

How to Think About Hell

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Hans Urs von Balthasar is correctly perceived within the contemporary Catholic Church as an exponent of an orthodox, even conservative, understanding of the faith. His nomination to the rank of cardinal just before his death is evidence of this, as was his friendship with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Nonetheless, one aspect of his theology, that dealing with the possibility of the salvation of all souls, drew upon him 'fire from the right.' He was taken to task by, among others, Gerhard Hermes and Heribert Schaaf.¹ In reaction to such criticism, Balthasar wrote a book entitled *Was dürfen wir hoffen?* ('What may we hope for?'), recently published in translation by Ignatius Press under the title, *Dare we hope 'That all men be saved'?*² One of the purposes of this article is to examine this answer by Balthasar to his critics. I believe that certain aspects of his argument are, indeed, inadequate and have been justly criticised. Nonetheless, the major question raised in the book (and, indeed, by the entire controversy) is a legitimate one—and precisely in the sense that Balthasar asks it. A second purpose of the present essay, therefore, is to suggest the parameters within which we might hope 'that all men be saved.'

We are 'under judgment'

My first point is one of agreement with Balthasar. Balthasar rejects those criticisms of his own work that suggest that, in so far as we know that at least some souls are damned to eternal perdition, we may not in any sense hope for the salvation of all souls. Hermes, for instance, writes with regard to hope for universal salvation: 'Such a hope does not exist, because we cannot, hope in opposition to *certain knowledge* and the avowed will of God' (15).³ Such certain knowledge is said to be found at, for instance, *Matthew* 25.31–46, where Christ says that the Son of Man shall gather all nations before himself, 'and he shall separate them one from the other as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.' To those on his left hand (i.e., the 'goats,' who have refused food, drink and other goods to those who required them), the shepherd will say: 'Depart from me you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' But does this passage constitute certain knowledge that anyone is or will be in hell? There are at least four reasons to think not. The first two are roughly logical in nature and will be considered more extensively below. Firstly, even given that *p*, to assert 'if *p* then *q*' (i.e., 'if a person is not merciful,⁴ he will find himself in hell') is not yet to assert *q*. For instance, one can use a conditional statement of things we know with only relative certainty, as when one says, 'If you stir quickly, the bread will rise.' Secondly, we may not be certain about *p*. Even assuming that the

relationship between p and q is a necessary one of the highest order (i.e., logical necessity), if we are not certain that p , we cannot say that we are certain that q .

A third reason for maintaining that we have no certain knowledge that anyone is in hell is that even among the traditional theologians (who are, as a rule, opposed to the idea of universal salvation),⁹ we find a strong disinclination to state definitively that we know anyone to be condemned. For example, St. Augustine, the twenty-first book of whose *City of God* still contains some of the most compelling arguments against the notion of universal salvation, argues in chapter 23 of that book in the following fashion. We know, he says, from scripture that the devil is in hell for ever. But if, as some claim, those condemned by the words of *Matthew* 25 will not always be in hell, what reason is there to believe that the devil will be? Of interest for our present purposes is the passage he uses to prove that the devil is in hell: *Revelations* 20:10. Here we read that the devil will be cast into the 'lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.'¹⁰ Although his intention is to show that we have no reason to assume that human souls might not suffer in hell eternally, he glosses over the fact that here, apparently, a human soul—i.e., the false prophet—is spoken of as suffering in hell forever, in order to make the more indirect point, 'if the devil is in hell, why not a human soul?'

A similar thing occurs in the work of the seventeenth-century Jesuit theologian Francisco de Suarez, whom Balthasar regards as a chief antagonist in this matter. Suarez talks about the Antichrist as a possible example of one we know by revelation to be condemned, but he speaks always in the most tentative of terms. The question before him in the passage I have in mind is whether it is licit to pray for those known to be condemned. In order to answer this question, he says, it is necessary to explain something with which it is connected and on which it depends, 'especially if God reveals someone in particular to be condemned.'¹¹ (The emphasis here and in the rest of this paragraph is my own.) He then says, '*we might be able to give as an example the Antichrist*', and that Augustine and Thomas Aquinas 'appear to conclude' that such a person should not be prayed for. He goes on to add, 'if on account of a special revelation we are able to distinguish [the Antichrist] from the predestined [to eternal glory], then we cannot pray for him.'¹² Finally, one page later, instead of using the Antichrist as an example of one whom we know to be damned, he employs the standard 'dummy name' of the time, 'Titius,' the equivalent of our 'Jones' or 'Smith.'

