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Pope Francis bows his head in front of a microphone. Men in suits and cardinal's cassocks are

Pope Francis cries as he prays for Ukraine in front of a Marian statue at the Spanish Steps in Rome Dec. 8, 2022, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Marking the 10th anniversary of his election March 13, 2023, he told Vatican News he dreams of a world where people recognize they are brothers and sisters and where they are not afraid to weep and to smile. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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An emphasis on God's mercy has so dominated Pope Francis' pontificate that it should surprise no one that he said he hopes hell is empty.

Yet, a firestorm erupted on social media after Francis was asked in an Italian television interview how he imagines hell given his belief that God forgives everyone who asks.

"It's difficult to imagine it," the pope responded Jan. 14. "What I would say is not a dogma of faith, but my personal thought: I like to think hell is empty; I hope it is."

"What about Hitler?" hundreds of people posted in reply on X, often adding other notoriously evil figures from history, their least favorite politicians or annoying neighbors.

"What about justice?" others asked. "What about the Bible?"

Dozens accused the pope of "universalism," a belief, condemned by the church, that all souls go to heaven whether or not they repented of their sins.

Others, like @Knyexor, tweeted: "The number of people angry about the pope just saying what amounts to 'hell is terrifying, I wouldn't wish it on anyone' is astonishing."

Yet for days following the pope's remarks, X also was filled with people quoting what is often referred to as the Fatima Prayer: "O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell; lead all souls to heaven especially those who are in most need of your mercy."

Doesn't that prayer match the pope's hope, they asked.

The papal remark also was the occasion for dueling Scripture quotations.

Matthew 25:31-46, the "Judgment of the Nations," which Francis often quotes to insist people will be judged by whether they fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited prisoners and welcomed strangers, says those banished from the Lord's sight will end up in "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Then, someone wrote, how do you explain Luke 3:6 where St. John the Baptist preaches about the coming of the Lord when "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

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Or Jesus himself saying in John 12:47: "I did not come to condemn the world but to save the world."

In more than 10 years as pope -- and more than 40 years of ministry before that -- Francis has made clear that he believes evil, the devil and hell exist; in fact, his frequent references to "the evil one" or to Satan were one of the first things people

commented on when comparing his homilies and audience talks to those of St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

At his meeting with cardinals two days after his election, the pope spoke about how the Holy Spirit unifies and harmonizes the church. "Let us never yield to pessimism, to that bitterness that the devil offers us every day," the pope said. Rather, be certain that the Spirit gives the church "the courage to persevere."

Just over a week later, in his homily for his first Palm Sunday as pope, he said that "a Christian can never be sad. Never give way to discouragement." Christian joy comes from knowing Jesus is near, even in times of trial when problems seem insurmountable. "In this moment, the enemy -- the devil -- comes, often disguised as an angel and slyly speaks his word to us."

At one of his first general audiences, he told visitors that Jesus is always near, ready to defend and forgive. "He defends us from the insidiousness of the devil, he defends us from ourselves, from our sins," the pope said. "He always forgives us; he is our advocate. ... We must never forget this."

Long before he announced 2015-2016 would be an extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy, Francis dedicated his first Angelus address to the theme.

"God's face is the face of a merciful father who is always patient," he said. "Have you thought about God's patience, the patience he has with each one of us? That is his mercy. He always has patience, patience with us, he understands us, he waits for us, he does not tire of forgiving us if we are able to return to him with a contrite heart."

The hope that hell will be empty is a hope that God's mercy will prevail -- including by reaching all people through the witness and ministry of other Christians.

In one of his morning Mass homilies in December 2017, Francis said some people have a hard time experiencing the consolation and joy that the good news of God's mercy brings.

As an example, he recalled a priest he knew who was a very good man but was "pessimism incarnate."

The priest, he said, would always "find the fly in the milk," that is, something wrong or out of place.

His brother priests, the pope said, would joke that when he died, he would ask St. Peter to show him hell and then, when he did, would complain about the lack of condemned souls there.