

Chapter V

UNIVERSAL SALVATION: QUESTIONS ON SOTERIOLOGICAL UNIVERSALISM¹

Let all the roads be blessed,

*The straight, winding and roundabout
ones,*

If they lead to You...

(Roman Brandstaetter)

We live in times when many people, tired perhaps of uncertainty and a multitude of divergent views, start leaning towards exclusivism, integrism, or even sectarianism.

This concerns not only Christianity but also other religions. A common feature of the attitudes denoted by the terms listed above is, in the area of religion, a tendency to appropriate exclusively truth and salvation, accompanied by a desire to disqualify all other beliefs and views. We are thus facing phenomena which are the negation of the spirit of universalism. The problem is not only the literal interpretation of the Bible or other texts recognized as authoritative and normative.

Much more important in this kind of mentality seems to be sheer suspicion that the others are completely wrong and in consequence deserve to be damned: all those who do not share my belief, do not belong to my Church or my religious community, are sent to hell; God saves only orthodox members of my community; others are to suffer eternal damnation. Hell is for others; we are the ones chosen by God and faithful to him; he will

save us, all others will be damned. The one we condemn is damned by God; we are sure of that! We do not need any dialogue, any common search for truth; the truth is ours; there is no alternative to the truth advocated by us. We are forced to accept it under threat of damnation...

These are only several characteristics of a closed and narrow mentality, inspired by the feeling of exclusivism, self-sufficiency and fear of others. It often happened in the past that hell was filled with a countless number of sinners, infidels, pagans, atheists and all other opponents. This attitude lacks any sympathy and understanding for weakness and sin of a human being. There is no compassion for the lost and damned. There resound verdicts of condemnation for the sinful world.

Christian Churches used to judge each other in this way in the past, guided by the conviction

that there was no salvation outside them. The hostile attitude towards certain groups of people (heretics, non-believers, witches, fortune-tellers, Jews, Gypsies) suspected of treating with the devil, was being strengthened in this way. An inclination to regard split and division as normal things gradually increased. The sense of all-human solidarity, being at the very heart of the Christian understanding of salvation, was disappearing.

As a result the Christian Good News lost its credibility, especially among non-believers and people distrustful of the Church. Today we are slowly learning again the difficult wisdom of universalism. We are learning it in the age of ecumenism, at the beginning of the third millennium of Christianity, in spite of all difficulties.

The followers of the New Age ideology preach a happy future, an all-embracing cosmic

reconciliation, an ultimate harmony of the universe. They offer hope, humanitarianism and universalism. All positive energies present in the world are supposed to overcome finally every sort of evil. This means that we do not need any God-given gift of redemption, liberation and salvation. The universe liberates itself in the process of universal reconciliation and transfiguration. Thus we may hope for the end of any antagonism between good and evil. The process of self-liberation should result in removing any separation between God and the world, between heaven and hell. The New Age ideology presents itself as a philosophy able to offer to people much more than Christianity. Is this fact not a real challenge to Christian hope and the vision of salvation?

Not finding answers to difficult questions concerning the future, many Christians turn to other religions, world-views and doctrines. They seek comfort and encouragement in

Buddhism, in the doctrine of reincarnation, in theosophy or in the teaching of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Still others succumb to the temptation of nihilism, become totally indifferent or even cynical. On the other hand, the atmosphere dominating in the world marked by secularism favours the growing inclination towards sectarianism, fundamentalism and integrism. These trends do not spare traditional Churches. Who preaches the existence of hell for others will be inclined to fill it with those whom he or she condemns, and to leave them to their own fate.

Today we are slowly learning again the difficult wisdom of universalism. We are learning it in the age of ecumenism, at the beginning of the third millennium of Christianity, in defiance of opposition and all difficulties. The lesson of history is especially important and admonishing in this respect.

THE EPOCH OF CONVERTING: COLLECTIVE VERDICTS OF CONDEMNATION

Up to the time of the Second Vatican Council the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church maintained that it was the only true Church of Christ in the world and the only space of salvation. Who did not belong to it could not be saved. Infidels and non-believers should be converted. All the separated groups of Christians should return to unity with the Holy See of Rome. Only a Christian who lives in communion with the Pope could belong to the Church of Christ. The illusion of "converting Russia", nurtured for many centuries, was an element of this narrow context of thinking about the Church and salvation².

The Council of Florence issued a verdict of

condemnation not only for pagans, non-believers and non-Christians but also for all non-Catholics:

The unity of the Church's body is of such great importance that church sacraments can help in being saved only those people who remain in this unity, and only they can obtain the eternal reward through fasts, charity and other pious deeds and practices of Christian life. No one who remains outside the Catholic Church, in disunity with it, can be saved, no matter how great his [or her] charity might be, and even if he [or she] might have spilt [his or her] blood for Christ³.

This statement is preceded by a solemn declaration that the "Holy Roman Church" (*Sacrosancta Romana Ecclesia*) believes, professes and proclaims that no one from outside the Catholic Church may become a

participant in eternal life, and that this concerns not only pagans but also "Jews, heretics and schismatics".

One can only be astonished today by this dark courage on the part of people of the Church of those times in pronouncing collective verdicts of damnation. These verdicts did not remain solely in the sphere of theory. They were directly referred to entire human communities existing outside the Roman Catholic Church. They became the reason for unjust treatment of people and many historical tragedies. They justified methods of converting other people inconsistent with the spirit of the Gospel.

A transformation towards soteriological universalism was slowly taking place in the awareness of the Catholics. It is not accidental that at the end of the second millennium which brought to Christianity the tragedy of the lasting division, John Paul II called for the

thorough examination of conscience. The Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio adveniente* contains the following characteristic passage: "Another painful phenomenon to which the sons [and daughters!] of the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given, specially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth."⁴

Centuries of Pedagogy of Fear

The traditional Roman Catholic doctrine on the everlasting damnation of non-believers, members of other religions and denominations was following the biblical warnings of hell. These warnings were transformed into the assertion about the real existence of everlasting torments in hell and applied to concrete groups of people. The part of biblical wisdom which gives hope for salvation was completely ignored. There was no room in the

official teaching of the Church for such universal hope. This hope was eliminated from the doctrine and spirituality out of concern for the moral order of believers' lives. It would reappear, but mostly among mystics and people who were able to think independently.

In his monographic study on the history of hell, Georges Minois quotes an opinion expressed by another renowned French historian, Jean Delumeau, who wrote some time ago that, within Christianity, "The questioning of the notion of the 'revengeful' and punishing God, as well as the defense of tolerance was the work of the 'Church's clochards' [i.e. vagabonds, WH], people from the margin of faith, sincerely concerned with rehabilitating the Supreme Being by restoring to it the quality of infinite goodness"⁵. One of the thinkers of the 19th century, A. Pezzani, wrote: "If hell does exist, my choice is clear: I want to be there, where there is unhappiness

and torment in order to bring comfort, because in this case God is no longer our Father... Theology has committed the crime of offense of humanity on account of the dogma on everlasting hell."⁶ Numerous similar charges against theology appeared many times in the course of past centuries.

The teaching about damnation and eternal hell was an integral part of the church pedagogy. The fear of death and hell was considered to be an essential motive for moral behaviour. Christians themselves were becoming such people, as Friedrich Nietzsche remarked sarcastically, whose faces bore no signs of joy because of the gift of redemption: "*Erlöster müssten mir seine Jünger aussehen!*"⁷. Faith in eternal hell and the final division of humanity discouraged people from overcoming the walls of separation and making efforts aimed at the rehabilitation of guilty persons. This can explain a non-Christian inclination of believers

to opt for the severe order of penalizing justice, and especially for the death penalty. Since we know for sure that the final division of mankind into the saved and damned ones will once inevitably take place, is there any point in striving to change this inevitability?

Today, theologians have the courage to speak with their own voice about the infinite goodness and liberating mercy of God. This is the voice of hope for universal salvation. Times do change and so does religious mentality.