Why this tentativeness? The problem is not with the notion of damnation itself nor with whether the known damned are to be prayed for. There is no doubt whatsoever that Thomas and Augustine (whom Suarez follows in these matters) say in the places Suarez cites that, given a (hypothetical) damned soul, we must not pray for it.¹³ The question is whether we ever *have* such certain knowledge concerning any individual. Again, it is one thing to assert 'if p then q ,' quite another to assert q . It is noteworthy that even in the

face of what appears to be good scriptural evidence Suarez hesitates to do the latter. However, even if one were to insist that he seriously maintains that we know of at least one human soul who is (or will be) in hell, it is critical that always, according to Suarez, those who are known certainly to be damned are known by revelation to be so—by which he means not that we might deduce that a particular person is in hell, but that scripture *says* that a particular person is in hell.¹¹ For some reason (we will discuss what it could be below), he is reluctant to make the transition from *p* to *q* in 'if *p* then *q*.' Thus, nowhere does he make the type of point that Hermes makes about *Matthew 25*.¹²

A fourth reason for maintaining that we have not certain knowledge that anyone is in hell would be that in the Liturgy of the Church we are constantly praying for the salvation of all souls. Balthasar gives a list of such prayers which is worth reproducing:

Father, you sent your angel to Cornelius, to show him the way to salvation. Help us to work generously for the salvation of all so that your Church may bring us and all mankind into your presence.

Father, you are the source of the life that your Son, Jesus Christ, secured for us in his death and his Resurrection. Receive us and all men into the sacrifice of redemption and sanctify us in the blood of your Son.

Lord, accept the offering of your Church; and may what each individual offers up to the honour of your name lead to the salvation of all.

Lord, Our God, at the altar we commemorate the immeasurable love of your Son. Let his redemptive work become fruitful through the service of the Church for the entire world.

Hidden God, ... we thank you for your patience.... Make us receptive to you. Let the whole of forlorn mankind find its way to you.

Father, all powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks. Through your beloved Son you created our human family. Through him you restored us to your likeness.¹³

We might note, that, with the exception of the last, all of these prayers might refer quite naturally to the living members of the Church—for whom, it is maintained by all the traditional theologians, we must assume there is yet hope.¹⁴ The last prayer is not an imprecation at all, but a pair of statements in the indicative which do not in fact exclude the notion that the reforming of the human race might involve its pruning. Still, it must be

acknowledged that nowhere in the Liturgy or in the Church's official teaching are we ever told to *exclude* any particular souls, living or dead, from our prayers. Suarez, indeed, says that we are forbidden to do this. Moreover, Leo XIII in the encyclical *Immortale Dei* teaches that, 'Just as Jesus Christ came into the world in order that men "might have life" [*John* 10.10], in the same way the Church has as its object the eternal salvation of souls: on account of which such is her nature that she extends herself toward the entire embrace of the human race, circumscribed by limits neither of place nor of time.'¹⁶

So then, it seems that we can agree with Balthasar to this extent: that there is no compelling reason why we cannot pray for the salvation of all souls. Although we are, as Balthasar says, 'under judgment,' the Church makes no claims about individuals as damned. Perhaps this is just as well. Perhaps, that is, we are spiritually better off left in doubt about certain eschatological matters. That the Church can declare certain persons to be in heaven does no damage to the spiritual quality of life in the Church, for they serve as exemplars. She is quite insistent, however, that no one person can know with certainty ('*absque ulla omnino dubitatione*') of his own salvation (DS-1534),¹⁷ for this would likely cause a person to cease growing in holiness. Similarly, although she teaches clearly that certain types of actions are incompatible with salvation, she never engages in 'negative beatification,' so to speak.¹⁸ Our prayers benefit for having no limit—for including, that is, even those we know not to have followed the example and teachings of Christ.

Balthasar's arguments for universal salvation

These things said, then, on the side of Balthasar, I would like now to change direction in order to confront his arguments for the possibility of universal salvation. The word 'possibility,' indeed, is an important one, for Balthasar contends that he is not arguing *for* universal salvation, but for the permissibility of hoping for it—and, thus, merely its possibility. (As St. Paul remarks, 'Who has hope for what he already sees?' [*Romans* 8.24].)

Much of Balthasar's argument pertains to the existence of two types of passage in holy scripture, such as he identifies them (29ff): (a) passages such as *Matthew* 25 which strongly suggest the existence of hell and the possibility of eternal punishment; and (b) others, such as *1 Timothy* 2.3-4, in which God's desire for universal salvation is spoken of. In the latter, for instance, St. Paul has been encouraging prayer for civic officials when he says, 'This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.'

