

The Purgatorio, XI

The terrace of gluttony is reserved for those who had a disordered love of the pleasures of food and drink. Dante and Virgil leave this terrace and climb up to enter the terrace of lust, which is reserved for those who had a disordered love of the pleasures of the body. Just how disordered this can become may be seen in our times by the fact that the fertility-industrial complex has stored millions, *millions* of “spare” embryos in freezers, the result of in vitro fertilization. Some of these embryos have been used for medical and scientific research – which makes me shudder- but most embryos will be stored indefinitely, which ought to fill me with something, but mostly makes me numb from the sheer extent of this cold, calculating, industrial regulation of human life.

The terraces of gluttony and lust are linked, just as the capital sins of gluttony and lust are in our world. People who glut their bodies with food or drink set themselves up for a fall into lust. Thus the poets learn at the entrance of this new terrace that human nature is not fulfilled by mere nourishment, nor is the body ever fulfilled by mere reproduction. Instead, a human being – body and soul together – is ordered to and created for charity, the heavenly love, and for the Holy Eucharist, which is the bread from heaven.

When they enter into the terrace of lust, which is the last of the terraces before paradise, they hear a voice cry out, “But I have not known man.” Those are the words of the Blessed Virgin. And as her role at the wedding feast of Cana provides the spiritual sustenance to the souls atoning for gluttony, so Mary is the first exemplar of the virtue of chastity, which militates against the vice of lust. These are the words she spoke to St. Gabriel at the mystery of the Annunciation; words which testify to her eternal chastity.

And chastity is not portrayed here as mere abstention from pleasure; that is properly called “continence”. Chastity is a positive virtue, not merely abstinence; it is the clear, burning purity of Mary’s soul. She is not the Mother of God despite being chaste; she is the Mother of God *because* she is chaste, and because her chastity is infinitely fruitful.

Now in the terrace of lust, we are confronted for the first time in the *Purgatorio* with the use of fire to purify souls. And through the burning, the souls are healed from “the last wound of all.” For while lust may be seen as the most base of sins, it is nonetheless the most common, and often the most difficult to overcome. St. Thomas More called the Sixth Commandment “The difficult commandment.” This is why it is at the top of the terraces.

There is a wall of fire that separates the terrace of lust from all the other terraces. Dante balks most understandably. Who would not? But the reason for his hesitation is that up to this point he has seen all the punishments of the inferno and the demons and the terraces of the mountain of Purgatory, and has not been touched or harmed by any of these. So Virgil has to remind him that this fire, as frightening as it is, will do no permanent harm to him. It is only temporary.

St. Thomas Aquinas says that the fire in Purgatory is the same fire that burns in hell. But it has an utterly different effect on people, depending on their disposition. In hell, the disposition of the damned is like that of Gestas, the bad thief, crucified on Our Lord's left. He is guilty, but can only condemn Christ and complain of his suffering. St. Dismas, on the right of our Lord, thinks nothing of himself except that he is deserving of his punishment, and he is the only one there other than Our Lady who sees that Christ is a king.

But reason is not enough to get through great pain. Reason often fails at these times, and here it fails to give Dante the courage that he needs. So Virgil tells him that to reunite with his beloved Beatrice, who is in paradise, which is the highest level of Mt. Purgatory, he must pass through fire. It is love, then, and not reason, that will get him through the fire. It is love that will give him courage.

Love of a person, that is. Certainly we should turn immediately to Our Lord or Our Lady to get through the fires of lust, but often we need to turn to a saint, which is one reason why God makes saints. Take St. Joan of Arc as an example. Numbers of books, plays, songs, films by other saints, or non-Catholic Christians or even atheists were composed about her, because she cannot be explained by mere human reasoning. For example, medieval cavalry did not use some spirited ponies – a medieval war horse was huge – bred to carry very heavy loads while suited in steel armor, and bred to fight and kill. It took years and years of hard training to learn how to ride one of those fearsome beasts. And after you learned how to control it, then you had to learn how to ride and control it without the reins, and learn how to use a shield in one hand and a weapon in the other. It was so difficult to do that there were few knights in those times. So how did a teenage girl learn how to do it in a couple of weeks? This is simply not possible.

But more to the point was the effect she had on the troops. Now, in the movies, she is portrayed as putting on her suit of armor in a tent, with a nun assisting her, since it wasn't possible to dress in the armor of the day without assistance. But in reality, she dressed in the field, sharing the same hardships of freezing cold rain and mud with all the other soldiers. Her page was a man, not a nun. She had no tent. And soldiers of that day were not known for their chastity, any more than in our times. Yet every single man who saw her said that they could not feel even slightly any lust, even seeing her naked. They said to desire sin in any way when she was around was not possible, even if they tried. Even their language cleaned up, and they said it was not possible to curse or blaspheme or cuss if she was near. So when we choose a saint, and get close to one, they have a similar effect upon us.

I have a friend who once confided to me that for him, it was Santa Lucia – St. Lucy. He carries a holy card of her over his heart. He runs to her in prayer and tells everything to her of his trials, and her intercession is powerful. It is a person then, not a concept, that gets us through great trials.

Just so, when Dante hears Virgil speak of Beatrice, the very thought of seeing her enkindles an interior fire, extinguishing the fire of lust, and he plunges into the wall of fire – a fire so hot that he would have thrown himself into boiling glass in order to cool off. The trial is terrible. But Virgil is beside him, encouraging him, and whispers into Dante's ear of Beatrice, "I think I can already see her eyes."

They pass through the fire and are met with the voice of an angel singing, "O all ye blessed of my Father, come." They take a moment to rest, and though unharmed, Dante is exhausted, and he sleeps. As he sleeps, he is set free and his will surges with delight to climb the rest of the mountain. The next morning, Virgil says his last words to his companion, and they are words of liberty. "Lord of yourself, I crown and miter you."