TOWARDS A UNIVERSALISM OF SALVATION

The Second Vatican Council has initiated a new way of thinking about the salvation of people of other denominations, religions and worldviews. It states unambiguously that non-Catholics "in some real way (...) are joined

with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them also He gives His gifts and graces, and is thereby operative among them with His sanctifying power. Some indeed He has strengthened to the extent of the shedding of their blood".⁸ Such words were dictated by the ecumenical sensitivity of the 20th century. Let us compare this statement with the passage of the Council of Florence mentioned above and related to shedding blood, to perceive the gap between the two ways of thinking. The Second Vatican Council goes even further. It refers in a completely different spirit to Jews, Moslems and those who "in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and every other gift (cf. Acts 17: 25-28), and who as Savior wills that all men be saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:4)."⁹ It is in this context that the characteristic phrase appears:

Those also can attain to everlasting

salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.

God is truly ecumenical in His mercy and generosity, and does not refuse assistance to anybody:

Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life thanks to His grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She regards such qualities as given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life. ¹⁰

One has to look back towards the past centuries in order to become aware of the change of paradigm in soteriological thinking marked by universalism. The comparison of the teaching of the Council of Florence with that of the Vatican II sufficiently illustrates the depth of this historic process of transformation. However, the Second Vatican Council cannot be treated as a final say. It has opened the road to even more courageous thinking.

For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. (...). The Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.¹¹

These words concern also non-believers. All necessary conclusions have not yet been drawn from such statements for the thinking and

practical behaviour of believers.

Some openness to soteriological universalism can be perceived in the thought of Pope John Paul II. In his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* he cautiously developed his eschatological reflections, posing to himself difficult questions and seeking answers. The feeling of truly inscrutable mystery of the ultimate destiny of humanity accompanied him unceasingly. He did not close the road to further research. He also admitted that the problem of hell has always disturbed the most keen minds in the history of Christianity and recalls that the ancient councils rejected the theory of the final *apokatástasis* which indirectly abolished hell. It is in this context that an important statement of the Pope appears: "But the problem remains. Can God, who has loved man so much, permit the man who rejects Him to be condemned to eternal torment?"¹²

The very admission that "the problem remains" seems to be a clear encouragement to theologians for further studies aiming at the deeper interpretation of the Scripture and Christian tradition. In the Pope's opinion hell is above all a moral requirement of the divine justice in the face of horrendous crimes of humankind:

Is not God who is Love also ultimate Justice? Can He tolerate these terrible crimes, can they go unpunished? Isn't final punishment in some way necessary in order to reestablish moral equilibrium in the complex history of humanity? Is not hell in a certain sense the ultimate safeguard of man's moral conscience?¹³

At the end of his eschatological reflections John Paul II comes back to the fundamental idea that "God is Love" (1 Jn 4: 8.16): "Before all else, it is Love that judges. God, who is

Love, judges through love".¹⁴

In fact all those who favour the hope of universal salvation are by no means the advocates of forced amnesty. Everyone will have to suffer the consequences of his or her wicked deeds. Salvation is neither necessity nor compulsion; it is God's gift which has to be accepted voluntarily, with inner conviction, great reverence and gratitude. Hope dares to trust that God will not remain completely helpless in the face of human freedom, that he will finally be able to draw it towards himself, purify and transform it thanks to his patient and boundless love. This can be achieved through suffering and torment which in human language could be termed endless, aeonic, i.e. lasting for centuries, because of its quality and intensity, as is suggested by the Greek word *aiōnios*.

A great thinker of the Early Church, Origen

(died in 254 or 255), one of the propagators of hope for universal salvation, was well aware of this. He pointed many times to the ambiguity of the term *aiōnios*, used in the Bible to denote either eternity or only long duration. He regarded the punishment, termed in the Bible as ‘eternal’, as the sign of God’s mercy, as a cure designed to bring about improvement and conversion. God will finally manage to soften and overcome any resistance and revolt of his creatures without violating their free will. There is room for such a hope in Origen’s theology.¹⁵ In the light of contemporary research the condemnation of Origen’s views seems highly questionable. It bears signs of sinful dogmatization present in the turbulent historical context under emperor Justinian. Origen’s rehabilitation appears to be a moral obligation owed to the man who has been treated so unfairly by history. Galileo has already been rehabilitated. Let us hope that this will once be the case also with Origen.¹⁶

Biblical Universalism of Promise

Christians are not the only sheepfold of Christ. He also has, as he has clearly stressed, "other sheep that are not of this sheepfold". Further words in the same passage astonish us with the universalism of vision: "I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." (Jn 10:16) One cannot overlook the eschatological universalism of promise and fulfillment expressed in these words. It would be naive to connect them with the earthly history of the Church. They reach into the ultimate future of the world reconciled with God. Christ tells about some of them: "my sheep", "they listen to my voice", "I know them and they follow me", "I give them eternal life". But he has to bring "other sheep", the ones that are not of this sheepfold. There is a kind of historical necessity in this statement. Only then will the

unification of one great "sheep-pen", run by one Shepherd, take place.

The vivid language of these expressions hides deep eschatological contents. The Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for "the sheep" (Jn 10:15) - all the sheep, not only those called by him "my sheep" - is not indifferent to the fate of "other sheep". The laying down of life confirms his rights to "the other sheep". An astonishing statement about ultimate victory over the power of darkness and a promise to "draw all to himself" by the power of beauty and goodness (his whole life was the sign of it!), does not appear accidentally on Christ's lips. The tone of hope and optimism is linked in these words with the motive of judgment and conquering the power of evil: "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself" (Jn 12:31-32).

This is an unusual announcement of the ultimate victory of the good. We face again the universalism of promise. Jesus did not say that he will *want to* "draw all" or that he will *try to* do so, but that he *will* draw them indeed. Is there any reason for disbelieving his words?

The ultimate consequence of these words can be perceived in the teaching of the Apostle Paul who says that when the end comes Christ will "hand over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power" (1 Co 15:24). In this passage Christ's victory was presented very vividly in a way characteristic of the mentality of those times: "He will put all his enemies under his feet". There is also an announcement of the ultimate universalism of salvation: "When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Co 15:28).

The most daring propagators of the hope of salvation for all used to refer to these unusual words over centuries. We have not yet learnt to collect the voices of hope. Those who are prone to preach damnation to non-believers or believers in other religions and denominations should reflect over the depth and boldness of the quoted statements. And their number is even greater than it might have seemed at first glance.

Soteriological universalism included in many biblical statements is often lost in translation. Opponents of the universalist interpretation quote among others the words of Jesus which in many translations sound as follows: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved (*sothésetai*); but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16: 16; RSV, JB). The fate of non-believers would thus be determined in advance: all those who have not believed and have not been baptized cannot be saved,

and damnation is their final destiny. However, in the Greek original the latter part of the sentence seems not to speak categorically about damnation but about future judgment: "Who does not believe will undergo judgment" (*katakrithésetai*). The main idea is the need of judgment and verdict in such an important matter in which the fate of a concrete human is being decided. The one who has not believed will have to be subject to judgment and a verdict indicting him or her for an intensive process of repentance and purification. This will be an unimaginable transition through suffering and maturation to the acceptance of God.

Many surprises in the more thorough examination of the Bible's message wait future generations of Christians. Revelation as a whole can hardly be reconciled with the doctrine on hell understood as an everlasting reality opposed to the Kingdom of God. Hell is

no work of His. Humans create hell, for themselves and others. God does not create it for anyone. To have thought so would insult one's Creator, belittle Him and make him look like a punishing and revengeful man. The faith in eternal hell is in fact the faith in the power of evil, a sign of disbelief in Christ's power to save. How can He be praised at the same time for his victory over death, hell and the devil? This has been one of the great contradictions in Christian theology.

Is God Helpless in the Face of the Gift of Freedom?

In defending human freedom traditional theology assumes that we are able to reject God ultimately and irreversibly. This assumption is one of the foundations of the doctrine on the actual possibility of eternal damnation and the real existence of hell. But the question arises whether human freedom

can indeed persist in an everlasting state of separation from God. Can a decision to reject Him be truly ultimate and irrevocable? It is God himself who knows and defines the mystery of created freedom. He is its ultimate horizon and goal. It is in Him that it can attain to the ultimate purpose for which it has been created. Creating humans and calling them to participation in his eternal life, God wanted to have free and creative beings rather than slaves. The human being able to shape his or her own fate and history is a person longed for and beloved, given the admirable ability to take free decisions. The gift of freedom is a gift for eternity in order to achieve the ultimate fulfillment of the whole of existence. One must not forget this positive and ultimate purpose of freedom, this dramatic but wonderful gift.

