

The Hope of Universal Salvation in the Theology of  
Hans Urs von Balthasar and Waclaw Hryniewicz

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## I. Introduction

### A. Eschatology

Eschatology is one of the disciplines of theology concerned about “last things.” It derives from the Greek words *eschatos* (the last things) and *logos* (reasoning). Thus it is the reasonable discourse of the “last things.” The history of salvation starts with the creation; in Christ it reaches its highest point (Galatians 4:4-5), and is fulfilled in eschatology. Therefore, eschatology covers the last part of the history of salvation and its ultimate fulfillment. The word “eschatology” appeared for the first time in the writings of the Lutheran theologian, A. Calov (+1686), who titled his reflections on death and resurrection “*eschatologia sacra*.” It was F. Schleiermacher, however, who spread the term and from his time it is used in theology (Finkenzeller 13). It does not mean, though, that reflections on eschatology started in the seventeenth century. Eschatological themes were already present in the Old Testament, especially in the writings of the prophets who looked into the future expecting the realization of God’s promises. Also, many of the New Testament writers are concerned about eschatological issues. As will be seen later, “last things” were widely and extensively discussed by many of the church fathers, who moved the focus from universal eschatology to individual eschatology. Theology of the medieval and post-medieval periods continued to develop individual aspects of eschatology, which were the main focus of the following centuries in the church’s theology, especially in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century theologians, such as Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich, Jurgen Moltmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar,

rediscovered eschatology, which thus became a widely discussed subject in theological circles.

The typical division of eschatology consists of universal eschatology and individual eschatology. Universal eschatology talks about the events of the end of history such as the Parousia, the second coming of Christ, the resurrection, the last judgment and the last things. On the other hand, individual eschatology discusses issues such as human death, judgment and the existence of the immortal soul (Finkenzeller 14). In my opinion, this division is important only for systematic purposes and therefore these two aspects are deeply related and should not be separated from each other.

Because eschatology touches important questions about human existence and destiny, it is an important field of theology. One of the most important issues in eschatology is the hope of salvation. Salvation is one of the most important spiritual and theological concepts in Christianity. For many people today, salvation simply means eternal life in heaven after death. The term, however, is much richer in meaning. In the Old Testament, to be saved is to be freed from danger, to achieve peace, freedom and life. It also means to be healed, freed from pain and sickness. In the writings of the prophets, salvation means primarily the right relationship with God. In the New Testament, especially in the theology of Saint Paul, salvation is connected with justification, liberation restoration, forgiveness, reconciliation and sanctification.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand the concept

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Paul describes the same reality from different angles and perspectives. For him, the reality of salvation bought in Jesus Christ's Paschal Mystery is so rich that it cannot be grasped in just one term. Michael J. Gorman states that "for Paul 'salvation' refers especially to the future experience of God's grace and glory that results from justification. It is the positive flip side of deliverance from wrath, as well as from other enemies, most especially sin and death. It includes bodily resurrection, glorification and eternal life" (112).

of salvation, one must first grasp the concept of sin and evil, which Saint Paul introduces and explains in his letters. Nevertheless, salvation is not just negative deliverance from sin and all its effects, especially death. People are called to share in the life of the Trinity and to be united in love with their Creator. It is possible only because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Saint Augustine in his “First Homily on John’s Gospel” states that this Word, through whom everything is created, is the same Word through whom everything shall be remade. In order to save humanity, the Word became flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary. Jesus Christ, who is God, willed to become human for people so that they may be saved through him. The Word himself was made flesh and dwelt among people, so that they can participate in the life of God and be redeemed. People are thus saved in Christ and through Christ and called to the unity with God (275-276).

### B. Hope

Hope in itself is one of the three theological virtues which “are the utmost of what a man can be; they are realizations of the human capacity for being” (Pieper 9). From the earliest times, humanity has hoped for something beyond death. Anthropology and science provide many examples of this hope in ancient burial rituals. The burial rituals of *homo sapiens neardenthalensis* from thousands of years ago proved that from the very beginning of human history, people’s hope extended far beyond what they could experience and see. A human being is the only creature that is able to go beyond oneself, to transcend oneself, and look beyond what is visible and can be experienced in this life. In his studies of the religious beliefs, Mircea Eliade, in examining the roots and origins of

belief, came to the realization that a human being is essentially *homo religiosus*. People from the very beginning were in search for themselves, in search for their roots and destiny. In this search, they were able to discover not only their strengths and capacities, but also their own limitations and brokenness.

According to biblical revelation, humanity, corrupted by sin, hopes “with the intention that the whole creation itself might be freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). From its creation, humanity was called to a deep and loving relationship with God. When this relationship was destroyed by sin, God “did not abandon man to the power of death, but helped all men to seek and find him” (Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, the Sacramentary 557). God so loved the world that in the fullness of time he sent his only Son to be our Savior and offered salvation and eternal life to all. “In hope we already have salvation”, writes Saint Paul to the Romans (Rom. 8:24). Hence, this hope of salvation addresses the most important question of every human being: What awaits me after death? Does everything end with death? Will I be saved? What is my ultimate destiny?

It must be asserted that this hope is not an individualistic hope. On the contrary, the hope of salvation in the Old Testament has always had communal and societal facets. God promises salvation to all. At the very beginning of salvation history, God did not abandon humanity destroyed by sin but promised salvation (Gen. 3:15). The biblical history of hope, starts with Abraham<sup>2</sup>, the one who “though there seemed no hope, he hoped and believed that he was to become

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<sup>2</sup> This hope is already present in the promise of salvation in Gen. 3:15, the *proto-evangelium* and in the story of Noah with whom God establishes covenant and promises that “never again shall all living things be destroyed by the waters of a flood” Gen. 9:11.

father of many nations in fulfillment of the promise” (Rom. 4:18). Abraham believed and hoped, not just for himself, but that in him all the nations might be blessed. He also hoped in order to “prepare for that day when God would gather all his children into the unity of the Church” (Catechism 60). As the history of salvation unfolded, God continued to assist his chosen people in promising salvation and deliverance from evil, as he delivered them from the slavery of Egypt, which became a type of liberation from slavery of sin.

According to the prophets of Israel, the covenant offered by God was entirely a gift from God and extended beyond the visible boundaries of Israel. God offered his salvation to all. Isaiah says that all the nations will come to Mount Zion to learn the law of the Lord (Isa. 2:2-3). The songs of the servant in Deutero-Isaiah proclaim the salvation of God for all peoples. The servant was made “a covenant of the people and light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison and those who live in darkness from the dungeon” (Isa. 42:6). The pagan nations will come to the Lord (Jer. 3:17) and will be converted (Isa. 45:14). To sum up, the hope of Israel for God’s salvation extended beyond the borders of Judaism. The God of Israel was a universal God, the God-creator of heaven and earth and ruler of the entire universe. Through Israel, all the nations of the earth would eventually be saved and come to know the one true God. Mount Zion was a symbolic place where all the peoples of the earth would gather, accept the salvation from God, and join in one worship and praise (Isa. 56:8).

All the hopes of Israel were fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ who came to proclaim the Kingdom of God (Matt. 4:17). In his inaugural speech in

Nazareth, Jesus showed that all his works and teachings were from the Spirit. Jesus was a great prophet anointed “to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Luke 4: 18-19). In the theological vision of the Gospels, Jesus is the prophet-martyr, who realizes the plan of salvation through his passion and resurrection. Because of this, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and stands in the center of salvation history. He is the prophet who interprets and fulfills all that was announced by the Old Testament prophets. Jesus is the true *savior* because his mission is to save his people from sin. The salvific actions of Jesus are present in the “Nazarene Manifest” (Luke 4) and realized in his teaching, signs and miracles: resuscitations of the dead, healings of the sick and expelling of evil spirits. The Synoptic Gospels show that Jesus’ ministry is not limited only to the Jews, but also to all peoples. There are passages in the Gospel of Luke that show explicitly the universality of Jesus’ mission, such as the conversion of Zacchaeus, the curing of the centurion’s servant, and the promise of salvation for the crucified criminal. Jesus came to save all and everybody. He revealed that God the Father cares about the poor, those who are persecuted, suffering, ignored and rejected (Kealy, 100-105). Also in his parables Jesus presents God as the merciful, loving and forgiving Father. Jesus does not use abstract language in speaking about God. His point of departure is always people in their difficult situation. The parables can especially be considered as portraits of Jesus who shows his desire to save all peoples.

