A few days before Easter, there was a news story about whether or not Pope Francis had said that hell did not exist. The Vatican explained that the journalist who had such reported was negligent in his reporting; as a matter of fact, he is known to not take notes during an interview but to write his story from memory after the fact. *America* reported in “Vatican: Claim that pope denied hell’s existence is unreliable,” March 28, 2018 that the Pope was not only misinterpreted, but that he is on the record in several instances in which he affirms the existence of hell.

John writes in today’s Gospel, “Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned (John 15: 6).” When the branch is separated from the vine, it is comparable to us living apart from Jesus, our source of life and nourishment.

Sin is present in the world; when we sin, we separate ourselves from God. And a consideration of social sin is most relevant when applying themes of justice and peace to the scripture. Mark O’Keefe, O.S.B., summarizes the thought of Peter Henriot in *What are they saying about social sin?* (p. 29):

…(1) structures that oppress human beings, violate human dignity, stifle freedom, impose gross inequality; (2) situations that promote and facilitate individual acts of selfishness; and (3) the complicity or silent acquiescence of persons who do not take responsibility for the evil being done….

O’Keefe later (p. 30) explains Gregory Baum’s understanding of social sin:

...First is the level of injustices and dehumanizing trends built into various institutions--social, political, economic, religious--which embody people’s collective life. Second is the level of the cultural and religious symbols, operative in the imagination and fostered by society, that legitimate and reinforce the unjust situations and intensify harm done to people...Third is the level of false consciousness created by these institutions and ideologies through which people involve themselves collectively in destructive action....Fourth is the level of collective decisions, generated by the distorted consciousness, which increased the injustices in society and intensifies the power of dehumanizing trends....

Though we celebrate in the midst of an Easter season, when it can be tempting to think that everything is “sweetness and light,” the truth of the matter is that if it were not for sin, Jesus would not have had a reason to come among us, and that God would have had no reason to take human form. Steve is a Norbertine brother from St. Norbert Abbey, De Pere, Wisc., with keen interests in Catholic social action, the liturgical life of his Abbey, and nonprofit service to his local community.