Is there really a burning hell
or is it just an eternity without God’s love which would be a “hell” like existence?

First it is important to realize the equating of fire and hell arises from Christ’s own words. He tells his disciples to avoid sin or what leads to it. “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”

We also need to realize that Gehenna was a physical place that existed right outside of Jerusalem and was considered accursed as the Kings of Israel had sacrificed their own children through fire to the false gods. As Christian theology evolved over time, this description naturally lent itself to the understanding of the punishment that one would receive in hell. And that it would have a physical component makes sense as people could see exactly where Christ was speaking about.

The Catholic catechism teaches us: Jesus often speaks of “Gehenna” of the “unquenchable fire” reserved for those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and be converted, where both soul and body can be lost. Jesus solemnly proclaims that he “will send his angels, and they will gather... all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire,” and that he will pronounce the condemnation: “Depart from me, you cursed into the eternal fire!” Furthermore, “the teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, “eternal fire” The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.”

Finally, as Catholics we believe that all human beings will be raised from the dead and the body and soul of the person will be united. Human beings are not purely spiritual beings. We are and will always remain physical and spiritual, body and soul. Until the resurrection at the end of time all who die are in a sense incomplete as it is simply their souls that remain intact. But at the last judgement the dead will arise and be made whole and all who are judged worthy will go to heaven in the fullness of their humanity and all who are damned will go to hell in the fullness of their humanity.

Based on what Christ has told us and what the Catechism seems to indicate there may be a physical component to the punishment and torments of hell. How that exactly works out it is difficult to say but to speculate that one may feel the fires of hell through all eternity is not without warrant.