After Jesus' resurrection and the event of Pentecost, the disciples proclaimed the Gospel to the whole world and the joyful news of salvation<sup>3</sup>. The Gospel was essentially the word of salvation first for the Jews, then to all the nations. The strength of the hope of the Church was concentrated on the expectation of the second coming of Jesus Christ, in which the history of salvation will find its completion and fulfillment.

### C. The Hope of Universal Salvation and *apocatastasis*

After speaking about the general theme of salvation in the Sacred Scriptures, the theme of the hope of universal salvation will now be explained. As it was already said, Christ died for all and came to save all peoples. The hope of universal salvation is thus a belief in a possibility that the entire creation will be saved and come to completion in God. Hence, it differs from the well known doctrine of *apocatastasis*, which “maintains that the entire creation, including sinners, the damned and the devil, would finally be restored to a condition of eternal happiness and salvation” (Sachs, “Current” 227). The idea of the definitive restoration of all things was also present in Stoic philosophy, Gnostic thought and Neo-Platonism. In the Bible the term *apocatastasis* occurs only once, in Acts 3:21.<sup>4</sup>

In the history of theology it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between hope and certainty of universal salvation (*apocatastasis*). Henryk Pietras notices

<sup>3</sup> Saint Paul stated that “the gospel is God’s power for the salvation of everyone who has faith – Jews first, but Greeks as well – for in it is revealed the saving justice of God: a justice based on faith and addressed to faith” (Rom. 1:16-17a).

<sup>4</sup> “Saint Peter explains to the Jews that they should reform their lives, and then God will send them Jesus, the predestined Messiah, who ‘must remain in heaven until the time of the *apocatastasis panton*, which God spoke of long ago through his holy prophets” (von Balthasar, *Dare* 225).

that it was Justin Martyr (+167) who, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, introduced the term *apocatastasis*. He used it in the context of salvation that was obtained by Jesus for all people. Justin states that Jesus Christ came to save all of humanity, yet it is difficult to say if he thought about the hope of salvation for all (315). Later on, the term is present in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyon's (+200) but, as it was said above, there is also doubt about the meaning of the term in his writings. The doctrine of *apocatastasis* was strongly developed in the writings of Clement from Alexandria (+211). Even though Clement accepts the necessity of punishment for sinners, he views this punishment as having a pedagogical, purifying, and healing function and, therefore, not eternal (Sachs, "Apocatastasis" 618).

Clement of Alexandria provided a foundation for the thought of his famous successor – Origen (+253), whose name is identified with the term *apocatastasis* and the teaching about universal salvation. In some of his writings, Origen denies eternal hell and suggests the possibility of eternal salvation for all creation, even the demons and Satan. Although Origen adopts Plato's philosophy and Neoplatonic and Stoic cosmologies in many places, he develops his idea of *apocatastasis* in Scripture (Trumbower 144). According to him, the saving power of Logos is stronger than every sin and, consequently, the final end of all things is connected with the total destruction of evil (Sachs, "Apocatastasis" 621). Origen sees in *apocatastasis* the realization of the promise from Ps 110:1, where it is written that Christ will be the king of all creation. The hope of universal salvation for all is particularly evident in 1 Corinthians 15:25-28 and Philippians 2:5-11. According to Origen, "the texts speak of the final end both as the promised

destiny of creation and history and as the subjection of all Christ's enemies including death, and presumably, therefore, the real powers of death, the demons" (Sachs, "Apocatastasis" 621). Although for Origen there is no doubt that sinners will be punished, he speaks of the remedial nature of God's punishments and the possibility of an end to suffering and punishment for the damned (Trumbower 117). It is important to note that as for Clement, also for Origen, the punishment has a pedagogical function and cannot last forever. He interprets the biblical word "eternal" from Matthew 18:44 as meaning "a very long time." John R. Sachs, summarizing the position of Origen, presents some key perspectives of his theology of *apocatastasis*. Firstly, he points out that because the Logos created everything, everything has to have final destiny in him. Secondly, because God is eternal, only life with Christ can be eternal, not punishment. Finally, in my opinion, the most important point is a medicinal character of divine punishment. If punishment is to be remedial, it cannot be eternal (Sachs, "Apocatastasis" 628). The goal of every human punishment (except much debated capital punishment) is reformation and change of a person. If the person does not have a chance to change and reform (like in the case of eternal hell), then this kind of punishment loses something essential of its very meaning.

The theory of Origen was officially condemned at the Provincial Council of Constantinople in 543. The council fathers stated that "if anyone says or holds that the punishment of the demons and of impious men is temporary, and that it will have an end at some time, or that there will be a complete restoration (*apocatastasis*) of demons and impious men, *anathema sit*" (Sachs, "Apocatastasis" 621). The Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 553

repeated the same statement. It is beyond the scope of this work to analyze the problem whether Origen actually believed that demons will be saved, or, what is more probable, if he thought that all evil people, as well as demons, will have a chance to convert after death. Yet the truth is that the idea of eternal hell became present in official documents of the council. However, despite all official statements of the Magisterium, the scheme of *apocatastasis* did not disappear from theology.

The hope of universal salvation was not foreign to Gregory of Nyssa (+394) and Gregory of Nazianzus (390+), the great “Cappadocian Fathers.” Gregory of Nyssa knew the theology of Origen and often quoted from his writings. He openly believed that at the end of time everyone will return to Jesus, even the evil spirits, including Satan, because malevolence cannot eternally exist beyond the love of God (Pietras 324). Moreover, Gregory of Nyssa identifies resurrection with *apocatastasis*, and teaches that it is nothing more than the promise of restoration to the state before the fall (Finkenzeller 205). Gregory of Nazianzus “holds that sinners will be judged and punished for their transgressions both in this world and in the next.” Nonetheless, he often suggests the possibility of the final purification because of the powerful mercy of God (Sachs, “*Apocatastasis*” 630). It is true though, that he is not as clear as his friend, Gregory of Nyssa, in his hope of universal salvation.

The Cappadocian Fathers are not the only ones who developed the theme of universal salvation. In the Patristic era the subject is present in the writings of Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Saint Jerome, Evagrius Ponticus and Saint Ambrose, to mention only a few. Also, some mystics of all ages believed in

universal salvation. Isaac the Syrian (seventh century), also known as Isaac of Nineveh, whose writings were discovered not long ago, expresses his strong belief about universal salvation in his Contemplation of Gehenna. In his opinion, everything that God does, expresses his will to save all humanity. He also speaks about the therapeutic role of hell that would eventually lead people to the acceptance of God's mercy. Three centuries later, Saint Simeon (+1022) articulated his desire for salvation for all. As Christians, he wrote, we must desire the salvation for all. Why shouldn't we be as Jesus, who wanted to save all humanity and not to damn anyone? (Hryniewicz, Chrześcijaństwo 353). One of the representatives of the idea of *apocatastasis* in the western Church was Julian of Norwich. In her writings and visions, she expresses her profound hope that at the end of time "all shall be well." Her hope is not naïve optimism as some of the interpreters of her writings say. Julian was conscious of human sins and weaknesses but, according to her, sin cannot conquer human life. We do not know everything during our earthly life. After death we are going to be enlightened by God who will enable us to fully accept his mercy and forgiveness. Unfortunately, the writings of Julian of Norwich did not gain attention after her death. Her theses were too liberal and did not support the official teaching of the Church (Hryniewicz, Chrześcijaństwo 369). Also, her writings were not widely read because of the suspicion about mysticism that came about with 16<sup>th</sup> century reformation.

#### D. Official Magisterial Teaching

As was proven above, many saints and mystics developed and supported the theme of *apocatastasis* throughout the centuries. Yet the official documents of the Church lead in the opposite direction. The Council of Lyons II (1274) stated clearly that “those who die in mortal sin or with original sin only go down immediately (*mox*) to hell (*in infernum*) but suffer different punishments.” Pope Benedict XII in *Benedictus Deus* said “that the souls of those who die in actual mortal sin go down immediately to hell” (Sachs, “Current” 238-239). Yet, despite the tension and challenges, some theologians continued to write about hope in universal salvation. The subject was especially popular in the Orthodox Church which never officially spoke about the eternity of hell. Paul Evdokimov, Alexander Turnicev, Nikolai Bierdiaiew and Oliver Clement are a few examples of orthodox theologians who spoke about universal salvation. The hope in universal salvation did not die in the Latin Church either.

