

The Four Last Things, X

Leaving the City of Dis, we accompany Dante and Virgil to the deeper and seventh ring of hell made for those who would not repent of violence. As they approach the ring, they encounter the Minotaur; half-man and half-bull. He fumes “half consumed with wrath,” but he is speechless, as a beast is, because the man that sinks into unjust violence sinks into the level of beasts. The Minotaur should be guarding the place, but is unable to do this since his fury “blinds him with rage,” and while he thrashes about, the poets run past him without his noticing.

Entering the ring they behold the warmongers, the highwaymen, the cruel and bloodthirsty. Here is Alexander the Great, there is Attila the Hun. All these violent souls stand forever in the boiling blood of the river Phlegethon. They do not speak, but Virgil converses with the demonic creatures that punish the violent, who are Centaurs.

This ring has three rings within it, because the sins of violence take three forms according to the victim. Those who did violence to others are punished in the river of blood. Those who did violence to themselves are punished in a malevolent forest, where they become horrid trees. The third ring is inside the first two; a barren plain of sand ignited by flakes of fire that torment the three separate groups who offend God directly: the blasphemers, the sodomites (who do violence to nature, which is the offspring of God), and the usurers; those who did violence to the economy, which is God’s plan of peace for human society.

It sounds a bit strange that the sodomites are punished with the usurious, but Dante has expressed this simply by saying that the sodomite uses something fertile in an infertile way, and the usurer takes something infertile and tries to make it fertile. St. Thomas, following Aristotle in this, states that “it is in accordance with nature that money should increase from natural goods and not from money itself.”

These circles – and the punishment in them – are not at all obvious to modern man, and were difficult for Dante to grasp as well. They are too profound for most in our times, because modern man is largely blind to the holiness of what is being violated.

Blasphemy is an example of this. I think that one reason why so many cannot see the true horror of blasphemy is simply because it is everywhere. If for example, you have a television in your house and watch it, then unless there is an extraordinary care about what is being watched, your home will resound with the noise of blasphemy. And so, we get accustomed to it, and naturally conclude it is not that big of a deal.

There was a man who lived in Rome in 1568. He went into a church and began to shout blasphemies during the Mass. He was arrested for this and spent time in jail. Upon his release he promptly went into another church and did the same thing. This time he was whipped severely and spent even more time in jail. Upon his release he immediately went into a church and blasphemed again. The order came down to the police that the man was to be lined up against a wall and shot, and the execution was carried out. The man that gave that order was Pope St. Pius V. This, to the modern mind, is incomprehensible, and the execution is thought to be worse than the blasphemy.

But not to Dante's mind. He finds the arrogant and unrepentant blasphemer, Capaneus, in the midst of the torments, and even then, Capaneus will not stop cursing God. He will not surrender to God or to truth; he will not acknowledge defeat. That stubbornness is not only absurd, but contemptible. And so, Virgil, who has thought these things through more than Dante hurls the curses back on the head of Capaneus, with scornful justice.

Before we leave to enter into the eighth circle, there are two things about the *Inferno* which do not meet the eye or the ear easily, as they are rather hidden in the *Divine Comedy*. The first of these is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and you shall have hatred for your enemy.' But I say to you: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. And pray for those who persecute and slander you." (Mt. 5: 44-45) Let's consider that phrase "You have heard that it was said." How true this is! Go to any people on the face of the earth; Vikings or Zulus, or Mongols or Democrats, and you'll find the teaching to love your neighbor and hate your enemies. But to love your enemy? This is unique to our Faith. Only Christ taught this, only our Lord ever taught this, and it caused a philosophical and religious earthquake in the Roman Empire when news of it went 'round.

So, if you pay attention to the words of all the characters you meet in the *Inferno*, you'll see that they have this in common: they had love for neighbor or family, and they hated their enemies.

The second hidden thing which comes clear only upon reading the whole *Comedy*, is the emotion which you find in it. That is, there is very little fear in the *Inferno*. There are a range of emotions, but little fear. For example, Virgil exclaims in the seventh ring, "O blind cupidity, both mad and guilty, that in our brief life spurs us on to evil, to keep us here throughout eternity!" You could call that a frustrated astonishment, but not fear. Fearsome things come before our imaginations when we read the *Comedy*, but the fear does not last.

This is because *The Divine Comedy* follows the pattern of the development of doctrine in the history of the Church, which in turn is also the pattern of the growth of the individual soul. That is, we know that no temper of mind is acceptable in the Divine Presence, unless that temper is love. Love makes Christian fear different from servile dread, and love makes true faith differ from the faith of devils. In the beginning of religious life, fear is the prominent evangelical grace to be sure. Yet in the course of time it will be developed. When it is developed, love takes that prominent place which fear held before, yet protecting fear and not superseding it. Love is added, not fear removed, and the mind is perfected in grace by what seems like a revolution. "They that sow in tears, shall reap in joy;" as the Psalm says, yet afterwards still they are "sorrowful," though "always rejoicing."

The love missing in the souls of the *Inferno* is the key to the whole *Divine Comedy*. You'll meet souls in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* who committed the exact same sins as the ones in the *Inferno*. But the ones who went to purgatory and heaven repented, and surrendered to God, and chose to love even their enemies. They are not there because God forced them to love anyone.

If the game of life is played, it must be possible to lose it. If our happiness lies in self-surrender, then no one can make that surrender but the individual soul, though many help him to do it. And all along he may refuse to love. Wouldn't it be a happy thing to be able to say "All will be saved?" But alas, with just a little thought, our reason asks "With their consent or without it?" If we say "without their consent," then at once we perceive a contradiction. For how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary?