

Gaudium de Purgatorio

2018 Academic Address on the Joy of Purgatory as an example of the integration of theology and spirituality

Note – this is an abbreviated version of the full paper. It was shortened for delivery as a talk. The full version will be substituted on this site in the near future.

Thomas A. Baima
Mundelein Seminary
2018 Academic Address

One in an admission board interview, a prospective student asked me where Mundelein stood, theologically. . . . The student was trying to ask what ‘school of theology’ Mundelein Seminary subscribed to. I was impressed that a college seminarian was so aware of the difference between doctrine and theology. . . .

What I appreciated about the applicant’s question was how it reminded me of the things seminarians and graduate students worry about. I recalled how I worried about similar things as I was beginning my seminary studies in 1976. I worried about them because, already in my 20’s I was perplexed by the toxic inability of Christians to present the gospel to non-Christians, and their seeming obsession of with making each other look ridiculous, with no concern for how this impeded the evangelizing mission. Oh, they talked about evangelism a lot, but they were not really interested in introducing those who did not know Christ to him, rather they were interested in the redistribution of existing Christians. Now, I am always happy when a brother or sister in Christ moves closer to the fullness of truth and sanctification preserved in the

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Catholic and Orthodox churches. But some people in each of the Christian communities think the current situation calls for a separatist attitude. It is as if they have mis-translated Matthew 28 to read: “Go and become an isolated sub-culture in all the nations.” We can and should be a contrast to the culture. But we cannot choose isolation, as that contradicts the evangelizing mission. Given the plurality of cultures, and the diversity in cultures, our theology must not become separatist either. While we must be unified in the faith, the sacramental life and *koinonia*, Catholic Christianity admits diversity in liturgy, theology, spirituality and canon law.¹ This legitimate diversity, especially in theology, is one of the greatest resources for the evangelizing mission and an untapped tool for apologetics, which is an important concern today. Here, also, is where you will find one of the riches of Mundelein Seminary.

I discovered almost in the first weeks of being at Mundelein that there were a variety of theological approaches present. In 1976, in the systematics department, we had theologians who favored a philosophical approach, which might mean Thomism in its scholastic or transcendental forms, existentialism and personalist philosophy. We even had one professor attracted to the philosophy of Marcel Merlot Pont. But we had those theologians who favored an historical methodology. They followed the methods of the Fathers, and worked on such then theologians as Johann Adam Moeler, John Henry Newman, or contemporaries such as Jean Danilou, Yves Congar or Henri de Lubac.

¹ CCC 83-84

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And, of course, there was Monsignor Meyer, who made us read Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whom he regularly criticized for using paleontology as his methodology. Father Meyer insisted that Teilhard would have better served the Church by grounding his integration of religion and science in physics. Physics grounds metaphysics. A modern cosmology would give us a modern meta-physics. Meta-paleontology would not get the job done. I can only suspect that Father Kartje's course on "Fundamentals of Science and the Foundations of Faith" is Msgr. Meyer's dream come true for a seminary curriculum. First, because Father Kartje knows physics and secondly, because Fr. Meyer believes, . . . that we could hardly claim to be educated men much less effective pastors, if we knew nothing about science.

Our previous education is an important element we bring to seminary intellectual formation. As an undergraduate, I worked in two departments of a secular university. Our philosophy department was firmly in the camp of studying Anglo-American analytic philosophy. The religion department was organized so that we could focus on one Christian and one world religion theme. I chose to read Eastern Orthodox theology and Buddhism. The unifier between them was that both had highly developed teaching on the inner life and, this is the point I want to emphasize to you, both used their spirituality to integrate their theology.

When I arrived at Mundelein, I gravitated towards the wing of the systematics department with the historical theologians, because with the study of the Fathers of the Church, they seemed to join theology and spirituality. One missing piece was social justice. We were all for it, but our studies did not fit it in. It would be a few years later,

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when I was a young priest that I would discover the writings of a woman who brought my several concerns together into a unity of approach. Theology, spirituality and social action all met for me in the . . . person of Catherine de Hueck Doherty.

