

What does the Church teach about hell?

Here are six things everybody should know about **hell**:

(1) It's real. Following the example of Christ, the Church warns us about the sad and lamentable reality of eternal death, known as *hell* (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1056). From the beginning, it's been the work of Satan to get us to think that hell doesn't exist (cf. Gen. 3:4-5; Jn. 8:44).

(2) Eternal separation from God. Just as the glories of heaven are beyond our limited comprehension, so too we can't fully appreciate in this life the torment that is hell. We do know that hell is eternal, and that the chief punishment of hell is separation from God, who alone can provide us the happiness for which we were created. See *Catechism*, no. 1035.

(3) It's a choice. God does not want any of us to end up in hell. However, in making us free, we are able to make choices that have eternal consequences. By persisting in mortal sin and refusing the merciful love of God up to the time of death, one freely chooses to exclude himself or herself from communion with God and the joys of heaven. See *Catechism*, no. 1033.

(4) Who's there? Well, we don't know. A very, very small percentage of the blessed in heaven are known to us because the Church, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has declared them to be saints through the process of canonization. There is no analogous process for determining any of the human residents of hell, and it's at least possible that even the most heinous, hardened sinners may have repented in the end.

(5) Hope and intercession. Since we know that God wants all to come to repentance and be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9), we have grounds for hoping that our loved ones who have died have been reconciled with God. The constant prayer of the Church is that all people would turn to the Lord and be saved from final damnation (*Catechism*, no. 1037). Perhaps those prayers were heard at the 11th hour with respect to our own loved ones. And after their death, we still pray for our deceased loved ones, that they may be purified of their sin and thus obtain the joy of heaven (*Catechism*, nos. 1030-32).

(6) Call to responsibility. The reality of hell is a wake-up call to each of us to use our freedom well, keeping in mind our eternal destiny. The love of God and neighbor should be the primary motivation for our actions, but a healthy awareness of hell and the desire to avoid it should help motivate us to do the right thing, especially in times of temptation or weakness. See *Catechism*, no. 1036.

--[*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1033-37](#)