Hermes believes that these two types of passage can be reconciled by understanding God's universal will for salvation as in some sense conditional: 'The Church has always distinguished between God's conditional will for salvation, which "wants all men to be blessed"—under certain conditions!—and his absolute will for salvation, which assuredly

destines certain individual men, *post praevisa merita*, for salvation. In this sense, and in it only, are the two seemingly opposed statements of revelation to be harmonised' (23).¹⁹ The 'condition' of which Hermes speaks here is, of course, the willing acceptance by an individual soul of the saving grace offered him (or her). Balthasar, however, objects to Hermes' point in this fashion:

But who, then, has asked you to harmonise here? ... We might, however, make quite clear to ourselves how outrageous it is to blunt God's triune will for salvation, which is directed at the entire world ('God wants all men to be blessed'), by describing it as 'conditional' and calling absolute only that divine will in which God allows his total will for salvation to be thwarted by man (23-4).

Balthasar is making two points which call for a number of interrelated remarks. First, he appears to think that the two types of statements *should* not be harmonised. (He says later, for instance, that 'the two series of statements run along side by side in such a way that a synthesis of both is neither permissible or achievable' (29) He offers, however, no argument for this prohibition. On the contrary, we might argue, if, on the one hand, scripture says that God wills everyone to be saved and, on the other hand, that some are heading for eternal perdition, the most natural thing in the world is to speculate that what (ideally) God wills to happen might not happen, due to some other factor—such as the refusal of grace. Indeed, this accords well with Balthasar's general approach to scripture in which he insists that we not fragment the Word of God but attempt, through faith, to understand it as a single, coherent whole.

Secondly, it is apparent that Balthasar does not really believe that the two types of passage should be left with a 'cleft' between them (23), since he attempts to resolve the tension between them himself. That, indeed, is the motive for his second point, that to harmonise the statements in the way that Hermes chooses is to put limits on God.²⁰ By removing these supposed 'limits' on God, Balthasar closes the gap by giving more weight to the second type of passage (interpreted in a particular way), thereby 'conditionalising' the first type. But who is to say that harmonisation is not to be achieved by going Hermes' route rather than Balthasar's?

Thirdly, and most importantly, Balthasar reconciles the two strands of scriptural tradition by an argument for the fact of universal salvation and not by an argument for the possibility of hoping and praying for universal salvation. If Balthasar is right, we need not *hope* for universal salvation: it could not *not* be. God could not condemn any men to eternal damnation since this would be to 'blunt God's triune will for salvation.'

Beginning with the idea that God's 'triune will for salvation' may not be 'blunted' or 'thwarted' by men, Balthasar can only proceed to the conclusion that God cannot condemn anyone to hell lest he violate his own nature (or the nature of his will), but this is to go too far. Not only does it open the possibility—nay, the necessity—of universal salvation, it precludes the mere possibility of damnation (since, of course, every such argument from

necessity disallows the contradictory of its conclusion). Indeed, Balthasar is forced further. He quotes with evident approval the remark of Hans Jürgen Verweyen: 'Whoever reckons with the possibility of even only *one* person's being eternally lost *besides himself* is unable to love unreservedly'. In the light of *Matthew 25*, it would seem that Christ's moral character is seriously flawed.

One way of escaping from this dilemma is to argue, as Balthasar does, that threats of condemnation can be legitimately directed by an individual to his own soul but not to any other soul. Balthasar quotes, approvingly, Karl Rahner:

The Christian message 'says to each of us, not to the other, but in each case to me: You can, through yourself, through the one that you are in your innermost centre and irrevocably wish to be, also be the one who shuts himself off from God in the absolute lifeless, irrevocable desolation of the "No"'.¹

However, if this irrevocable 'No' is a real possibility for me, is it not for others? If we were to assume otherwise, what would this say about an individual's connection with the community of worshipers? Or, even if condemnation is a possibility just for me, does not this fly in the face of any argument that God cannot condemn a person to hell? Once we grant that one human person can spend an eternity in hell what logical reason is there to say that others might not do so also?