This is not her story. But it is a story about the toxic inability of Christians to present the gospel to non-Christians and the seeming obsession of making their co-religionists look ridiculous. In other words, this is a talk about Christian division and its corrosive effects on evangelization. And it will make the claim that recognizing the difference between doctrine and theology, and the integration of theology and spirituality is the royal road to avoid this tragedy.

We have been reflecting quite a lot this year about church division. Following the request of Pope Francis, we have engaged the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with an appreciative inquiry. We are fortunate to have Dr. Elizabeth Sung with us as Paluch Professor, to help us do this, and I look forward to her second Paluch lecture next week. In my academic address today, I want to offer one insight from my study of the Christian East, explore a controversial doctrine from the reformation as a case study, and suggest an alternative way to think about apologetics in the post-modern period.

My reflections on 1517 are really about the importance of integration of theology with spirituality. . . .

The standard narrative names the posting of the 95 theses as the inaugural event of the Reformation. Of course, it's more complicated than that. But within all that history is a presenting question around which energy gathered and that energy would

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unleash what was to follow. That question was about salvation. And it all came together in a common teaching, purgatory, and the devotional, and financial practices surrounding it.

In this academic address, I want to use purgatory as a case study. . . .

Diarmaid MacCulloch has it right when he says that the purgatory doctrine was the spark that led to the breakup of Western Christendom. . . .

Professor MacCulloch, in another place puts the matter of understanding the quarrels among Christians this way: “If you care about salvation, and they did . . .”

[then these are not speculative questions, but life and death in the ultimate sense].²

MacCulloch also said that emperors didn’t like religious disputes. They cared about social unity. “Christians,” MacCulloch notes, “cared about truth a bit more.”³ In those two statements, MacCulloch and I can find a common foundation – this is about salvation and truth. These two things must be our reference point.

So, how do we approach the truth about purgatory? I would argue that we will not find a solution in the post-Reformation period because of the way the doctrine has been transformed into a polemic. Rather, we need to look at a different school of theology, which while contemporary to Luther, only came to be known later. The theologian was a woman named Catherine Adorno.⁴ I suggest this because her

² The Reverend Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch is a deacon of the Church of England and Professor of the History of the Church at the University of Oxford and Fellow of Saint Cross College, Oxford.

³ Ibid.,

⁴ Benedict J. Groeschel, OFM, Cap., “Introduction” in *Catherine of Genoa: Purgation and Purgatory & the Spiritual Dialogue*, trans. Serge Hughes, pref. Catherine de Hueck Doherty (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

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teaching on purgatory and purgation could have solved the controversy, before it ever started. In fact, her teaching is so radically different from the standard narrative on purgatory that I titled this talk, with apologies to Pope Francis, *Gaudium de purgatorio*—the joy of Purgatory. She offers an alternative theological perspective to what developed around the Council of Trent, and one which I would argue better addresses some of the concerns which motivated the Protestant Reformers. Sadly, her teaching was not published until 1551.

Catherine Adorno may not be familiar to you, as she is now referred to as Saint Catherine of Genoa. Her teaching on purgatory was an exercise not of scholastic theology (which Luther rejected) but of mystical theology. The essence of the method of mystical theology is one of theological reflection based on experience not deduction or abstraction.⁵ The heart of the approach of mystical theology is, as Pope Benedict has said, “aiding people to see and act with God’s eyes and heart.”⁶

As I studied Eastern Christian theology, I came to know the Russian School, and the attempts at a Neo-Patristic synthesis.⁷ These approaches were fellow travelers with the *Ressourcement* movement in Catholic theology.⁸ Both were reactions to rationalism and atheism in the modern period of the 19th and early 20th century. Russian theologian Andrew Louth put it this way:

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “General Audience: Catherine of Genoa” (January 12, 2011)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology* . . .

⁸ See Emery de Gaal, *The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI: the Christocentric Shift* (San Francisco: Macmillan, ____), chart.

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Very briefly, because it suggested a way of approaching theology that had at its heart an experience of God, an experience mediated by prayer, that demanded the transformation of the seeker after God, [mystical theology] is an approach that shuns any idea of turning God into a concept, a philosophical hypothesis, or some sort of moral guarantor.

At the same time, Fr. Louth asserts that this mystical way of theology, “understands the Christian life to be an ethical philosophy composed of action and contemplation.” By the means of prayer, “the intellect, purified, illuminated and perfected” can therefore achieve an intellectual formation capable of theological reflection on experience.

It is union of the soul with God which provides the epistemology for theological work. I want to briefly describe this from Catherine’s life as it provides an utterly different way to looking at the doctrine of purgatory. My hope is that this will illustrate that there can be different theologies about the same doctrine.

Catherine Adorno was a not a cloistered nun. She was a married woman who worked in a hospital caring for the sick. The two great commandments, love of God and love of neighbor, filled her life.⁹ She had a singular spiritual experience which she called her “conversion.” She described it as “receiving a wound in my heart from God’s immense love.” It was, as Pope Benedict described, “a clear vision of her own wretchedness and shortcomings and at the same time of God’s goodness. . .”¹⁰ After this, she began a life of purification which for many years caused her to feel constant

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

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sorrow for the sins she had committed and which spurred her to impose forms of penance and sacrifices upon herself, in order to show her love to God.”¹¹ Does this sound anything like Luther’s story? Actually not. Where his story was one of penance seeking the forgiveness of God, Catherine’s is one of penance expressing her gratitude for the mercy of God, and as a means of opening her soul more and more to receive his love. For Luther there was torment in purgation, for Catherine, joy.

I do need to say a word or two about her mystical experience. Catherine never received specific revelations on purgatory or on the souls being purified there. What we receive in her teaching is a description of her own purification through prayer, and how she applies this experience to understanding the purification of others in purgatory.

Where the usual 16th century narrative to explaining purgatory was to think of it as a place of exterior fire and torment, Catherine explains purgatory as an inner fire in the soul. She writes:

The soul presents itself to God still bound to the desires and suffering that derive from sin and this makes it impossible for it to enjoy the beatific vision of God.”
Purification is the growth of love in the soul, such that it can more and more enjoy being in the presence of God. Love of God, which is itself received from God, is an inner flame which cleanses the soul from the residue of sin.¹²

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

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This is neither a scholastic nor Augustinian approach to theology. Speaking of the distinction, Serge Bulgakov noted that the difference between the Western and Eastern approaches is that the Augustinian school takes a juridical approach and uses language from the penal code, while the Dionysian school takes an ontological approach rooted in the mysteries of God's love. Father Bulgakov was a critic of the West for what he saw as scholastic rationalism or "anthropomorphism in thought." Rather, he suggests the corrective in the approach of Dionysius, the Pseudo-Areopagite. I would note that the genius of Saint Thomas Aquinas was the synergy he developed between Augustine, Aristotle and Dionysius. This synergy was sadly lost shortly after his own lifetime. This Dionysian theology is the source of much of the mystical theology of the Eastern Church, as described by Father Louth. Note please that the doctrine does not change. What the great Tradition expresses in both East and West is "the departed are supported by the prayers of Christians, that communion of the living and the departed has not been severed by death, that there is hope of a place of light, a place of refreshment, a place of repose, whence pain, sorrow and sighing have fled away for the departed. At the same time, "death involves judgment and the inescapable realization of what we have made of our lives."¹³

Purgatory is both an encounter with God's justice and God's mercy. Different theological schools explain the doctrine using varying emphases. All schools of theology are careful [mostly] to use Scripture to support their claims. But as Catholic

¹³ Andrew Louth, *Introduction to Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 151.

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Christians (and Orthodox as well) the Scriptures are understood through the interpretive key of Tradition. And Tradition is not a body of texts, but the living koinonia of the Mystical Body. Consequently, the liturgy and the lives of the saints are also witnesses to the Great Tradition.

Sources

The traditional sources for our doctrine on purgation comes to us from the Liturgy of the Church, both East and West. The liturgy is fundamentally doxology/praise that “nourish our hopes and [the] longings learned from the scriptures.”¹⁴ . . . The Roman Ritual . . . expresses the traditional eschatology. . .

Order of Christian Funerals describes the two events this way:

O God, in whom sinners find mercy and the saints find joy, we pray to you for our brother/sister N., whose body we honor with Christian burial, that he/she may be delivered from the bonds of death. Admit him/her to the joyful company of your saints and raise him/her on the last day to rejoice in your presence forever.¹⁵

The Russian theologian, Alexi Khomiakov, reminds us of the foundational truth which interprets our eschatology:

We know that when any one of us falls, he falls alone; but no one is saved alone.

He who is saved is saved in the Church, as a member of her, and in unity with all

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¹⁵ Opening Prayer no. 170, “Funeral Mass” in *Order of Christian Funerals* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1989), 83.

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her other members. If anyone believes, he is in the communion of faith; if anyone loves, he is in the communion of love; if anyone prays, he is in the communion of prayer.¹⁶

In every celebration of the Mass, in the Eucharistic prayer, the sacrifice is offered for the saints, for the baptized faithful, and for “our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection, and all who have died in [God’s] mercy: welcome them into the light of your face.”¹⁷ Fr. Andrew Louth, says that the liturgy is expressing that even for the saints, “their blessedness will not be complete until the consummation of all human life in the last judgment.”¹⁸ He bases this on the work of Dumitru Staniloae, (students of Father De Gaal take note) who remind us of the difference between the particular and the general judgments. Father Staniloae writes:

Because the full blessedness or damnation of each individual is organically bound up with the end of the world and the activity of humans within the world; that means therefore, that blessedness or damnation is dependent on the result of this activity, and that these results, whether good in the kingdom or evil in hell, have eternal consequences.¹⁹

Catherine of Genoa shows us that mystical theology has a role to play in theological reflection. It is one of the integrators of doctrine in the life of the Church.

¹⁶ A. S. Khomiakov, *The Church is One*, trans. William Palmer (London: Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius, 1968), 38.

¹⁷ Eucharistic Prayer II, *The Roman Missal* (Woodridge, Illinois: Midwest Theological Forum, 2011), 789.

¹⁸ Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013), 146.

¹⁹ Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodoxe Dogmatics III*, (Solothurn and Dusseldorf: Benzinger, 1995), 292. English translation taken from Louth, *ibid*.

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Now remember, Catherine never received any private revelation about purgatory. And it is the official teaching of the Church that

The authority of private revelations is essentially different from that of the definitive public Revelation. The latter demands faith. For the former, an assent of Catholic faith is not due ... it is not even possible. [Private] revelations seek rather an assent of human faith in keeping with the requirements of prudence, which puts them before us as probable and credible to piety"²⁰

It is in this way that the inner life of the saints is a source of theological knowledge. Their union with the Lord offers an additional sort of knowledge of how love and understanding interpenetrate one another. The integration of scripture, tradition and the magisterium with the celebration of the mystery of Faith in liturgy and prayer offers a more complete intellectual formation. Without this doxological context, the scriptures are a closed book. Indeed, the doxology of liturgy is the first instance of the living tradition. We do well to remember that in the East, the theologian is one who prays and anyone who does not pray cannot be a theologian. . . .

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Purgatory has been a controversial doctrine between Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians for hundreds of years. How do you solve a problem like purgatory? At a simple level, I am suggestion clarity as to what is doctrine and what is

²⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Message of Fatima* http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html accessed April 2, 2018.

