

HERALDS OF GOD'S MERCY THROUGHOUT THE AGES

Editor's note: The following important paper, of which we are presenting a small portion, was written by Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky in 1911. In a sermon he gave on October 16/29, 1972, St. Philaret the Confessor of Orthodoxy, Metropolitan of New York, made reference to this particular portion of Metropolitan Anthony's paper. St. Philaret's sermon, in turn, was distributed on the internet by Father Panayiotos Carras of Toronto on November 13, 2009.

We have become accustomed to picturing the future lot of sinners in conformity with the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In the flame of Hell the condemned will mourn over their sins in vain, and cry out to God and the saints for mercy without avail: the repentance of the dead is not accepted, it is too late to correct oneself! [But] why should this be so? Why a soul which has condemned its falls and changed its attitude, should nevertheless be rejected by divine justice, remains incomprehensible.

Hence originate the very natural attempts to set up fabrications about some new, universal reconciliation or *apokatástasis*. However, this teaching has been condemned by the Church, and the followers of Origen are considered heretics. And this is quite consistent: any attempt to interpret eternal torments as very prolonged torments, but not endless ones, contradicts the Word of God and the Tradition of the Church. It is sufficient to cite God's words in Esaias: *Their worm shall not die and their fire shall not be quenched* (Esaias 66:24). It is impossible to reinterpret these words in favor of prolonged torments, for it is directly indicated that they will have no end (cf. Revelation 14:11, 20:10.)

However, even if neither the Holy Bible nor the clearly expressed teaching of the Church had revealed to us the teaching that the torments are eternal, still our reason would be unable to avoid this sad conclusion about the future lot of conscious enemies of God and unrepentant sinners. In fact, the only alternative would be to allow that the Lord would make them righteous by force and drag them into His joy; but where there is compulsion, there moral values no longer exist, and the very difference between good and evil disappears—and together with it, the whole meaning of [God's] Redemption and Economy. Is it possible to surmise that there are no people who are consciously and definitively evil, that evil is the result of lack of understanding and imperfection, as the pantheists and evolutionists teach, as well as even some theists? Such a notion, however, is likewise incompatible with the teaching about free will, and even more so with the teaching of the Holy Scriptures and the Church about the demons, which no halfway sincere reader of the Gospel can interpret in some other way, whether he himself believes in God or not. Finally, we have the direct words of Christ concerning the fact that His enemies hated Him not because they did not understand Him, but precisely because they had understood Him, and in His person had hated Truth itself and Goodness itself. *If ye were blind, ye would have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth*

(John 9:41). *If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no excuse for their sin. He that hateth Me hateth My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both Me and My Father* (John 15: 22-24).

Thus the teaching that the torments are eternal proceeds not only from the clear meaning of the Word of God and the Tradition of the Church; it is inescapable even if one resolves the question by the aid of reason alone.

"But," the reader will object, "this is not at all what we see in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. There we do not have an unrepentant and hardened evildoer, but a soul bitterly lamenting its sins, and moreover filled with compassion for other sinners still abiding on earth. Why should such a soul not find mercy with the Lord?" This objection, in our opinion at least, is entirely well-grounded, and it would be hard to deal with it if it was the final lot of the dead which is described in this Parable. But let us recall that the Lord said this to the Jews before His descent into Hades: would it [i.e., His Descent into Hades] not have been saving for the Rich Man who had repented of his sinful life? Of course it would, for the Apostle testifies that not only righteous people, but sinners as well were saved by the Vanquisher of Hades: *Christ also suffered once for sins, the Just One for the unjust ones, so that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit; by which also He went and preached unto the spirits in prison, which were once disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah.* (I Peter 3:18-20).

From these words of the Apostle we may draw the clear conclusion that Abraham's words in the Parable about the great chasm fixed between the righteous and sinners, which neither the one nor the other can cross, referred to the time *before* the appearance [in Hades] of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who traversed this chasm on the day of His saving death and resurrection.* He delivered from thence not only the righteous, but many who *were once disobedient* as well, who had not become entirely hardened in their opposition to the Truth.

Thus, the state of sinful souls condemned forever will not at all be that state experienced by the Rich Man in this Parable, who humbly begged that his brothers living on earth might be brought to their senses.

(Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky,
On The Future Life and Eternal Torments)

o — o — o — o — o — o

*Metropolitan Anthony makes a good point here, because it is evident that this Parable refers to the time *before* the Final Judgment. This is evident from the fact that the Rich Man of the Parable can still make an appeal for his brothers *who are still living on earth and still have an opportunity to repent*. The end of time has *not* yet arrived, and the eternal punishment of those condemned has *not* yet commenced.

More Heralds

Wherefore the devil sets everything in motion in order to root in us the reasoning which comes of despair: for he knows that if we repent even a little we shall not do this without some reward. But just as he who gives a cup of cold water has his recompense reserved for him so also the man who has repented of the evils which he has done — even if he cannot exhibit the repentance which his offences deserve — will have a commensurate reward. *For not a single item of good, however small it may be, will be overlooked by the righteous Judge. For if He makes such an exact scrutiny of our sins, as to require punishment for both our words and thoughts, much more will our good deeds, whether they be great or small, be reckoned to our credit at that day.*

(St. John Chrysostom
Letter One to the Fallen Theodore, 9)

o — o — o — o — o — o

"God overlooked the times of ignorance, but now He commands all men everywhere to repent."

(Acts 17:30)

Surely, if God overlooked from the foundation of the world *the transgressions committed by people out of ignorance*, and He gives to each the forgiveness of transgressions, fittingly did He come among us at the end of the ages, in order that His boundless love of mankind might be received in accord with the measure that He reveals His presence.*

St. Ammonius

There is some confusion about the identity of this Ammonius. There were two who bore the name Ammonius and who wrote commentaries on the Holy Scriptures. Both lived in Alexandria, Egypt, one in the third century, and one in the fifth.

o — o — o — o — o — o

Be a herald of God's goodness, for God rules over you, unworthy though you are. Although your debt to Him is so very great, He is not seen exacting payment from you; and from the small works you do, He bestows great rewards upon you. *Do not call God just, for His justice is not manifest in the things concerning you.* And if David calls Him just and upright [see Ps. 24:8; 144:17], His Son revealed to us that He is good and kind. "He is good", He says, "to the evil and impious" [see Luke 6:35]. . . Where then, is God's justice, for while we were sinners Christ died for us! [see Rom. 5:8].

(St. Isaac of Syria, *Ascetical Homilies*,
Homily 51)

* Commentary on Acts 17:30. *Catena Graecorum Patrum in Novum Testamentum*. J. A. Cramer, ed., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1840.