This brings us to a final, closely-related matter. Although the Church does not speak of any human soul's being in hell, she speaks with scriptural warrant of Satan's being in hell. Even Balthasar acknowledges that the 'theological hope' which he posits with regard to human souls 'can by no means apply to this power' (the personified power of the Evil One). He argues, with Karl Barth, that due to the marginality of scriptural statements about Satan we are incapable of constructing a 'coherent demonology' (144). Nonetheless, he holds that 'the doctrine of a fall of the angels, which is deeply rooted in the whole of Tradition, becomes not only plausible, but even, if the satanic is accepted as existent, inescapable' (145). But with this admission on the part of Balthasar, we can employ the Augustinian argument, from *The City of God*, book 21 chapter 23: if God can, without contradicting his own merciful nature, consign an angel to hell, there would seem to be no logical reason why he could not do the same to a human soul. Anticipating, perhaps, this counter-argument, Balthasar suggests that, perhaps 'the concept "person"' does not apply to 'the satanic being' (145). This argument cuts both ways. Might not a human soul spending eternity in hell be considered less than a person, for the same reasons that Balthasar considers 'the satanic being' possibly not a person—i.e., in so far as 'being a person always presupposes a positive relation to some fellow-person'? There are considerations which might be thought to disallow the characterisation of a human soul in hell as a non-person (we shall examine these below) but they would also pertain to any such characterisation of the devil.

The parameters of legitimate hope

I return now to the possibility of eternal salvation. I acknowledged previously with Balthasar that it is possible that all men might be saved. But can we acknowledge this in quite the same sense as he? I think not. A different situation ensues theologically once we address our attention to hypothetical persons in hell. There are two things to be said in this regard. First of all, in so far as received teaching pertains only to hypothetical persons all definite persons could conceivably escape eternal perdition, since nothing is taught in their case. Thus, the notion of hypothetical persons allows us to hope that all might be saved. Secondly, since the Church's teachings about the damned pertain to hypothetical persons, if our theorising pulls us beyond the line which separates the living from the dead, we thereby begin to speak of the hypothetical souls concerning whom the Church has spoken.

Balthasar's understanding of universal salvation involves these hypothetical souls concerning whom the Church has spoken. His entire theory about universal salvation goes back to his understanding of the 'harrowing of hell,' according to which Christ's salvific power reaches to the lowest depths of hell— i.e., not only to those souls without mortal sin who are waiting, for whatever reason, for Christ to set them free, but also to those who are hypothesised as condemned for their sins.²¹ However, those hypothesised as being in these lower reaches of hell ('*infernium inferiorem*'—DS—1077) are, according to Catholic doctrine, there forever. The suffering they undergo is 'eternal,' the flames of hell (however these are to be understood) are 'inextinguishable.'²² Any suggestion that these souls leave hell conflicts with defined Church teaching.

Balthasar, does not directly contradict the proposition that for these souls hell is eternal. He attempts to maintain the doctrine, while offering a special understanding of what 'eternity' might mean, with regard to hell. There is nothing novel in this *per se*: Thomas Aquinas, for instance, says quite flatly that in hell there is no 'true eternity' but rather 'interminability.'²³ Thomas's intention is not to mitigate the reality of hell; if anything, it is to acknowledge a worse prospect for sinners than eternity, which he views quite favourably since it is so bound up with beatitude. Balthasar's intention is quite the opposite. In accord with Thomas, he makes the point that 'the eternity in eternal life' is an enhancement of life; but then he says that the eternity of eternal death 'is complete withdrawal to the point of shrivelling into a disconsolate immovable now...where nothing more can be contemplated or done' (133). This latter characterisation of hell might be unobjectionable if it meant that, however insignificant hell might be on the moral horizon of the saints, it is still a reality to which those supposed to be damned are consigned and from which they are not removed. Given Balthasar's conception of the harrowing of hell (which he discusses in conjunction with his ideas about the impossibility of eternal damnation), it is hard to see how he can mean this. The idea of harrowing is that those in hell

leave that place. He must then mean that the shrinking of hell to a 'disconsolate immovable now' somehow forces the souls out. This is precisely what faced the Fourth Lateran Council, when it issued its decrees on the eternity of hell.²⁴ Balthasar's special understanding of the eternity of hell serves no function other than that of a smoke-screen.

We cannot accede to Balthasar's way of conceiving the possibility of eternal salvation and remain orthodox. How then can we understand the possibility? Before dealing with this issue directly, we need to establish one preliminary point: that there is no intrinsic reason to regard the sayings of Jesus found at *Matthew 25* as mere threats or warnings. The only reason we might have for so regarding them would be if Balthasar (and others) were right: that it is incompatible with God's nature to allow to happen what Christ says will happen to those who are not merciful. But there is no reason to make this assumption. Is such evil incompatible with the notion of a loving and all-merciful God? We already have such evil in the world: sinners who separate themselves from God and live—even humanly-speaking—frustrated, resentful lives. If such suffering is incompatible with the notion of the Christian God, he is either not as powerful as Christians claim (and therefore not the Christian God) or he does not exist. Given that the Christian God does exist, if such suffering is in itself not incompatible with his nature, why must its duration be incompatible with that same nature? As Newman remarked 'the great mystery is, not that evil has no end, but that it had a beginning.'²⁵ Ultimately, the problem of hell can be reduced to the problem of evil—and no one thinks of solving the problem of evil by denying its existence.²⁶ If we have no reason to regard Christ's remarks at *Matthew 25* as mere threats or warnings, it is legitimate to represent them as conditional statements of the form 'if *p* then *q*': if we are not merciful we *will* find ourselves in hell. The question facing us is how to understand, such statements.