There is something astonishing in the mystery of freedom: the ability to reject God comes

from His own gift! Many things seem to indicate that the Creator is not afraid of granting this dramatic and dangerous gift to His rational creatures. He behaves as if He were sure that He will be able to save this gift and rescue it from the most dangerous and harmful situation of being lost. Freedom may be ill and blind but it never ceases to be God's gift. It carries in itself a promise and hope for achieving its ultimate goal because it does not cease to be, even in case of wrong and sinful decisions, an ability given by God himself. There is always hope that every freedom will finally prove to be what God wanted, namely, freedom to the right decision. He alone can save the created freedom in a truly divine manner without destroying His own gift.

A deeper understanding of the gift of freedom is able to open new perspectives of universalist eschatological thinking. One can then perceive that God is always present in the very depths

of His creatures. A created being is unable to free itself entirely from this immanent presence of the Creator. It may ignore or reject it, but it cannot change the very fact of being created and its dependence in existence on the all-embracing reality of God. This fact already implies a mysterious promise stemming from the indestructible bond between God and each creature. No fault, nor the state of getting completely lost, can destroy this ontological bond. The human being is and will always remain an *icon of God*, a being who with the help of the Creator is able to overcome all resistance and make the ultimate and irreversible choice of the Infinite Goodness.

Another understanding of freedom makes God helpless, unable to overcome its resistance and denies Him any possibility of saving those who got lost. Is not the sovereign freedom of God limited in this way? Is not God's gift of freedom turned then into a logical idol before

which He himself has to capitulate? It seems that this logic does not allow us to perceive the truly divine manner of reaching the deepest secrets of freedom and transforming it from within without violence.

Whoever denies the freedom of coming out from the existential state of Gehenna believes in fact in the ultimate victory of evil over at least a part of God's creatures. Practically he consents to a failure of the divine plan of creation and salvation. This approach means to some extent the acceptance of a dark doom, more horrifying than the doom of Greek mythology. So far Christian awareness has failed to deal successfully with this problem. The obvious failure of the plan of salvation cannot be called the triumph of divine justice or just retribution for the sins of one's life. An ordinary earthly feeling of justice shudders to think of everlasting punishment for faults of sinful creatures committed in time because of

weakness, blindness, anger or simple stupidity.

Being convinced of this incommensurability of time and eternity many people today choose therefore the doctrine of reincarnation rather than on the eternity of hell. In the light of the theory of reincarnation the evil deeds committed in time are subject to expiation also in time, and not in eternity. Although this theory is not easily reconciled with Christian teaching (such attempts have already been made), it is a useful warning against constructing an ontology of eternal torments. It reminds us that our ultimate fate is determined only through undergoing the incomparably greater experience of the spiritual world than is possible during a short earthly life, limited by the date of birth and death, marked by guilt, weakness and ignorance.

Eternal hell and everlasting damnation mean in fact a terrifying lack of proportion between the

endless punishment and the evil done during the quick passage of a short life. I dare to think that this would also be a sort of hell and eternal distress to God himself who is Love. What is terrifying is not what God wills to do to me; it is what I can do to myself. Hell does not mean that we get into the hands of a just, angry and punishing God. Hell is what I have done or what I may do with my own life and the lives of others.

The doctrine on eternal hell is a fruit of the moral awareness inspired by the idea of divine justice and shaped by the conviction that a decision of human freedom is irreversible. This awareness divides the ultimate destiny of creation in a dualistic manner into two opposing kingdoms: the kingdom of the good and bad, of the just and sinful, of the saved and damned. The advocates of the doctrine on eternal hell stress that only wrong decisions of human freedom and bad life lead to the

everlasting perdition. They do not admit the freedom which would lead out of hell. According to them, entrance to hell is voluntary but there is no exit from there, because death, as they claim, decides about our eternal future.

Every human being faces the real possibility of getting existentially lost. Biblical texts include warnings against this terrible state. Christ used to speak about the "eternal" or aeonic character of human suffering in Gehenna. However, one should not rashly identify the adjective "eternal" (*aiōnios*) with the eternity of God himself. Hell is the negation of eternity. There exists no diabolic and evil eternity. The only true eternity belongs to the Kingdom of God. There is no negative eternity, parallel to the eternity of life with God. The notion of eternal hell is characterized by an inherent ontological contradiction. Gehenna or hell may exist in the form of a

subjective existence. It is an inner existential state of infernal experience. Whoever finds himself or herself in intense torment has the impression that it lasts and will persist endlessly.