As it was said, in the writings of many theologians and mystics it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the hope of universal salvation from the theory of *apocatastasis*. The first attempts to remain just a hope, while the second is a well founded doctrine which was condemned by the Magisterium. Did the Magisterium in condemning the doctrine of *apocatastasis* condemn also the hope of universal salvation? It should be emphasized from the outset that according to the critics of the hope of universal salvation there is a fine line between hope and certainty. The two theologians, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Waclaw Hryniewicz in supporting the hope of universal salvation are aware that *apocatastasis* was condemned by the Magisterium but make clear that hope of

universal salvation does not contradict the official teaching. Thus, can Christians hope that all be saved?

#### E. The Hope of Universal Salvation in Contemporary Theology

As it will be shown later on, the Gospels talk and refer to the possibility of eternal damnation. Throughout the centuries, most Catholic theologians did not embrace the theme of hope of universal salvation for two reasons. Firstly, it had been condemned rather strongly by the Magisterium. Secondly, it seemed to deny the fundamental reality of human freedom and responsibility (Sachs, “*Apocatastasis*” 617). The aim of recalling the magisterial teaching was to emphasize one’s freedom and responsibility. The hope of universal salvation is widely present in the patristic theology, forgotten in following centuries, but came back to light again, thanks to the publications of Hans Urs von Balthasar which caused debates in wider circles. One of the contemporary Polish theologians and ecumenists, Waław Hryniewicz, devoted an extensive part of his work and research to the theme of universal salvation. In the last twenty years, one can witness an outburst of books and articles on the question of universal salvation, not only among Catholic theologians, but also Protestant theologians. The problem was investigated and explored from all possible angles, but the main question remained the same: does hope of universal salvation have solid scriptural and theological foundations, or it is just the belief shared by the few which does not have any scriptural and theological base? Moreover, is hope of universal salvation just a hope or does it come dangerously close to certainty of salvation of all?

The conviction shared by Hans Urs von Balthasar and Waclaw Hryniewicz is that hope of universal salvation is present in the New Testament but was marginalized in theology and replaced by dogmatic statements about hell. Nevertheless, the official teaching has never stated that someone actually is in hell. As von Balthasar and Hryniewicz affirm, this hope was also extensively present in the patristic theology and in many writings of the church fathers and thus belongs to the very theological traditions of the Catholic Church. The pessimistic view of humanity finds its roots in some of the theology of Saint Augustine and his famous *massa damnata* theory. “But many more are left under punishment than are delivered from it, in order that it may thus be shown what was due to all” (City 438). According to him, because of total corruption of human nature most of humanity will be damned. This teaching of the most famous doctor of the Western Christianity influenced not only the teachings of the Magisterium but also the entire western theology.

As it was already mentioned, the forgotten hope of universal salvation found its way back into theology. Now, the problem is discussed, not only by scholars and educated theologians, but also among ordinary Christians. Hans Urs von Balthasar was born in 1905 in Lucerne, Switzerland. From his earliest years he showed great interest in literature. After pursuing his theological studies, he joined the Society of Jesus and became friends with Henri de Lubac. After meeting Adrienne Von Speyr, whom he led into the Catholic Church, he established the secular institute, the Community of Saint John. Von Balthasar was influenced by Adrienne Von Speyr and her mystical experiences. He decided to leave the Jesuits but never became a university professor. Von Balthasar, one

of the pioneers of the theological renewal, was convinced that Catholic theology was undergoing an identity crisis. Instead of focusing on scholastic theology, von Balthasar nurtured his love for the Fathers of the Church, especially Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor. He was involved in a movement called *nouvelle theologie* that put an accent upon the universal saving will of God. This universalism became one of the great loves of von Balthasar to the end of his life. After a long time in isolation, his work finally found recognition and was awarded a prize in theology by Pope Paul VI. He died in 1988, two days before the consistory, in which he was to become a cardinal (O'Donnell 1-2).

The most visible sign of the crisis in theology, according to von Balthasar, was that theology was not able to address the main questions and longings of ordinary people, “the grief and anguish of the men” (*Gaudium et spes* 1). One of the goals of his entire life was to contribute to the renewal of Catholic theology. The themes of Christian love and hope, which he developed, contributed to the renewal. In speaking of love and hope as the basis of Christian faith, von Balthasar was able to convey the message to ordinary Christians whose faith was devastated by the experiences of World War II. In one of his books, he described love as the foundation of the entire Christian faith as inseparable with hope (Love 57). Only love is credible, but love must be in connection with deep hope. In speaking of the history of salvation, von Balthasar used the image of a drama portraying the relationship between God and humanity. This drama, caused by sin, is visible in the separation between God and humanity and among people themselves. People long and hope for salvation. This hope cannot be individualistic. Hope is personal only as much as it is for all. Von Balthasar shows

that hope of individual salvation has been foreign in Catholic theology. To hope for salvation is to hope for the salvation of all. This is the most important dimension of Christian faith.

In contemporary Polish theology, Waclaw Hryniewicz, influenced by von Balthasar, continues his work and develops his own theology of universal salvation. He emphasizes different aspects of this hope. Waclaw Hryniewicz was born in 1930 in eastern Poland. In 1960 he was ordained a priest in the Congregation of Oblates of Mary Immaculate. In 1966 he achieved a doctor's degree in dogmatic theology at the Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. From 1968 to 1979 he participated in historical research in Louvain, Paris, London and Rome. Since 1983 he has been the head of the Department of Orthodox Theology of the Ecumenical Institute at the Catholic University in Lublin. He is a member of many ecumenical commissions, including the European Society for Ecumenical Research. Throughout many years he developed his theology of universal salvation and ecumenical theology open to Protestant theology and other religions; a theology looking for ways of reconciliation of churches, nations and cultures.

In developing his theology of universal salvation, Hryniewicz proves that it belonged to the oldest theological traditions, not only in the West but also in the East. Being involved in ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox Church, Hryniewicz examines Orthodox theologians and shows that the hope of universal salvation is present in many of their writings. In addition, Hryniewicz examines the writings of the mystics who treasured and shared the hope of universal salvation.

Chapter 1. Hans Urs von Balthasar's Hope of Universal Salvation

### A. The Hope of Universal Salvation in the Context of von Balthasar's Theology

Von Balthasar's hope of universal salvation must be seen in the context of his Trinitarian theology. Eligiusz Piotrowski speaks about consequent trinitarianism in Balthasar's thought: his Trinitarian soteriology, Christology and eschatology (287-288). Von Balthasar's hope is rooted in the Trinity that is described as essentially relational and dynamic. It is no mere accident that God is Trinity. Instead, according to von Balthasar, the Trinitarian nature of God belongs to the very core of who God is in himself, and who God is in his relationship with people. God is not passive but actively participates in the life of his creation, and through his incarnation radically involves himself in the drama of human life. The drama of love that takes place between all Persons in the Trinity is visible in the way in which God relates to creation. The love that God has for his creation became incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ. Dramatic understanding of salvation history and the relation between creation and God is present almost in all writings of von Balthasar, but especially in his monumental work, Theo-Drama. In describing the drama of human life and freedom, von Balthasar attests that this drama without the radical involvement of God would simply become human tragedy. The radical involvement of God in human history is best described in the question von Balthasar asks from God's perspective: what does God lose in losing man? (Theo-Drama, 5:506) Many years later, he described the main point of his work in these words:

God enters into an alliance with us. How does the absolute liberty of

God in Jesus Christ confront the relative, but true, liberty of man?

Will there perhaps be a mortal struggle between the two in which each one will defend against the other what it conceives and chooses as the good? What will be the unfolding of the battle, the final victory? (My Work 117)

One can already get a sense of the dynamic and dramatic nature of the theological search of von Balthasar. If the history of salvation is a drama, what would be its final end? That was the question that von Balthasar tried to answer in his theological investigation. In his mind, the contemporary Christian influenced by writings of F. Kafka, A. Camus and J. P. Sartre, longs for a well grounded hope of salvation, not only for himself, but also for others.