There are two issues here (first introduced above). The first is the nature of the transition from the left to the right side of the conditional statement; the other, the certainty with which *p* is asserted. We can, of course, abbreviate conditional statements by means of the symbols '*p* → *q*'; I am suggesting that the first issue is the nature of the necessity which brings us over the arrow. The arrow represents the link between definite individuals and their fate in the afterlife; indeed, we might think of the arrow as the final judgment itself. We have already established this link between *p* and *q* but what its nature might be is unclear.

We can be sure that the necessity of associated with the arrow is not such that hope for salvation and fear of damnation are equally weighted. If *q* and not-*q* are equally likely (given *p*), it is false to state 'if *p* then *q*,' for a statement like 'if *p* then *q*' is meant to exclude the possibility that *p* and not-*q*. As we said above, this is not necessarily to say that a statement of the form 'if *p* then *q*' need absolutely exclude not-*q*; but certainly we must regard a conditional statement such as we find at *Matthew 25* to be saying at least that *q* follows from *p* most of the time.

In fact, there is good reason to believe that the necessity represented by the arrow between p and q does approach logical necessity. To the extent that one's understanding of moral theology relies on the notion of a divine command, so that such-and-such is right because God wills it rather than God wills it because it is right, one can it seems 'loosen up' the necessity of the arrow. According to this conception, God would preside *over* the last judgment, free to determine from time to time at his own discretion that p and not- q . (That he might do this for all cases is excluded, however, by the former argument.) But this is an extremely legalistic understanding of moral theology and has justly been criticised by a number of moral theologians.²⁷

The alternative to such an approach, however, is to conceive of the last judgment as being effected by the sinner himself. According to this conception, God does not stand over the sinner as judge. Rather, in his infinite love he allows the sinner to choose what constitutes his own condemnation. In a sense, the sinner is punished not *because* he is evil; his punishment *is* the evil he chooses. Souls find themselves in hell in so far as lack of mercy, etc., are hell. But if this is the case, the relationship between p and q is very much like one of logical necessity. Hell and evil are ultimately one and the same thing. So, under this non-legalistic conception, if p , it is absolutely certain that q . But even if we adopt a legalistic understanding of the last judgment, it is impossible to hold that all souls will be saved, for even if God chooses to be especially merciful toward some, he cannot be so toward all without contradicting the revealed doctrine contained in *Matthew* 25. Perhaps, however, we have still a 'window of opportunity' left: the second question mentioned above, the certainty with which p is asserted.

God issues warnings of the form ' $p \rightarrow q$ ' which are in no sense bluffs and which we might regard as open equally to either q or not- q . An example often used in the traditional literature is the warning issued through Jonah to Nineveh. Here we would read p as 'Nineveh does not repent in sackcloth and ashes,' q as 'Nineveh will be destroyed.' Implied in this warning is another conditional: that if Nineveh does repent it will not be destroyed ('not- $p \rightarrow$ not- q '). In the case of Nineveh, then, even if the arrow represents the strongest type of necessity, the episode is open to either q or not- q since it is not yet determined whether p or not- p .

In the question we are now considering, i.e., whether all men might be saved, we are not discussing whether certain people will choose in a way which seems to satisfy the conditions of p , but whether, given what appear to be such choices, they really are what they appear. For all practical purposes, p is almost certainly true. People do live evil lives and die without repenting of their evil ways. Were we not faced with the question of the possible damnation of souls, we would not hesitate to affirm this. It is of course possible that, unbeknown to us, all people when face-to-face with death turn towards God in such a way as to cancel any and every sin.²⁸ But we are concerned here precisely with what we do know. The only sort of 'evidence' that might be adduced for such last moment conversions would have to be arguments about the nature of God and his mercy; and we have already seen

the inadequacies of such arguments.