God himself is the greatest hope for all His creatures. He penetrates even the infernal depths of the human heart. He can lead out of the depths of Gehenna. He does not destroy the freedom of rational beings, but respects human choice. However, he has his truly divine way of persuading the freedom of the beings most in revolt. He attracts and transforms them from the inside through His goodness, beauty and boundless love manifested above all in the voluntary *kenosis* of Christ. The existential inner state of being lost is constantly visited by Christ. He does not leave anyone on his or her own. To persist in sinful resistance to God is the worst illness of freedom. I believe that Christ is forever the

Good Shepherd of all those who got lost. Not to leave, to return again and again, to persuade and attract - this is the most divine feature of God.

TIME FOR REVALORISATION OF THE UNIVERSALISM OF

HOPE

Some of the outstanding theologians and hierarchs of the Christian Churches speak today a language totally different from the one heard during the past centuries. In his conversations with Patriarch Bartholomew I, a French Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clément, summarised his views in the following words:

Current intellectual revolutions have been in progress which discover and develop the most outstanding intuitions, such as those of Gregory of Nyssa,

Maximus the Confessor and Isaac the Syrian; they oppose the sadism of the expiatory conceptions of salvation by paschal joy, hell conceived as an eternal concentration camp -- by prayer for universal salvation.¹⁷

Elsewhere, Clément mentions his meeting with the great contemporary mystic, Father Sophronius from Mount Athos, whom he asked what would happen if a person does not agree to open his or her heart and accept the love of God. The old monk answered: "You may be certain that as long as someone is in hell, Christ will remain there with him".¹⁸

These words appear to echo those from the Book of Revelation: "Here I stand knocking at the door" (Rev 3:20). God stands at the door of the human heart even if the latter is closed and rebellious. He is ready to wait, if the need arises, for a whole "eternity", until resistance

is finally overcome. This is the ultimate consequence of the paschal belief in the overwhelming and all-embracing power of the risen Christ.

The time is coming for the revalorisation of the universalism of hope. One should not rest satisfied with concern for one's own salvation since we are all responsible for each other. Universal hope is the duty of every Christian. Traditional eschatology perceives only two ultimate possibilities: heaven or hell. It does not take into account the great synthesis of the history of the world in God. It also excludes all thoughts about the universal reconciliation of the lost creatures with God. It does not hear the voice of hope resounding in numerous biblical statements, nor does it heed the patient cry of hope which has not vanished from Christianity throughout the ages. It prefers to remain an eschatology of the ultimate dualism of the creature torn apart, the dualism of good

and evil, of light and darkness, of love and hatred, and of heaven and hell. Is this the ultimate logic of being? After all, there also exists the logic of goodness and love, discernible in such evangelical parables as that about the shepherd and the lost sheep, or about the prodigal son, or rather two sinful brothers (cf. Lk 15).

By preserving his or her freedom and the possibility of negating God, the human being is never left alone. Not to leave the other alone is, as I said earlier, a truly divine attribute. God helps even the most sinful creature attain the ultimate purposefulness of freedom, and not remain in a state of split, contrary to its inner nature. Beyond death, the rebellion of a rational and free being may last for an indefinitely long period of time. The term "long" signifies the intensity of experience rather than the quantitative extent of duration.

Thanks to this hope, I can trust that freedom is incapable of rejecting God irrevocably, definitively, and once for all. Such a possibility may appear rather as a theoretical hypothesis as long as one does not reflect deeply on the very nature of freedom, which is created towards God and for God. Whoever speaks about the hope of universal salvation cannot remain indifferent towards such categories as beauty or goodness, which attract and persuade human freedom. "And I shall draw all men to myself (*πάντας ἐλκύσω πρὸς ἐμαυτόν*), when I am lifted up from the earth" (Jn 12:32) — Jesus said shortly before His death. Special emphasis is due to the words of universal significance: "draw all people". Let us repeat once again: this is an astonishing and amazing promise! Attracting by means of beauty and goodness constitutes God's way of persuasion, which does not destroy the freedom of rational creatures.