Being is essentially a gift of God, who, as Saint Thomas writes, is “the most perfectly liberal giver, because He does not act for his own profit, but only for his own goodness” (Summa Theologiae Ia, q. 44, a. 4 ad 1.). According to von Balthasar, creation is a gift of God, and humanity is the crown of that gift created in God’s image and likeness and called to share God’s life. Creation not only comes from God but is essentially in God; it belongs to God (von Balthasar, Theo-Drama, 5: 61-70). The entire Trinity participated not only in the work of creation but also in the work of salvation. Salvation is the work of the Trinity – all three persons of the Trinity are involved in salvation to the same extent. The most important gift of God is ultimately freedom. Because of this gift, the harmony of the relationship between God and humanity was destroyed in sin, committed in freedom. The visible effects of sin are among others, disrupted relationships, suffering and death. In von Balthasar’s Theo-Drama, it is not man that is in the center; it is God who is in the center of the play. God, who did not leave humanity

for destruction, offers eternal life because “he wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:6). God’s universal will of salvation is the source of Christian hope.

Speaking about the hope of universal salvation, von Balthasar does not offer it as a possibility or postulate that it may simply be rejected or ignored. On the contrary, he states strongly that it is the very duty of Christians to hope for the salvation of all (Sachs, “Current” 243). One cannot simply hope for one’s salvation and at the same time not desire the salvation of all people<sup>5</sup>. In developing his hope of universal salvation, Balthasar first looks at scriptural passages that contain or indicate this hope; secondly, he examines the mystery of Holy Saturday and Christ’s descent into hell, and thirdly supports his hope with statements from many church fathers and theologians. Von Balthasar proves that the hope of universal salvation belongs to the very core of Catholic theology. He attests however, that his hope remains just a hope and not certainty (Dare 18). Von Balthasar states that even though one cannot know “the final outcome of human decision and divine judgment with certainty, we may hope that all will be saved” (Sachs, “Current” 232). Hence his aim is not to prove that all people will indeed be saved, but to show that the hope of universal salvation is reasonable and has its roots in biblical revelation and theology.

## B. The Hope of Universal Salvation in the New Testament

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<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Marcel thus defines hope: “hope is essentially the open readiness of a soul that has involved itself sufficiently, at the inward level, with the experience of communion to assume the mental attitude – over and beyond mere will and cognition – in which it posits the living everlastingness that lends that experience both in security and pledge” (qtd. in von Balthasar, Dare 83).

Examining the New Testament's eschatological statements, von Balthasar noticed their ambivalence and diversity. His point of departure is the reality of God's judgment that awaits everyone. Some of the eschatological statements in the New Testament, like Matthew 5:22; 10:28, and 23:33 talk about "hell fire", others about the "outer darkness" (Matthew 8:12; 22:11), or eternal punishment (Matthew 25:48). In regard to these statements, von Balthasar asks the question "whether these threats by God, who "reconciles himself in Christ with the world," will be actually realized in the way stated" (Dare 183). On the other hand, another group of statements, leave room for the hope of universal salvation (Dare 20). Already quoted 1 Timothy 2:6 speaks of the universal salvific will of God. In 2 Peter 3:9 one reads that "God is being patient with you, wanting nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to repentance." Lastly, in my opinion, the most important text from John 12:32, states: "and when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all people to myself." These two groups of texts cannot be harmonized. According to Adrienne von Speyr, these texts belong to two different realities: the former belong to pre-Easter times and the latter to Post-Easter times (qtd. in Piotrowski 254). She states that the Scriptures present us with glimpses and are to be read as a whole. "The truth consists in a sum total of partial truths, and each of these partial truths must be *wholly* expressed, wholly thought out and lived through" (von Balthasar, Dare 70). Von Balthasar agrees with her but is very careful not to be accused of proposing "progressive revelation". He states that:

the pre-Easter Jesus lives toward his "hour," when his earthly downfall will be transformed into the full "overcoming of the world" (Jn 16:33) and when, for the first time, through the Passion and

resurrection of the Son, the Father will have spoken *all* of His Word to the end, which, only then, through the Holy Spirit, will become understandable to the disciples and subsequently to the entire believing Church. In no way does this mean that the words and deeds of the pre-Easter Jesus are devaluated, but rather that they are given their proper place within the totality and unity of the Word of God (Dare 22)

Von Balthasar makes here an extremely important point. The New Testament does not provide us with the unified dogmatic system of eschatology, but rather offers us statements that cannot be harmonized and brought into agreement. Therefore, in examining these passages, one must keep in mind the totality and unity of revelation as included in the New Testament. Von Balthasar is in no way denying that the New Testament does contain statements about eternal damnation, but simply brings these statements into balance with others that contain hope of universal salvation.<sup>6</sup> Von Balthasar respects the mystery of Scripture and neither builds a systematic theory of *apocatastasis*, nor claims to know in advance the final outcome of God's judgment. In my opinion, von Balthasar defends the very core of the Christian hope; hope that does not know for sure but just reasonably hopes not only for itself but also for others. Von

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<sup>6</sup> In The Short Discourse of Hell von Balthasar states: "I claim nothing more than this: that these statements [that speak of hope] give us right to have hope for all men, which simultaneously implies that I see no need to take the step from the threats to the positing of a hell occupied by our brothers and sisters, through which our hopes would come to naught (...) The hope cannot be attained, but hope can be justified (Dare 187).

Balthasar thus proves that the New Testament writings leave place for hope of universal salvation.<sup>7</sup>

### C. The Hope of God

If it is possible and reasonable that people can hope for the salvation of all, is it possible to think that God hopes for the salvation of all as well? The theology of hope was developed by Jurgen Moltmann, the Protestant German theologian from Tübingen. Jurgen Moltmann, in his Theology of Hope, tried to rethink the entire Christian theology from the perspective of hope. According to Moltmann, the God of Israel is a God of hope, who promises salvation to his people and calls them to hope. In Christ's resurrection, the hope of people is fulfilled, but the history of salvation is not ended yet but opens to future fulfillment. Hence, for Moltmann, the eschatological dimension, which is essentially related with the core of the hope of a Christian, plays the fundamental and decisive role in the life of faith. He makes a point that faith without hope is empty and therefore it is the very hope that enlightens faith and allows the believer to positively look into the future (qtd. in Illanes 500-503). Von Balthasar touches different aspects of hope and moves to show the positive impulse of faith and hope not only as present in human life, but also in the infinite life of God. He summarizes his position, asking:

Does not this super-hope in God, which is *immanent* in the Trinity,  
also manifest an *economic side*? Is there not, right from the start,

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<sup>7</sup> In the reference to the New Testament statements about hell, von Balthasar quotes Joseph Ratzinger and states that, "All New Testament and theological talk about hell has but one point: "To bring man to grips with his life in view of the *real possibility* of eternal ruin and to understand revelation as a demand of the utmost seriousness" (Dare 198).

something we might call “hope” on the part of Father and Spirit, namely, the hope that the Son’s mission will succeed? Furthermore, since God has equipped man with such a precarious freedom, cannot we say that God “hopes” that this man will be saved? (Theo-drama, 5:181)

This moves the perspective from only human experience of hope to hope in the very immanent life in the Trinity. According to von Balthasar, the mission of Jesus Christ was to save all people, and indeed he died “once and for all,” but his mission would remain incomplete until the last of us is saved. In describing the life within the Trinity, von Balthasar contemplates the possibility of prayer and faith within God (Theo-Drama, 4:83-86). While von Balthasar maintains the traditional distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity in reference to salvation, he proposes that “our salvation is also ‘hope’ of God, an economic side of that supra-hope which already exists within the Trinitarian event and without any necessary reference to the world (Immutability 68). Then he goes on to quote Charles Péguy’s “mystery” poem, *The Gate to the Mystery of the Second Virtue*, in which the poet analyzes the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son, trying to elaborate on the question of Christian hope. Von Balthasar agrees with Péguy, who, while “in all seriousness introduces hope to the very heart of God,” (von Balthasar, Theo-Drama 4:182), does not move as far as Moltmann who spoke about “certain hope,” but still considers the possibility of rejection by God. The examined parables prove that God really cares for people and continues to respect freedom to the end, simply because of the hope that he has (Immutability 68).

To summarize: speaking about hope in God, von Balthasar does not want to prove that because God hopes for all to be saved, all will indeed be saved. The hope of universal salvation, rooted in the immanent life of the Trinity, allows one to think and wonder about the mysteries of salvation and all the promises of God that are associated with hope. Like in many other places, von Balthasar does not endow us with simple and easy answers or proofs. Rather, he simply reflects theologically on the mysteries that remain mysteries.

