

The Purgatorio, I

“And now my song is of the second kingdom, wherein the human soul is cleansed of sin, and rendered worthy to ascend to heaven.”

This second kingdom is purgatory, and Dante conceives it quite differently than most of us. For example, he conceives of it as being an island in the Southern Hemisphere, given that he and Virgil have gone through the earth and come out the opposite side they first descended into the Inferno.

And what a change! He describes what he sees, and we take delight just in the description. “Blue as a sapphire from the Orient, the aspect of the sky shone forth serene from zenith to the rim of the horizon, so that my eyes were filled again with joy as soon as I had left that deathly air which had so sore oppressed my sight and spirit. The lovely planet that incites to love made all the eastern sky to smile, and cast a veil upon the fishes in her train.”

Unlike the Inferno, the Purgatory does not begin by describing the terrible condition of a pilgrim who has lost his way due to repeated sin. Purgatory is not some pale shadow of hell – another place of punishment but not quite as bad – for all the souls in Purgatory are blessed; they dwell in a state of grace, and are protected from sin, and one day they will enter the Paradiso – heaven.

The change here is worth pondering. We know from private revelation such as may be found in the Dialogue of St. Catherine of Genoa, that the souls in Purgatory are overcome with joy when they arrive in purgatory, and discover that they will never commit another sin ever again. They are delivered from offending God or their neighbor for all eternity. We can scarcely imagine such joy, and Dante too is hard put to express it, and calls upon the Muses to bring dead poetry back to life, and even Calliope to amplify his song with harmonies.

And it is Sunday morning, the day of the Resurrection. Every soul encountered in Purgatory will be found living in that greatest of all feast days.

And then the joy is combined with wonderment, when Dante and Virgil are welcomed by someone you would not expect to be there. “I saw, hard by, a solitary shade, in aspect worthy of more reverence than any son should show toward his father.” We learn indirectly from Dante that this man is Cato the Younger. And we are surprised, and bend our heads sideways to ponder how this could be.

Cato was a pagan like Virgil, so what is he doing in purgatory? He seems an odd choice for a welcoming committee. Wouldn't he belong in Limbo with Virgil? And not only that, Cato committed suicide. How can someone who did that be on his way to heaven? Didn't we meet souls in the Inferno that committed suicide and have a special place there created just for them? Isn't suicide one of the worst sins a man can do?

All this is true, yet the medieval mind, as exemplified by St. Thomas Aquinas, had an approach to things that we moderns often miss. *Semper distinguere* he said. Always distinguish. Always make distinctions. And the Purgatory of Dante is filled with these. In fact, all the sins you find being punished in the Inferno, are the same sins being purified in the Purgatory. Yes, all of them, even the most vile, even the most shameful of them.

Now the last thing we want to do with this is to commit presumption, such that we delude ourselves into thinking "Well, yes, this is a mortal sin I'm doing, but there's still a good chance I can get into purgatory with the reception of the Last Rites. Things are going pretty well on the whole, and God judges the whole of a man's life, not just one or two things."

My dear parishioners, salvation is not a game. Taking such chances is the very definition of being a fool. Every one of us has noticed how hard it is to turn our thoughts to God when everything is going well with us. "We have all we want" is a terrible thing to say if the "all" does not include God. In such a state, we find God an interruption. St Augustine says "God wants to give us something, but cannot, because our hands are full – there's nowhere for Him to put it." Or as someone once said, "We regard God as a parachute; it's there for emergencies but he hopes he'll never have to use it."

May we never, ever determine to get into heaven as cheaply as possible. With such a determination, we won't even make to purgatory.

Back then to Cato, what distinctions could we make here? When we meet him, he is utterly unlike the guardians of hell; he is measured, calm, dignified, and obedient to the will of heaven. Dante uses him to speculate on the Judgment, because what Cato did needs context. That is, when Julius Caesar was massing his armies to impose his will on the Senate of Rome in order to become a Dictator or tyrant, Cato bitterly opposed him.

When the handwriting was on the wall, and it was clear that Cato and his allies would lose and Caesar would win, there was great danger of proscription, which meant that all Cato's allies and their families would be either killed or exiled into slavery. So he takes his own life to save them.

And we naturally think, "But we can't use a bad means to a good end." And this is true. However, we must make a distinction. As Dante explains, Cato took his own life, not to enjoy the false freedom with which the lie of suicide seduces, rather he does so to restore and protect the freedom of others. And real freedom – the liberation of the will from sin – that is the purpose of purgatory. So Cato lays down his life to set men free – and thus he becomes conformed to the example of Christ.

The way he lived also conformed to Christ. Cato was a noted orator, a distinguished senator of Rome, but with a huge difference to most of the Senate. He was absolutely true to his word. He was utterly courageous. He was immune to bribes, and was completely stubborn to even the suggestion of corruption. Everything about him was pure and noble. Yet he does what is wrong to achieve a good end. So he does not go immediately to heaven like a martyr who lays down his life for others. The martyr's life is taken, and Cato took his own.

So there he is, born in 95 BC, still in purgatory 1,540 years later. But one day he will be in the Paradiso, in heaven.

Just like Dante had to go down into the inferno to understand sin, he must now cross over the water to the island of the Purgatorio. And as he and Virgil had to cross over a river of death and darkness in a foul boat piloted by a demon to enter hell, so he will need to cross over to the island over beautiful, clear sapphire water, hearing the song of birds, and boat piloted by an angel, whose great wings point up to the sky, and the light from him illuminates the scattered clouds above by reflection of his light. And Dante bows in deep respect for the angel pilot.