²¹ *Catherine of Genoa: Purgation and Purgatory, The Spiritual Dialogue*, trans. Serge Hughes, intro. Benedict J. Groschel, preface, Catherine de Hueck Doherty (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 36-42.

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theology in the various narratives. The standard narrative has become so polemical that it offers little space for any new understandings. One compelling alternative narrative, based on a different school of theology is that of Catherine of Genoa. This offers a fresh perspective which I have called *Gaudium de purgatorio*. Another, which I cannot explore here, is the literary approach of C. S. Lewis described in his book, *The Great Divorce*.²² In ways I cannot demonstrate this morning, it follows a similar approach to that of Catherine.

Since the doctrine of purgatory remains controversial, the pastoral question which presents itself to us, and which is illuminated by the different approach of mystical theology, is to ask which 16th century approach, Saint Catherine or the Counter-Reformation, is the best resource for the contemporary moment. One approach focuses on justice, the other on mercy. One locates purgation in a place or state, the other locates it in the soul itself. But how will either be heard by the post-modern seeker?

This is why context is important for the interpretation of doctrine by theology. In a world shot through by belief, the stress on justice might be the right path. In a world of atheistic/agnostic doubt, mercy may be more accessible. I will return to this difference in approach at the very end of the address.

[Conclusion: Prolegomena to any future apologetic.](#)

²² C. S. Lewis, "The Great Divorce" in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 360.

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I said earlier that this address was a talk about Christian division and its corrosive effects on evangelization. I lamented the toxic inability of Christians to present the gospel to non-Christians and the seeming obsession of making their co-religionists look ridiculous. I suggested that if we recognize the difference between doctrine and theology, and strive to achieve the integration of theology and spirituality we will travel the royal road and avoid this tragedy.

So, in conclusion, how do we approach apologetics in the post-modern period? My argument is that just as in the 13th century, we should approach the question through the epistemology of the day. One might think that this means a rationalistic argument, because of the Enlightenment, but such thinking would miss the mark. The Enlightenment is actually over, it is simply that many of its adherents have not realized. More than that, post modernism is also over, in the sense that the radical theology it spawned in the Death of God school had its height in the 1960, but then became an exhausted project. The attraction which the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar had during the period which followed the 1960's is an indicator of the next move. Fr. Edward Oakes, of blessed memory, used to say that Balthasar was not a school but an approach. His was a mystical theology, in the sense that I have been using that term throughout this address. It is a theology which seeks to integrate scripture, tradition, reason and experience in a unified manner.

I do not know what the future apologetic will be. My suspicion, however, is that it will be an apologetic of authentic experience. *Sola Scriptura* has given way to *Sola Experientia*. I say "authentic" experience to distinguish it from political correctness

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which can be a crude, relativistic form where post-moderns make truth claims which are to be judged by their correspondence to the experience/identity of the speaker. All one can say in post-modernism is that something is true from and for your experience. Authentic experience is something different, because it is universal. We see this most clearly in the experience of a person who is holy.

My survey of Orthodox Christian theology suggests that we can learn a valuable lesson about using the holiness of our brothers and sisters as a basis for theology. We believe that Tradition is a living thing, not a body of texts. Tradition is, first of all, the liturgy and traditions are the living of the gospel in the Church. We witness this in people's lives. Popular religiosity represents the inculturation of the one Tradition in the particularity of the church's local life. We see it in devotion. Love of God and neighbor are the fruit. We see it also in acts of justice and charity. Together, they stand as the validator of our apologetic efforts. Their capacity lies in the fact that they are both the Tradition authentically experienced.

The key move which Catholic or Orthodox Christianity makes, which is different from either Evangelical or mainline Protestant theological schools, lies in what qualifies as experience on which theology can be based. Which sort of experience qualifies is determined by the living tradition. It is the Church's experience, exemplified, first of all, by her liturgical existence and also by the saints who witness to the transformation it brings.

