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<sup>39</sup> Arhimandritul SOFRONIE, *Viața și minunile Sfântului Siluan Athonitul*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1999, p 97.

<sup>40</sup> Maria Faustina KOWALSKA, *Diario. La Misericordia divina nella mia anima*, Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007, p. 735.

<sup>41</sup> Gabriel BUNGE, *Mania și terapia ei după Avva Evagrie Ponticul*, Editura Deisis, 2016, p 164.



soul will have denied him (...), the more he evades acts directed against him. Then the faith in the boundlessness of love and grace becomes justified hope in a universality of salvation, even though, through the fundamentally open possibility of resistance in front of grace, the possibility of eternal damnation is also maintained”<sup>42</sup>.

We find here the same hope in the goodness of divine creation, in the fact that it is not a failure, also present in Origen, in Gregory of Nyssa and nowadays in theologians like Florenski, Evdokimov, Clement, etc. From this perspective we can hope that no man will reach a state of complete satanization, although this possibility has been dogmatized. We can at least hope, and this time without dogmatic reservations, that through the prayers of the Church many people will come out of Hell in the time between the particular and the universal judgment. We can also hope that the will of man will be allowed to act, not constrained, but convinced, conquered, or even seduced by the beneficent will of Christ; that the divine will, if it cannot manifest itself against the will of man, it will manifest itself in and through this freedom, leading it towards its own salvation. We can also put these words of a saint under the sign of hope: “I believe there is a hell, but it is empty”<sup>43</sup>. We can hope, as long as there is no perfect, rigid overlap between dogmatics and spirituality. As a rule, dogma, as an expression of a revealed truth, precedes the spiritual experience which, moreover, it establishes. But sometimes a spiritual experience, deepening and fuller of the Revelation, can advance a future dogmatization or can anticipate in part what God will reveal perfectly only at the end. It can also express what God himself can and will let be a creation of man, starting from him, in as complete a freedom as possible, under the ineffable, almost imperceptible inspiration of His grace.

From all this we can only conclude with amazement: how much God protects the mystery of man! How much He envelops it and deepens it in its own destiny, not separating it from His!

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<sup>42</sup> H. U. Von BALTHASAR, *Mic discours despre iad*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>43</sup> Jean GUITTON, “L’enfer dans mentalité contemporaine”, in: *L’enfer*, Les Editions de la Revue des Jeunes, Paris VII, 1950, p. 348.



## V. Conclusion

In this compilation over the centuries we have seen the evolution of the development of the belief in hell. From a strongly developed belief in eternal torment and Catholic exclusivism, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed a collapse of belief in hell. Christian universalism has slowly and steadily advanced and captured more and more adherents who have grown tired of the exaggerated rigors and fearmongering, finding Christians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century struggling mightily with these trends<sup>44</sup>. After presenting the historical background of this idea of apocatastasis and the current situation facing the Catholic Church, we tried to translate the words of Pope Francis into the Orthodox spirit. Only understood and assumed in a sincere and spiritual register, Pope Francis' statement is sustainable. The affirmation opens the limitless prospect of hope in the salvation of all, a hope which lies at the basis of that perfect work of the saints: prayer for universal salvation.

In conclusion: to affirm with certainty that hell is empty is an extreme and unsustainable statement, but to pray for the salvation of all is a spiritual desire.

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<sup>44</sup> Alexandru LAZĂR, "The Problem of Eternal Life – Some Anti-Universalist Landmarks", in: *International Journal of Religion*, Volume 5, No. 8, 2024, pp. 708-714.