#### D. The Pain of God

The hope of God in von Balthasar's theology as presented in Theo-Drama is closely related to his reflection on the sufferings of God. As it was already mentioned, God in von Balthasar's theology is deeply involved with creation. In my opinion, his reflections about the pain of God support his hope of universal salvation. As with the question of the hope of God, also here, von Balthasar proposes reflections rather than easy answers. He begins with the question, "How could a God of love maintain an unmoved "passionlessness" (*apatheia*) in the face of sin or (what is more) in the face of the potential damnation of certain of his creatures, to say nothing of his Son's abandonment on the Cross?" He goes on to say that:

God's susceptibility, his pain (which goes to the very limit of his death), cannot be dismissed as contrary to revelation, because the idea of God suffering pain rests on biblical and, in particular, Old Testament statements (Theo-Drama, 5:214)

Then he goes on to quote G. Martelet who says that “if God is love, as the New Testament teaches us, hell must be impossible.” Hence, in this context, hell understood as the rejection of God’s love can exist only for those who create it for themselves. In this case, the only possible reaction of God is his suffering. Von Balthasar, in referring to the theory of G. Martelet, is careful; however, he attests that the possibility of the pain of God does not stand in contradiction neither with biblical tradition nor theological tradition (Piotrowski 248), but he has to deal with the question of the impassibility of God. In short, commenting on the teachings of the fathers of the church, von Balthasar states that “it is not correct... to restrict God’s immutability to his attitude of covenant faithfulness within the dispensation he established: the Bible, in both Old and New Testament, looks *through* his attitude and discerns beyond it a quality of the Divinity as such” (Theo-Drama, 5:222). Thus, one can talk, in some sense, about the pain of God. The question of the pain of God was examined by many theologians, such as K. Barth, J. Galot, F. Varillon and J. Moltmann and their positions varied from the acceptance of the theory to its rejection. It is difficult to examine the position of von Balthasar on the subject, because he mostly refers to the positions of other theologians and rarely shows his own position on proposed questions. In my opinion, he remains open to the possibility of the pain of God, which relates to his theory of God’s radical involvement in the world and hope of God.

To summarize: von Balthasar finds two types of eschatological statements in the New Testament. One group speaks of the possibility of damnation, the other leaves room for the hope of universal salvation. The latter group of statements has been ignored in Catholic theology since the time of Saint

Augustine, but has found its way back. It is reasonable then to hope for the salvation of all, because God radically involving himself in creation and in the incarnation attempted to save all. Thus, we can speak of the hope of God. To state that God is at ease with the possibility of losing any of his creation would be to accept a “passionless” God. Consequently, God, radically involved in his creation, would be at pain if only one of his creatures would be damned.

#### E. The Mystery of Holy Saturday

One of the most interesting arguments of von Balthasar for the hope of universal salvation is his examination of the mystery of Holy Saturday in which Christ descended into the realm of the dead (*descensus ad inferos*). He understands it as essentially Trinitarian and a salvific event (*Mysterium Paschale* 176). It must be said that the thought of von Balthasar on that matter, developed over time, was influenced by the mystical visions of his long time friend, Adrienne von Speyr, who in her writings, described the pains of abandonment in hell. There has been much discussion and debate on von Speyr’s influence on von Balthasar on this subject; needless to say, he was influenced by her, developed her thought and accepted her theories as his own. Von Balthasar, speaking of the mystery of Holy Saturday, put it in the context of kenotic love of God. Philippians 2:6-7 speaks about the self-emptying Christ “who though was in the form of God did not deem equality with God... but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” Christ’s descent into the realm of the dead becomes the natural consequence of his salvific mission and identification with sinners. Peter Casarella, commenting on von Balthasar in his article, The Descent, Divine Self-

Enrichment, and the Universality of Salvation, states that “the experience of Christ when he descended on Holy Saturday is the perfect, visible form of God’s incarnate, kenotic love” (“The Descent” 4). The mystery is presented in the core of the Apostle’s creed that says that “Christ was crucified, died and was buried and descended into hell.” The main scriptural passage on which the truth of Christ’s descent is based may be found in 1 Peter 3:19. The problem is how this mystery is to be understood because there have been different interpretations throughout the centuries.

Casarella, in his already mentioned presentation, quotes Hans Kung, who stated that there have been four main ways in which the mystery of hell was interpreted in the Christian tradition. I will not go into the great detail here to explore this position; it will be enough to state that there has not been just one understanding of the mystery of *descensus ad infernos*, and some of them differed significantly from the one proposed by von Balthasar. The question may be stated like this: is it possible that Christ’s descent might have had any salvific significance? Is it possible that Christ descended into hell to end the punishment of sinners? Von Balthasar clearly understands it as a salvific event and thus stands in opposition to Saint Augustine who argued that the descent was not literal but figurative. For Saint Augustine, Christ’s descent did not have a salvific purpose at all. Moreover, for Saint Augustine it is impossible that the punishment of hell may come to an end and those who are in hell will be there for ever (City 433).

Scholastic theology, influenced by Saint Augustine, tended to limit the salvific effects of the descent into hell and debated how far Jesus really

descended, and to what point his redemptive power extended. Von Balthasar says that “the most frequent reply was that he showed himself to the damned in order to demonstrate his power even in Hell; that in the Hell of infants he had nothing to achieve; that in purgatory and amnesty could be promulgated, its precise scope a matter of discussion” (*Mysterium Paschale* 176-177). In my opinion, the scholastic mystery presents itself with inconsistency. It does not explain why Jesus descended into the realm of hell to show his power to the sinners, and not showing his power earlier on the cross. Hence, John O’Donnell notes that “the principal difference between von Balthasar’s interpretation of Jesus’ descent among the dead and the more classical approach is that for von Balthasar Jesus’ descent is not a triumphal journey into the underworld” (87). As it was already mentioned, for von Balthasar Jesus’ *descensus ad infernos* is the natural continuation of his salvific work, which did not end on Holy Saturday. It is essentially an expression of “the radical unwillingness of God to abandon sinners, even, where by definition, God cannot be, insofar as hell means the utter and obstinate rejection of God” (Sachs, “Current”, 244). God does not abandon sinners but in his love and fidelity “wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Von Balthasar thinks that the mystery of *kenosis* is further expressed in *descensus ad infernos* because Christ’s soul is emptied and actually suffers with the dead in solidarity with them. Consequently, “von Balthasar’s rendering of Christ’s descent into hell reveals a “theo-dramatic” event, one in which the Trinitarian action of the self-transcending, kenotic love” (Casarella 21).

The Mystery of Holy Saturday, as expressed by von Balthasar, certainly supports his hope of universal salvation. Jesus Christ, in coming to the world,

united himself completely with the human race. Even people in hell are not abandoned by God as the mystery of *descensus ad infernos* reveals. Christ did not descend into hell to preach his victory but to suffer with the sinners. God's love is greater than anything that can be perceived and understood. Is it to say, that, because of Christ's descent into hell all people, indeed, will be saved? Hell certainly remains a real possibility and von Balthasar never says that this universal restoration will be the necessary outcome of Christ's descent into hell (Casarella 24). He clearly stands at the side of hope, and only hope and not certainty. Nonetheless there has been a wide and sometimes harsh critique of von Balthasar's understanding of the mystery of *descensus ad infernos*. The critique concerns the possibility of conversion after death, von Balthasar's ambivalent language of hell and the reality of abandonment of the Son by the Father.

## II. Waław Hryniewicz's Hope of Universal Salvation

Waław Hryniewicz belongs to the generation of Catholic theologians who were formed by the Second Vatican Council. Like von Balthasar, he devoted his theological studies to the renewal of Catholic theology and thus focused on biblical, ecumenical and patristic studies. Being born in eastern Poland, Hryniewicz, from his youth, was exposed to orthodox theology and liturgy that later shaped and influenced his own theological studies. Also, being faced with the sufferings and event of World War II, Hryniewicz reflected on the question of Christian hope in front of despair.<sup>8</sup> Hryniewicz started to show the existential and individual dimensions of hope, to move later to the ecclesiastical and ecumenical perspectives. His interest was strengthened with the studies of Eastern theological traditions in which he discovered much more openness to the hope of universal salvation than in the Latin Church, which focused more on dogmatic formulations about last things. He developed different aspects of the hope of universal salvation than von Balthasar, exploring different ways of understanding the New Testament and the eschatological preaching of Jesus.

### A. Hope as a Central Theme of Christian Faith

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<sup>8</sup> Waław Hryniewicz on the topic of the hope of universal salvation published: *Nadzieja zbawienia dla wszystkich: od eschatologii lęku do eschatologii nadziei*, (Warszawa: Verbinum, 1990), *Dramat nadziei zbawienia. Medytacje eschatologiczne*, (Warszawa: Verbinum, 1996), *Pedagogia nadziei. Medytacje o Bogu, Kościele i ekumenii*, (Warszawa: Verbinum, 1997), *Na drodze pojednania. Medytacje ekumeniczne*, (Warszawa: Verbinum, 1998), *Chrześcijaństwo nadziei*, (Krakow: Znak, 2002), *Nadzieja uczy inaczej*, (Warszawa: Verbinum, 2003), *Dlaczego głoszę nadzieję*, (Warszawa: Verbinum, 2004).

Similarly to von Balthasar, Hryniewicz regards hope as one of the central themes of Christian faith. He attests that Christian hope differs from human illusions, wishful thinking and hope of other religions and philosophical systems. Christian hope is inseparably connected with the person of Jesus Christ and his proclamation of the promise of the future kingdom of God. Christians are people of hope, people of the promise who wait for its final completion. In addition, Christian hope does not reside in a vacuum but has its roots in history and the person of Jesus Christ, therefore, it is transmitted and lived in the community of the church. Looking toward the future, Christian hope has its historical beginning and roots in the past, in the history of salvation (*traditio spei*). There is an internal relationship between the hope of Israel and the hope of the church. Jesus Christ is the ontological foundation of God's promise for the people of all ages. It is in him that the promise of final restoration and reconciliation of the creation with the creator is essentially rooted (Hryniewicz, Dlaczego 72). Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity who, in the Incarnation, entered into human history and became the promise of salvation for the entire world. Therefore, as Hryniewicz points out, Christianity is not a religion of transcendental egoism and exceptional care for our own salvation, but a religion of forgiveness, compassion, companionship and hope for the salvation of all (Dlaczego 81). Thus, like von Balthasar, Hryniewicz emphasizes the communal aspect of Christian hope. We, as Christians, hope in the community of faith, in church.

In Jesus Christ the promises given to humanity by God were fulfilled (Acts 13:32-33). This promise is universal in character because it is given to all peoples (Eph. 3:6). Jesus Christ, the Son of God was sent by the Father to save not only

Jews, but all. This universality was *novum* in the history of religions. Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of God, became the visible sign of the incredible love that God has for every human being. It was in Jesus Christ that the gate of hope for all was open once and for all times (Hryniewicz, Dlaczego 77). The promise of salvation that was proclaimed through the prophets and was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ is universal in character. It essentially means that this promise was not limited only to the chosen people, but was extended to all humanity of all times.

Wacław Hryniewicz in his analysis of the history of spirituality proposes an interesting distinction between the spirituality of the cross and the spirituality of resurrection. Of course, these two aspects cannot be separated; nevertheless, one or the other was emphasized stronger in the history of spirituality. To attempt a thorough examination and description of these two spiritualities at this point would take us too far afield from the main point of this chapter. It would be enough to say that the spirituality of the cross is characteristic for European Protestant cycles and in the writings of theologians influenced by existentialist philosophy. It emphasizes the sinfulness of people, their internal conflicts and the prize of the blood of Christ that they were redeemed by. According to Hryniewicz, this vision of spirituality by focusing on sin and the cross, it “forgets” about the resurrection. Thus the spirituality of the resurrection is more optimistic. It does not emphasize only the tragic aspects of human existence like sin, suffering and loneliness, but instead focuses on positive aspects of human existence and history. Wacław Hryniewicz states that these two kinds of spirituality do not consist of the full Christian mystery. He proposes to replace them with, what he

calls, “the paschal spirituality” that would take into account the Mystery of Christ in its totality. Therefore, this spirituality would be characterized by the affirmation of life that was sanctified by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and by the affirmation of the human person and his earthy existence. It also proposes active participation in the affairs of this world and a realization of love for all. Paschal spirituality takes seriously human existence with all its tragedies but at the same time is full of hope (Hryniewicz, Chrześcijaństwo 155-170). It is within this spirituality that the hope of salvation for all may exist and be substantiated.

#### B. The Weakness of the Doctrine of Eternal Hell

As was already mentioned above, the traditional magisterial teaching speaks of the eternity of hell and the immutability of the situation of the dead. Hryniewicz challenges this teaching and asks some interesting questions. In his view, the tragic vision of the duality and opposition between heaven and hell, good and evil, happiness and suffering as presented by traditional teaching must be challenged. What does it mean for God that some of his creation will be eternally damned? Will not the love of God and his desire to save all be fulfilled? If God wills all his creation to be saved, will he not be able to transform it, so that everyone will indeed accept his merciful forgiveness? Did not God create everything to be united with him? Can we accept eternal dualism instead of unity? How can evil exist eternally (Hryniewicz, Dlaczego 159)? For Hryniewicz all these questions are valid and need to be thought about. In his opinion, theology too many times has given the definitive and doctrinal answers that today

are being questioned.<sup>9</sup> The eschatological teaching of the Church was based on specific interpretations of the biblical texts. The doctrine of eternal hell was pronounced as a dogma by the Church. The doctrine of eternal hell made of Christianity the religion of fear and anxiety.

The pessimistic view of the end of human history begins with Saint Augustine, who in his major work, *De civitate Dei* (XXI, 12), wrote about a damned mass (*massa damnata*). Because of total corruption by sin, most of humanity will be damned. This doctrine turned Christianity into a religion of grave fear, anxiety and aggression toward sinful people.<sup>10</sup> Joy was withdrawn from the life of Christians. A human being was viewed as a criminal, depraved and worthy of eternal punishment. Sin overwhelmed grace, forgiveness and mercy.<sup>11</sup> God became distant, threatening, and according to some, even laughing at the damnation of humanity. Because of the division of Christianity and the Reformation, it was taught that most of the Christians (heretics, schismatics, and, so called “bad Catholics”) were damned. Hryniewicz says:

Over the centuries the teaching about damnation and eternal Hell was an integral part of the Christian Churches’ pedagogy. The fear of death and the dread of Hell were regarded as an essential motive behind moral behavior. As a result Christian Good Tidings lost its

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<sup>9</sup> In many of his articles and books, Hryniewicz presented his view of theology as the discipline that constantly looks for better understanding of eternal truths of our faith. Even though Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of the Father, we do not see the truth in its totality yet. The Christian faith is never a definitive knowledge or absolute certainty (1 Cor. 13:9.12).

<sup>10</sup>

See a wonderful historical analysis of Jean Delumeau in his book *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture*, (Palgrave: Macmillan, 1990).

<sup>11</sup>

Wacław Hryniewicz, “Zaswiaty, Czyli o Rehabilitowaniu Boga,” *Magazyn Gazety Wyborczej*, (4 November 1999): 33.

credibility especially among non-believers and people distrustful of the Church. Christians themselves were becoming the people whose faces bore no signs of joy in the gift of redemption, as Nietzsche remarks sarcastically... The Roman Church's doctrine, upheld over the centuries, on the damnation of non believers and members of other religions and denominations was following the biblical warnings of Hell and a state of being lost. These warnings were transformed into the assertion about the real existence of eternal Hell. They were applied to concrete groups of people. The part of biblical statements which gave hope for salvation and redemption was completely ignored (Hryniewicz, "Can" 63).