Can this be correct? Does not this bring us back to Hermes' position—i.e., back to affirming that *Matthew 25* constitutes certain knowledge that some souls are in hell? I think it brings us extremely close. The Church however, as we have said, has never gone that far, maintaining a tradition of prayer for the salvation of all and a refusal to speak of definite individuals as damned. Could there be a basis for this tradition? There must be such, otherwise, as participants in a rational enterprise, we should have to agree with Hermes.

The basis for this hope, I would argue, must be extremely thin. A more 'thick' basis would be made up of experiential (or contingent) knowledge of the way people are. We know that such knowledge is not available: our experience is that some persons do go unrepentant to their graves. An even 'thicker' basis would be made up of non-contingent, necessary truths; but, as I have argued, arguments attempting to establish such truths bring us into conflict with Church teaching. The basis then of our hope must be located in the realm of non-necessary truths and yet be beyond our normal experience: it must be located on the thin ledge that separates the most certain of contingent knowledge from necessary knowledge.

This might at first seem like a circumvention of the problem: a device whose only justification is the theological difficulty it is intended to solve. I would claim that it is not. It makes sense that the Church to which we belong have in it neither the knowledge that all men will be saved, nor, the knowledge that certain individuals are damned. If in the end God is going to save all souls and also be proved not to be a deceiver, this is the only locus for the hope that we have.

As thin as this basis of hope might be, it is easily recognisable. We recognise it when a mother teaches her child that, despite all evidence to the contrary, the child must never judge another to be outside the state of grace. There is nothing erroneous about this teaching. It is given an authoritative basis in the words of Jesus from the cross, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (*Luke 23.34*) and in the words of Peter addressed to those in Jerusalem he has just accused of killing the author of life: 'I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers' (*Acts 3.17*). Neither of these two expressions of mercy is based on definite knowledge that there was something wanting in the deliberative process leading up to the death of Jesus. Each is founded rather on that thin ledge we have identified: that somehow, for reasons beyond our understanding, evil deeds are performed non-culpably. This is not a sceptical but a realistic point: we cannot claim more certainty for our knowledge than it inherently possesses. Which is not to say that it does not possess a great deal.

Before concluding I would stress that I am not saying that the *prayers* of the Church for the salvation of all need to be founded on this extremely thin basis. The Church's *hope* that all men might be saved must, it seems to me, have the rational foundation I have suggested—and obviously the Church can pray for what it hopes will come to be. It is also possible to pray for the

salvation of all souls without any such basis being involved at all. One would provide an account of this by examining what it means to pray for all.

One such analysis would be to specify the sense in which the concept 'all' is meant. 'All' need not encompass simultaneously, and as a group, every member of the class to which it refers. It might be true, for instance, that John wants to marry every girl he meets, but this does not make him a potential bigamist. Similarly, we might be able to pray that all men be saved without implying that we desire universal salvation. I am not convinced, however, that such an analysis can bring us very far. The prayers found in the Liturgy and quoted by Balthasar do appear to be prayers that the 'whole group' be saved. Even if they can be understood as referring only to the living, Leo XIII's statement (quoted above) would seem to license the broader sense.

A better analysis comes, again, from Suarez. He says that it is one thing to pray for the salvation of all out of the 'simple desire' which would include the condition, expressed or not, that that which is prayed for be subordinate to the will of God. It is another thing to pray out of 'absolute and efficacious desire,' as Christ did when, according to Suarez, he prayed for those predestined to glory: 'I do not pray for the world but for those whom you have given me.'³⁰ In such a prayer, one is explicit about the things revealed concerning the fate of the just and the unjust. That is, these things do not come into the prayer in so far as they are allowed for by the conditional nature of the prayer, but rather they are explicitly assumed as true.

It is permissible, says Suarez, to pray for the salvation of all in the former mode, for the condition attached to it ensures that such prayers do not come into conflict with the revealed will of God. But if we pray in the latter mode for the salvation of all, we must come into conflict with Church teaching, for in this mode we pray with respect to those supposed to be condemned that they not be condemned. As Suarez explains, it is possible to pray for the salvation of all with simple desire, even if we know by revelation that some are damned—thus, our 'thin basis' is irrelevant here. To pray in this fashion is simply to conform our wills to God's, who might will the salvation of all, even knowing that some will refuse it.