Hope for the universality of salvation should not lead to ethical cynicism, nor destroy responsibility for one's own life and the life of others. Nonetheless, it demands a different pedagogy than that of fear. The great wisdom of life is not shaped in an atmosphere of fear of condemnation, but in a calm and trusting view of the whole course of life in which, despite various falls, the experience of eternity continues to mature. What matters most is the fundamental option of one's life for God, illumined from the inside, permeated with a feeling of inner meaning, stronger than the fear of sin, futility, void and hopelessness.

Restorative Justice

But the question is in what way can the distorted human relationships be healed *already now*, during our earthly life. In this context one can point to an interesting evolution in contemporary philosophy and

theology of justice. We slowly come closer to an ancient understanding of a therapeutic, re-educational, pedagogical and restorative punishment prevailing in the Early Church's eschatology during the first four centuries. I would like to draw attention to the concept of the so-called *restorative justice* recently developed and put into practice by a Catholic priest from New Zealand, Jim Consedine¹⁹. As an experienced prison chaplain, he has always tried to restore the destroyed relationships between perpetrators and their victims. Restorative justice aims at something more than a pure retribution for evil deeds. Retributive and punitive justice is oriented towards the past. It exhausts itself in the very act of retribution and punishment. The restorative justice is much more positive in this respect and oriented towards the future. Its very name indicates a certain likeness with the ancient theory of *apokatástasis*, i.e. final restoration of all things.

In this approach all people affected by a transgression are involved in the process of overcoming its social consequences. How to rebuild then the damaged or destroyed inter-human relationships? Restorative justice embraces not only the victims and perpetrators, but also their families and local community in which a determined crime has been committed. It urges that all motives, attitudes, emotions and means should be taken into account. It also indicates the need for compassion, readiness to forgive and to be reconciled. Some competent people would be summoned here to help in this difficult process of healing the damaged relationships. The basic motivation in all this is care for the good of a human being lost in his or her humanity.

As can be seen, restorative justice does not concentrate on the very punishment understood as retribution or motivated by purely utilitarian goals of preventing future

crimes. It goes further and intends to heal and to restore what has been lost, destroyed or damaged. The very category of relation and relationship plays a central role here. But restoration and healing cannot be achieved unless an inner change has taken place in people affected in whatever way by the transgression.

One should ponder the far-reaching consequences of such an understanding of restorative justice. It is deeply linked with the biblical idea of justice and mercy. This conception urges a profound revision of a re-socializing model of penal law that often does not respect the dignity of human person and of human rights, and in addition remains ineffective. The labour of re-socialization should therefore be carried out in a different way. The method inspired by restorative justice brings more positive effects. It does not infringe upon the dignity of human person.

The respect for human rights constitutes in it an indispensable condition of the whole pedagogy of restoration of damaged human relationships.

The highest norms of human legislation and international pacts consider social rehabilitation and improvement of transgressors as an essential purpose of punishment. In this context the idea of everlasting hell would be a total denial of the educational and therapeutic meaning of punishment. Should humans then be better than their Creator? Eternal punishment of the lost creatures would be the greatest failure of His role as Creator, Saviour and Pedagogue of humanity. The therapeutic function of punishment would be doomed to failure as well, which seems to be totally impossible. God is, however, unfailingly, the most effective and creative Pedagogue whose final victory over every evil I secured by his

convincing love, goodness and beauty.

Universalism of God's Overwhelming Grace

Those who speak about hell as a provisional and transitory state of perdition do not, by any means, ignore the gravity of evil. They simply indicate that evil is not universal and everlasting, that it has to be exhausted, and cannot gain the ultimate victory. Victory belongs to God who does everything possible to free His creatures from the bondage of their own guilt. Such hope for an ultimate reconciliation with the Creator is not only the voice of the "vagabonds of the Church" nor of figures from the margin of the faith.