In the Christian tradition there have been even texts that expressed joy and happiness for the damnation and suffering of the sinners. This way of thinking has its roots in Jewish apocalyptic. One of the characteristics of apocalyptic writings is their pessimistic view of human history which is viewed as a history of sin, degeneration and rejection of God. There is a radical difference between this sinful world and the future world which will be radically different. Sinners will not have a place in this new world and only the chosen ones will be saved. One can see here already the elements of the exclusivist understanding of salvation. The doctrine of eternal hell was supposed to deter people from sinning. Waclaw Hryniewicz says that it created "pedagogy of fear". It was supposed to help people in conversion and penance. God was pictured as a terrible judge who would justly repay and punish for every evil. Tertullian in *De spectaculis* expressed joy over all the damned and suffering in hell that will be experienced

by all the saved in heaven. They will watch and rejoice over the torments of the damned. Can this “pedagogy of fear” be successful in bringing people closer to God? Can this terrible God who is looking indifferently on the sufferings of the condemned be the merciful God of Jesus Christ? Can the joy over the damned be reconciled with the commandment of love of our enemies (Hryniewicz, Dlaczego 188)? Saint Augustine noticed in *De civitate dei* the same problem and criticized those who were too merciful and who wanted the damned to be saved:

I must now, I see, enter the lists of amicable controversy with those tender-hearted Christians who decline to believe that any, or that all of those whom the infallibly just Judge may pronounce worthy of the punishment of hell, shall suffer eternally, and who suppose that they shall be delivered after a fixed term of punishment, longer or shorter according to the amount of each man’s sin. In respect of this matter, Origen was even more indulgent; for he believed that even the devil himself and his angels, after suffering those more severe and prolonged pains which their sin deserved, should be delivered from their torments, and associated with the holy angels. But the Church, not without reason, condemned him for this and other errors... Very different, however, is the error we speak of which is dictated by the tenderness of these Christians who suppose that the sufferings of those who are condemned in the judgment will be temporary, while the blessedness of all who are sooner or later free will be eternal... Let, then, this fountain of mercy be extended, and flow forth even to the lost angels, and let them also be set free, at

least after as many and long ages as seem fit! Why does this stream of mercy flow to all the human race, and dry up as soon as it reaches the angelic? And yet they dare not extend their pity further, and propose the deliverance of the devil himself (444-445).

Saint Augustine sarcastically speaks of all of these Christians who are “merciful” and want the sufferings of the damned to be temporal and not eternal or even the devil himself to be saved. He goes on to say that

Their human tenderness is moved only towards men, and they plead chiefly for their own cause, holding out false hopes of impunity to their own deprived lives by means of this quasi compassion of God to the whole race (City of God 447).

Now Christians that hope for the temporal damnation of sinners are accused not only of being “too merciful” but also of self interest and egoism.

Hryniewicz notices the weak points of the doctrine of eternal hell. He shows that the punishment of eternal damnation would be unjust, not proportionate and not understandable because this punishment lacks the possibility of improvement and rehabilitation of the person. The idea of eternal hell is a total negation of educational and rehabilitative aspects of punishment. There is no doubt, writes Hryniewicz, that a person should be punished for the sins and offences committed, but the temporal offence committed in time does not deserve eternal punishment whatsoever. The punishment must be proportionate to the offence. In the case of eternal hell, one cannot speak of the proportionality of this punishment. The punishment is administered just for the

sake of punishment. Furthermore, Hryniewicz says that theology teaches that a person cannot “earn” salvation and eternal life, but that salvation is the gift of God. About hell, on the other hand, the theology has taught that it is “earned” justly by the sinner. Thus, heaven is a gift whereas hell is just a payback. It seems that God uses two different measures: on the one hand there is non earned heaven, on the opposite side well-deserved hell. Philosophically, says Hryniewicz, one does not deserve eternal punishment because it would be not proportionate to the crime committed. Hell then would be terrible punishment just for the sake of punishment. The point is that from the perspective of human understanding of the goal of punishment, the sanction of eternal hell has the elements of only negative and repressive functions of the punishment. From the ethical point of view, the punishment is only successful if it changes the person for better and encourages the process of conversion and change of life. In the case of eternal hell, this process is impossible. Thus the eternal sufferings of hell exclude the possibility of conversion or change of life (Hryniewicz, Nadzieja 176-184). Hryniewicz not only expresses his critique of the dogma of eternal hell, but also proposes his own understanding of Gehenna (as he calls hell is accord with the biblical texts), as temporal and not eternal punishment. Therefore Hryniewicz proposes a different interpretation of the biblical texts that speak of the possibility of eternal damnation. Is it possible, he asks, to interpret these texts differently than traditional theology and see the hope for the salvation of all?

### C. Eschatological Teaching of Jesus

Hryniewicz begins his reflections with the question of how one could interpret the eschatological teaching of Jesus, so that it would be understandable to contemporary Christians. He states that in order to understand the eschatological teaching of Jesus, one must first examine the cultural aspects, linguistic forms and literary traditions of the times of Jesus. Unless one does that, one may misinterpret or even completely misunderstand the parables, hyperboles, comparisons and paradoxes widely used by Jesus in his public ministry. There are many elements in Jesus' teaching that cannot be understood literally.<sup>12</sup> These elements teach us that they cannot be understood literally but in a wider context of the entire ministry and teaching of Jesus (Hryniewicz, Nadzieja 13-14). These special norms of interpretation apply especially to the eschatological teaching of Jesus regarding his second coming and judgment because this teaching is full of symbols, exaggerations and hyperboles. To take this teaching literally would be a misinterpretation and misunderstanding of this teaching and would have tremendous consequences in understanding the very message of Christianity. What does "eternal fire", "grinding of teeth", "external darkness" really mean?

According to Hryniewicz, the literal interpretation of the eschatological teaching of Jesus, led some of the theologians, and eventually the Magisterium, to form the doctrine of eternal hell. The last judgment account from Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 25:31-46) was the foundation of the doctrine of the eternal hell.

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<sup>12</sup> As an example, it is difficult to interpret the words of Jesus that "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25) or to reconcile the words that Jesus brought not peace but sword to the world (Matt. 10:34) with the command that we should not offer resistance to the wicked (Matt. 5:34). And what do we do with the exaggeration that we should cut our hands and tear out our eyes if they cause us to sin? (Matt. 5:29-30).

Hryniewicz proposes careful reexamination and reinterpretation of this account. The exegetes are divided in the interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46. Some consider the last judgment account to be a parable (J. Jeremias, J.R. Donahue, J. Lambrecht). Others, on the other hand, consider it to be a faithful and literal account of the actual event. There are also some exegetes (minority) that doubt that the text comes actually from Jesus and state that it was composed by the evangelist. The question of authenticity, however, cannot be separated from the more important question of the sense of the account (Hryniewicz, Nadzieja 27). To treat these accounts literally, says Hryniewicz, one would reduce them to sheer apocalyptic fantasies. According to Hryniewicz, the eschatological teaching of Jesus belongs to the prophetic tradition and is parabolic and metaphoric in its character. Therefore, the main point of the eschatological teaching is not to give the exact account of things that will happen in the future but to encourage people to conversion.

Let us focus on the last judgment account from Matthew's Gospel and see how Hryniewicz interprets it. The main point of the judgment account is to show that Jesus wants people to do good to others as we would do good to him. The deeds of mercy and goodness are the practical expression of our love of God. Because God cares for the abandoned, the poor, the imprisoned, the sick and the marginalized, people should do the same in their lives. If one does good to one's brother or sister, one does good to God himself. Hence the main point of the account is to encourage people to do good to others without self interest. It must be noted, says Hryniewicz, that the motive to do good to others should be pure love and not an expectation of the prize of eternal salvation. As God loves us

unconditionally, so we too have to love our brothers and sisters. Hryniewicz says that the account of the last judgment is a severe critique of, what he calls, “the religiosity of interest”. A person with this kind of religiosity would do anything good but only in order to achieve eternal life. Thus, the main goal of one’s good deeds is oneself alone and not God or one’s neighbor in need. The parable encourages doing good deeds just because of love which must be the main force that drives people’s spiritual lives. People’s relationship with others will then be the main criterion of their judgment. People will be judged by love. Thus, the parable of the last judgment is the invitation of Jesus to love others unconditionally and without reserve.

If the main focus of the account is to show the role of unconditional love of others, what does it mean that “good ones” will be separated from “evil ones” as sheep from the goats? The traditional interpretation of the account was that at the end of times during the last judgment, good people will be separated from the evil ones. The first group will inherit eternal life, while the second will be condemned to eternal damnation. Later it will be examined what “eternal” may mean in this parable. Now let us focus on another interpretation of the separation of good and evil ones, as proposed by Hryniewicz. He says that the contrast presented between evil and good does not necessarily mean that people will be separated as absolutely good and absolutely evil. There are no absolutely good and absolutely evil people. The judgment of God will take place in the heart of every human being. The separation will not take place between people but in the heart of every particular person. Thus “sheep” and “goats” represent good and evil deeds in the heart of every person. This internal judgment will allow the

person to see his life in its entirety. Then the person will see not only one's evil side and all the wasted opportunities that desire condemnation, but also one's good side and all the good deeds. This understanding of judgment as the process that will take place in the heart of every person allows one to overcome the vision of eternal dualism of good and evil. To summarize: the central message of the parable is not to give an exact and literal description of what will happen at the last judgment but rather to show the ethical imperative that should be the major driving force in our spiritual lives. It encourages loving unconditionally other people just because they are brothers and sisters (Hryniewicz, Nadzieja 26-35).