Conclusion

I have argued both for and against Balthasar: for the notion that we may 'dare to hope' for the salvation of all and against his way of establishing the point, which involves him in arguments to the effect that God could not condemn souls to eternal perdition. I do not by any means intend to suggest that Balthasar opposed Church teaching, although the trajectory of his arguments certainly comes into conflict with it. We must though have some basis for the hope which we have. This basis cannot be in arguments from necessary but from contingent truths. Indeed, in a sense, the basis must be contingency itself: that, despite massive evidence of our unworthiness, we do not know but that God will yet have mercy.³¹

- 1 See, for instance, Hermes, G.. 'Ist die Hölle leer', *Der Fels* 15 (Sept. 1984), pp. 250 – 256 and Schauf, H. 'Die ewige Verwerfung in neuen und älteren kirchlichen Verlautbarungen,' *Theologisches* 178 (1985), pp. 6253–8. In the United States, his speculations were attacked by the editor of the conservative *National Catholic Register*, although capably defended in the same journal by Fr. Joseph Fessio, S.J.
- 2 The original German was published by Johannes Verlag (Einsiedeln), in 1986. The Ignatius Press edition (San Francisco, 1988) also contains 'A short discourse on hell'—a translation of *Kleiner Diskurs über die Hölle* (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag AG 1987). Numbers in parentheses within the text of this essay refer to the page numbers of the Ignatius Press translation; in footnotes I will use the abbreviation *DWH*.
- 3 Italics in the translation.
- 4 In what follows I use lack of mercy as representative of the many sins which, according to traditional teaching, cut one off from the possibility of salvation.
- 5 A number of patristic writers, however, under the influence of Origen, appear to have favoured the notion of universal salvation. Notable among the latter were Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa. For the patristic background, see Daley, Brian E., 'Apokatastasis and "honourable silence" in the eschatology of Maximus Confessor,' in Felix Heinzer and Schönborn (eds.) *Maximus Confessor: Actes du Symposium sur Maximus le Confesseur, Fribourg, 2–5 septembre 1980* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1982), pp.309–339, especially pp. 309–15.
- 6 The beast here is the Antichrist. Augustine resisted the idea that the Antichrist was an historical figure: see *De civ. Dei* 20.19, also Rauh, H.D., *Das Bild des Antichrist im Mittelalter: von Tychonius zum Deutschen Symbolismus* (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1979), p.123. Augustine apparently identified him as the devil (*Adnotationes in Iob*, 18). But the Antichrist's prophet is certainly human.
- 7 'Ad expediendum hoc dubium, oportet prius expedire aliud, quod in eo involvitur, et ex quo pendet, nimirum si Deus revelet aliquem in particulari esse reprobum...' Suarez, F., *Opera Omnia*, ed. C. Berton (Paris: L. Vivès, 1856–78), v.14, p.57. From now on I will refer to Suarez's writings as '*Opera*.'
- 8 '[P]ossumusque exemplum ponere in Antichristo, quem certo scimus esse damnandum, ac proinde reprobum. Nam quod pro tali persona non liceat orare, videtur colligi ex Augustino...et D. Thoma..., dicentibus ideo non posse non alicui negare orationis beneficium, quia non possumus distinguere praedestinos a reprobis; ergo e converso, si propter specialem revelationem possumus distinguere hunc a praedestinis, non poterimus orare pro illo' [*Opera* v.14, p.57b]. Balthasar, incidentally, unjustly vilifies Suarez in connection with this passage. He paraphrases his answer to the question whether we may pray for all men: 'Yes, certainly [says Suarez, according to Balthasar], since on earth we cannot distinguish the *electi* from the *reprobati*. But what if God should reveal to someone that a certain person is damned?' Balthasar then interjects the parenthetical remark, 'One would like to ask Suarez whether there has ever been, or ever will be, such a revelation' (*DWH*–37, in note 3 beginning at p.35). Balthasar need not ask Suarez this, since he says quite plainly here that he means the Antichrist of *Rev.* 20.10. But, as I argue, Suarez is extremely reluctant to push this idea too far.
- 9 *Opera* v.14, p.59a.
- 10 The cited places are (Thomas) *S.T.* II–II, q.83, a.7, ad 3; (Augustine) *De correptione et gratia*, 15.
- 11 With regard to the Antichrist, Suarez writes, 'si Deus revelet aliquem in particulari esse reprobatum' [v.14, p.57b]; with regard to 'Titius' he says: 'si per revelationem certo constaret Titium esse a Deo reprobatum' [v.14, p.59a].
- 12 Suarez's disinclination to declare any definite soul to be condemned is demonstrated also in his extreme reluctance to acknowledge that God might make known to a living individual his own future damnation. Such knowledge, he says, would be greatly repugnant to this state of life ('talis credulitas multum repugnat statui viae') (*Opera*, v.14, 60a). He admits, however, that such knowledge is not absolutely impossible. See also below, note 14.
- 13 *DWH*–35 n.3. Several of these prayers appear only in the German missal. The last is the

- very loose *Roman Missal* translation of what appears in the *Missale Romanum* as part of the third common preface. The pertinent part reads in Latin: 'Qui per Filium dilectionis tuae, sicut conditor generis es humani, ita benignissimus reformator.'
- 14 Thomas is insistent that no one is beyond redemption before death: see *S.T.* II-II q.83 a.7, ad 3. Augustine too is clear on this: see *De civ. Dei* 21.24 ('quia de nullo certa est, orat pro omnibus dumtaxat hominibus inimicis suis in hoc corpore constitutis...'); *De correptione et gratia*, 5; *Retractiones* I.19.7; *Sermons* 71.13.21. See also Suarez, *Opera*, v.14, p.60b (12). At one point Thomas suggests that it might be possible in special circumstances for someone to know by revelation of his own damnation (*De Veritate*, q.23 a.8, ad 2); but, at *I Sent.* d.48, q.1, a. 4, ad 2, he emphatically denies that this is possible, citing Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, XII, cc.17 and 18. Suarez discusses this issue at *Opera* v.14, p.60a (11) (see above, note 12).
 - 15 *Opera*, v.14, 60b–61a. He draws a distinction, though: we are permitted to except souls formally but not materially.
 - 16 DS–3166. The abbreviation 'DS' stands for Denzinger, H. and Schönmetzer, A., *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 36th ed. (Herder: Rome, 1976). Suarez says that charity 'omnes homines amplectitur, et omnium salutem exoptat' (*Opera*, v.14, p.59a; see also p.60b (12)).
 - 17 See also DS–1540, where it is allowed that by special revelation a person might know his own state of grace. Presumably, this would not be made known to a person who would not profit by it.
 - 18 Note too that Thomas Aquinas says that, if an individual knew of his own damnation, this would cause him to despair [*De veritate*, q.23, a.8, ad 2]. But see above, note 14.
 - 19 For this notion of *post praevisa merita*, see Suarez, *Opera*, v.14, p.58b.
 - 20 He makes similarly strong claims in other places in the book: see *DWH*–26, for instance, where he says that for men to be damned is for Hell to be stronger than Christ, or *DWH*–27, where he strongly suggests that to conceive of the chosen rejoicing in heaven while others languish in hell is to countenance the unacceptable prospect of the chosen being pleased 'because they have been relieved of the memory of their friends.'
 - 21 See *DWH*–97–113. This notion itself has been anathematised by the Church: see DS–1011 and 1077. For the distinctions within hell, see Thomas Aquinas, III *Sent.* d.22, q.2 a.2, solutio 2. Surprisingly, Augustine held that Christ descended not to the limbo of the just but to the lowest reaches of hell: *De Genesi ad litteram libri XII*, 33, 63 (see also *De civ. Dei* 17.11). Whom did he save from there? 'Whom he willed,' he says at *Ep.*164.5.14. I argue against this notion below.
 - 22 DS–443, also 76, 801, 780.
 - 23 *S.T.* I, q.10, a.3, ad 3; see also IV *Sent.* 49, q.1, a.2 solutio 3, ad 4.
 - 24 The council was interested in opposing the errors of the Albigensians and Cathars who held that the punishment of hell was not eternal. See DS–801.
 - 25 *Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), p.422. Newman, incidentally, proposes a way of mitigating the objections to the notion of eternal damnation in 'Note III' of this volume (pp.50f–3). It is, to my mind, a legitimate use of the notion that the eternity of hell might shrink to a 'disconsolate immovable now'; and I employ it below. I am grateful to Stratford Caldecott for this reference.
 - 26 Of course, in a certain sense evil does not exist—in so far as all God's creation is good. This might, indeed, serve as the seed of an anti-Manichean theory of how God can tolerate hell. Such a theory might incorporate the notion that the eternity of hell might shrink to a 'disconsolate immovable now'. But again, the notion that the hypothetically condemned might be taken out of hell could play no part in such a theory.
 - 27 See especially, Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, v.1, pp.101–102, 382.
 - 28 See, for instance, Augustine. *De civ. Dei* 21.18; Suarez, *Opera*, v.14, p.60a.
 - 29 That particular judgment occurs immediately after death was defined by Benedict XII (DS–1002). This would seem to rule out post mortem conversions.
 - 30 *Opera*, v.14, 55b.
 - 31 I thank Stratford Caldecott, John Finnis, Germain Grisez, Brian Ferme, Mark O'Toole, Tony Meredith and Philip Clayton, each of whom provided helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.