The post-modern apologetic, then, requires two moves. First, is to stop fighting old battles. Stop letting the other side, modernity, post-modernism, fundamentalism,

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whatever, frame the conversation polemically. Get to the real questions of the present moment, which are not the questions of the 16th or even the 20th century. Secondly, say who you are, not who the other is not. In this second move is a critical epistemological point. When I tell you to say who you are, you is plural. There is no autonomous Christian, no "I" who in isolation works out belief. There is only the plural subject, "the Church," a "we" who speaks with the sole voice of an "I," for she is the mystical voice of the one Body of Christ, the prolongation of the incarnation.

Because of this, she can speak experientially to a world that trusts experience. Intuitively this world knows that not all experience is good. Intuitively this world knows that only certain experiences can form the basis for a life of meaning, purpose and contribution. Intuitively, your generation knows that radical individualism is one of the sources of relativism. Intuitively, you also know that you are interdependent, as the march for our lives shows.

John Henry Newman directed that we should find our unity before the controversies. This remains sound advice, individually and theologically. I have argued in this address that the fundamental theological problem we face today is the separation of theology (especially its speculative dimension) from spirituality. Or said in the language of formation you hear from Fr. Kartje and Fr. Welter, the problem is integration of the four dimensions of formation.

If we want to be successful apologists, in an age when experience is the sole source of authority, then we have to witness to authentic human experience as a reliable contrast to the alternative. During the modern period, the primary religious narrative

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was adversarial. This no longer serves us. The post-modern religious narrative must witness attractive power. I would suggest four things which seem to be attractive to the seeker of the early 21st century.

1. The Bible as the greatest meta-narrative ever told offers a true story which can enlighten every human experience. When read through the living Tradition the seeker finds a hermeneutic which is stable and proven.
2. Theology in its legitimate diversity, so long as it is neither afraid of science nor uncritical before it.
3. Witness of concern for creation, human and otherwise, expressed through Catholic social doctrine which places the dignity of the human person, the common good, the solidarity of the human community and subsidiarity at the center of discourse about ethics and society.
4. Spirituality based on the personalism of the unique Christian doctrine of the Trinity where dualism is overcome for both Deity and creature as “We” becomes the subject “I” in the communitarian life of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Such an integration I found as a young priest in the teaching of Catherine de Hueck Doherty, herself influenced by Saint Catherine of Genoa. It was a teaching which reflected the deep Orthodox Christian tradition of Russian Theology fed by their reception of the *Philokalia* from Mount Athos, and at the same time was what you heard from so many of the *Ressorcement* Catholic theologians from Newman and Moeller, forward into the early 20th century, with Congar, de Lubac, Ratzinger, Balthasar and others.

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This integration is essential for effective post-modern evangelism. Theology is talk about God, but not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world, that it may have life and have it to the full. What approach we take needs to be tailored to the seeker. The post-modern apologetic needs to be a non-adversarial apology. This is what you find in the approach of mystical theology as I have been describing it to you. Both Saint Catherine of Genoa and a very recent saint of the Orthodox Church, Saint Silouan of Athos, agree that God's mercy is a mystery and we must pray that all experience it. Let me close with a quotation from Fr. Louth's book where he recounts an unfortunate clash of theologies between Saint Silouan and another Athonite hermit:

The hermit said to the saint, with evident satisfaction, 'God will punish all atheists. They will burn in everlasting fire.' Obviously upset [the saint] said, 'Tell me, supposing you went to paradise, and there looked down and saw someone burning in hell-fire – would you feel happy?' 'It can't be helped. It would be their own fault' said the hermit. [The saint] answered with a sorrowful countenance: 'Love could not bear that. . . We must pray for all.'"²³

Thank you for your attention.

²³ Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), xiii.