#### D. Hryniewicz's interpretation of *Kolasis aionios*

Now Hryniewicz's interpretation of "the eternal torment (*kolasis aionios*)" in Matthew 25:46 will be examined. According to Hryniewicz, the New Testament does not provide the definition of *ainios*, "eternal". It may only mean "to exist through the centuries", "existing through the eons" (Hryniewicz, Dlaczego 168). In his article "*Can Non-believers Be Redeemed*" he says:

Generally, the word *aionios* in the Greek language is not synonymous with endlessness. It denotes first of all "limited persistence". The adequate meaning of this adjective should be searched for in the Hebrew language. Its counterpart is the Hebrew word *olam* but this word has also many meanings because it is derived from the act of hiding. It may either mean eternity or long persistence. So when Jesus in his parable terms punishment (torment) as eternal one has to apprehend the adequate sense of

this expression. Eternity belongs to God alone. It is a sign of his absolute transcendence of all creatures. Only God is the absolute fullness of life without origin and without end. He alone is really eternal. The word “eternal” in relation to creatures may only have a limited and relative meaning (67).

Moreover, in Plato’s writings the word *aionios* means persistence that will finally come to an end. Origen also noticed that *aionios* can have many meanings. According to him, the word in Sacred Scripture sometimes means something without end (*ut unem nesciat*), and another times it describes the reality that does not have an end in our world but will have an end in the future world (*ut in praesenti quidem saeculo finem non habeat, habeat tamen in futuro*) (Hryniewicz, *Nadzieja* 39). Therefore, says Hryniewicz, one cannot simply say that the Scriptures teach about “eternal punishment” but one has to get the proper meaning of this statement (Hryniewicz, *Nadzieja* 39).

In Matthew 25:46 the torment (punishment) is called “eternal” and is parallel to “eternal life”. In both cases the same word *aionion* is used. For that reason, advocates of the traditional teaching about the eternity of hell see in this parallelism the fundamental proof for the existence of eternal hell. Hryniewicz interprets it differently. He states that in this case one should not see parallel symmetric but rather parallel asymmetrical (Hryniewicz, *Nadzieja* 41).

In describing the meaning of the word *kolasis*, which means “torment”, Hryniewicz says that it may not mean a state that is indeed ultimate and irreversible. The “eternal torment” symbolizes purification. The cursed are to be purified in the fire of contrition. The Greek fathers, who supported the hope of

universal salvation, saw the therapeutic sense of the “eternal torment” (Hryniewicz, *Nadzieja* 38-39). Hryniewicz summarizes that the eternity of God and the eternity of the life of redeemed cannot be treated on a par with the eternity of the state to which the cursed and the damned have been condemned. He writes in “*Can Non-believers Be Redeemed*”:

It is a state of redemption and therapeutic character... Such a punishment is purposeful only when its therapeutic objective is possible to reach. The other punishment, even only allowed for by God would not be worthy of his love and mercy in relation to people including those lost and “cursed”. The asymmetrical parallel (Mt 25:46) results from the antithesis on which the parable of Jesus is based. It is the antithesis between the blessed (Mt 25:37.46) and the “cursed”, between the good and bad people and in consequence the antithesis between “eternal life” and “eternal punishment”. It says that something of human ultimate destiny is fulfilled already in earthly life. It is a warning. Such is its basic objective. The same adjective, “eternal,” is used in both cases but its meaning is different.

One can already guess that in his interpretation of the account of the last judgment, Hryniewicz aims for a temporal understanding of *gehenna*. Therefore now, I will examine Hryniewicz’s attempt to present *gehenna* as temporal and not eternal punishment.

#### E. *Gehenna* as Therapeutic Punishment

Hryniewicz understands *gehenna* not as eternal punishment but as punishment whose goal is to bring the sinner to conversion and repentance and eventually lead him to eternal salvation. He supports his understanding with his exegesis of Matthew 25 and an examination of the patristic traditions that supported the hope of universal salvation. In his opinion, *gehenna* is not an eternal state but rather “the purifying fire”, God himself who purifies, loves and cures his sinful creatures. Death is thus not a definitive moment in human life after which nothing can be changed. *Gehenna* is the state of the human soul which found itself before God whose the soul cannot accept. The meeting of the human soul with God is always associated with purifying fire. Nobody will be free from it. Everyone will stand before God and will have to confront one’s life with the Truth, the Love and the Life. Everyone will have to be purified in God’s fire (Hryniewicz, Nadzieja187). God will not be helpless in the face of the gift of human freedom. The defenders of the traditional doctrine of eternal hell say that people are able to reject God ultimately and irreversibly. Hryniewicz asks, “But can a human freedom last in an eternal state of separation from God? Can a decision to reject him be ultimate? (Hryniewicz, “Can” 68).

#### IV. Conclusion

Speaking of the hope of universal salvation, Richard John Neuhaus says that “if we love others, it seems that we must hope that, in the end, they will be saved. We must hope that all will one day hear the words of Christ, ‘Today you will be with me in paradise.’ Given the evidence of Scripture and tradition, we cannot deny that hell exists. We can, however, hope that hell is empty. We cannot know that, but we can hope it is the case” (Neuhaus 61). But there are also two main objections against the hope of universal salvation. Firstly, naïve optimism about universal salvation trivializes human freedom. Secondly, it undermines and underestimates human responsibility. Hryniewicz and von Balthasar respond on both counts.

Von Balthasar, in opposition to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (par. 1035), thinks that it is possible for him to say that human freedom is not absolute and remains unfixed even after death. Therefore, it is subject to change and conversion as long as it does not rest fully in God. “Human freedom becomes finally and irrevocably definitive only in God, because only in God can it really enter into eternity” (Sachs, “Current” 248). In relation to that, Waclaw Hryniewicz writes about the drama of human freedom. According to traditional theology, human freedom is able to reject God definitively and irrevocably. Hryniewicz poses questions: can human freedom exist in eternal separation from God? Can the decision of rejection of God be irrevocable? According to him, the answer to these questions is not necessarily “yes”. He says that the human “yes” does not have the same irrevocable character as “no” because human freedom is in its core a positive reality – it is the possibility of openness on God who is its definitive goal (Majewski 218).

The second group of critiques of the hope of universal salvation comes from theologians who in this hope see a danger for morality. Their critique can be summarized thus: if a person hopes that he will be saved and that the punishment of hell is not a definitive and eternal possibility, he will not be motivated to live morally and according to the commandments. More to the point, it can lead to the conviction that morality does not make any sense because, no matter how we live, we will be eventually saved. Von Balthasar and Hryniewicz respond to these critiques. The pedagogy of fear must be replaced by the pedagogy of responsibility. Morality cannot be built only on fear of eternal punishment. The theology of hope, in opposition to the theology of fear, reveals God who takes our sins on himself, who is ready to transform revolted human freedom and who wants to save, not punish (Hryniewicz, Nad 333). Furthermore, Hryniewicz explains that hope in universal salvation is not certainty that all will be saved. Therefore, it is not without importance how one lives on this earth because one will be punished for one's sins. Hryniewicz also abolishes the myth that the fear of punishment can change the sinner. Life provides too many examples of Christians who completely do not care about their moral life or the punishment after death. Hryniewicz and von Balthasar share the opinion that the hope of universal salvation helps one to strengthen one's sense of responsibility for the loss of our brothers and sisters. Therefore, the hope of universal salvation does not reject morality. Instead, it builds it up. Morality is to be built on hope and love, not on fear and dread.

The aim of this work was not to show all the dimensions and difficulties connected with the hope of universal salvation but rather to prove that this hope

has been alive in the Catholic tradition and recently has been talked about. John Paul II in his book, Crossing the Threshold of Hope, encouraged theologians to further study the problem by stating that even though eternal damnation is certainly proclaimed in the Gospel, we do not know to what degree it is realized. “However, we can never forget that God ‘wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.’ (1 Tm 2:4). He cannot but want to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (Crossing 73). The discussion about the hope of universal salvation is not closed – it has just begun. The subject is still open for further development and debate. Salvation is ultimately a mystery and this mystery will never be fully understood during this life but in the future life, “when everything has been subjected to him, then the Son himself will be subjected to the One who has subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

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