The words of a Jesuit, Karl Rahner (+1984), one of the most outstanding Catholic theologians of the 20th century are close and dear to me:

Therefore we know (!) in our Christian faith and unwavering hope that despite all the dramatic and open character of freedom of individual people, the history of salvation as a whole will lead humanity to a favourable end under the action of God's overwhelming grace.²⁰

I can see no reason why we should be less courageous than many wise teachers of such a hope in the history of Christianity whom we call saints, the Fathers of the Church, great mystics and theologians. Certainly, no words about God's victorious and overwhelming grace will ever instill in a concrete human person presumptuous confidence in his or her own salvation. They introduce an atmosphere of trust and hope. The most courageous expectations in the Christian tradition are expressed in such a hope. This is also a hope for all non-believers. Such hope becomes a strong ally of inter-human solidarity and

Christian ecumenism.

The hope for the salvation of all teaches us a lesson of universalism. The deep experience of inter-human unity allows the believers to understand the meaning of life more deeply than can the mere logic of reasoning. The mystery of the ultimate destiny of the world and of humankind is one. We have to know how to discover it in ourselves and in others.

NOTES

1 A modified version of the paper initially published in a poor unauthorized translation in: "Dialogue and Universalism" 8 (1998) No. 1-2, pp. 61-74.

2 See W. Hryniewicz, *Czy Rosje należy nawracac? Ekumeniczna lekcja przeszlosci a dialog z prawoslawiem [Should Russia Be Converted? The Ecumenical Lesson of the*

Past and a Dialogue with the Orthodox Church.], "Zeszyty Naukowe KUL" 37 (1994) No. 1-2, pp. 3-20; id., *Iluzja nawrócenia Rosji [The Illusion of Converting Russia]*, "Studia Rosjoznawcze. Nauki Humanistyczno-Społeczne" (Torun) 310 (1996), pp. 19-35 (Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici); id., *Na drogach pojednania (On the Ways of Reconciliation)*, Warsaw 1998, pp. 143-156.

3 See the decree of the Council of Florence for the Jacobites (1438-1445). DS 1351.

4 Apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio adveniente* (Nov. 10, 1994), No. 35.

5 G. Minois, *Historia piekła* [Histoire de l'enfer], Polish transl. by A. Kedzierzawska, B. Szczepanska, Warszawa 1996, p. 305.

6 Ibid., p. 341.

7 F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (II Von

den Priestern; III, Vom Gesicht und Räthsel; Vom Geist der Schere), in: *idem, Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, hg. von Giorgio Colli /Mazzino Montinari, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967ff.

8 Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, no. 15. In: *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbot, S. J., General Editor, Very Rev. Msgr. Joseph Gallagher, Translation Editor. London-Dublin-Melbourne 1967, pp. 220-221

9 *Ibid.*, No. 16.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Pastoral Constitution on the Church *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 22. *Ibidem*, pp. 221-222.

12 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. by Vittorio Messori, transl. from the

Italian by Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee, New York 1994, p. 185.

13 Ibid., p. 186.

14 Ibid., p. 187.

15 See H. Crouzel, *Origène*, Paris 1985, chapter XIII.

16 For more information see W. Hryniewicz, *Dramat nadziei zbawienia* [*The Drama of the Hope of Salvation*], Warsaw 1996, pp. 171-173; id., *Nadzieja uczy inaczej* [*Hope Teaches Otherwise*], Warsaw 2003, pp. 124-141, esp. 137-141; id. *Bog wszystkim we wszystkich. Ku eschatologii bez dualizmu* (*God All in All: Towards an Eschatology without Dualism*), Warszawa 2005, pp. 145-149.

17 O. Clément, "*La vérité vous rendra libre*". *Entretiens avec le Patriarche oecuménique*

Bartholomée I^{er} [The Truth Will Set You Free. Conversations with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I], Paris-Bruges 1996, p. 308.

18 O. Clément, "Taizé, un sens à la vie," *Service Orthodoxe de Presse (SOP)*, July-August 1997, no. 220, p. 37.

19 J. Consedine, *Restorative Justice: Healing the Effects of Crime*, Lyttelton, N.Z., Ploughshares Publications, c. 1995; see also an interview with Jim Consedine in: W. Osiatynski, *O zbrodniach i karach (On Crimes and Punishments)*, Poznan 2003.

20 K. Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens. Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*. Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1976, p. 418.

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