

The Four Last Things, IV

Before Dante goes to the first circle of hell, which is Limbo, he tries to peer down into the inferno, but sees almost nothing. Isn't this just like evil? If we fall and do something evil, and try to comprehend it and ask ourselves questions about it like "Why did I do that?" we are stymied. Like being in a cave where you can't see your hand in front of your face, we can ask that question a thousand times and won't get much of an answer. Evil is an absence. There is nothing there. The harder you stare at it the less you see.

And so Virgil has to remind our protagonist that in these regions there is no sky, no sun, no moon, and no stars. There is no natural light in other words. No power of natural reason is sufficient to grasp these realities. Instead, Dante is reminded by Virgil of his baptism, essence of his faith. And remember, Dante was lost in the stupor of sin. That's why he began this pilgrimage in the first place. We understand then that he has taken his baptism for granted. He has not considered baptism, except for a passing notion that it is somehow important.

In this too he is everyman. When I give instructions for matrimony, one of the things that needs to happen is to record the date and place of baptism and to obtain a certificate of it. But when I ask the great majority of those seeking matrimony, what the date and place of their baptism was, almost invariably they don't know. "You mean you don't know when original sin was washed away from your soul? You mean you don't keep the anniversary of the day when you were adopted by the Most High Lord? You mean you don't know when it was that sanctifying grace was first poured into your soul, and with it the Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity? You mean you don't know when it was that eternal life began in your soul, and you became a member of the only true Church founded by Our Lord?" Well, actually, I don't really ask those questions. No need to badger the young couple. But maybe I should ask, because St. Vincent de Paul once said that fulfilling the vows of Baptism is the whole of the Christian life.

So Dante needs the reminder. He needs to remember when his baptismal name was written into the Book of Life. He needs to ponder the mystery of good that is baptism. For he has forgotten the importance of the name.

We get a name at baptism, which signifies a new life of grace. And we get another one at confirmation, which marks a great turning point in our pilgrimage, which is also a new life – a life lived on a very different level, even though we are scarcely aware of it. When religious take their solemn vows, they take yet a third name, again signifying a different mode of existence. And if we enter heaven, we shall receive another name, again signifying another new mode of existence. Most have never heard of this name. It is mentioned in the Book of the Apocalypse (2:13). "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches: To him that overcometh I will give the hidden manna and will give him a white counter: and in the counter, a new name written, which no man knoweth but he that receiveth it."

A counter in this case is a stone. So this new name will be written in heavenly stone, and no one else will know it except our Lord and the one to whom it is given. Of all our possessions then, what could be more our very own than this new name which even in eternity remains a secret between God and the recipient of it? And what does this secrecy mean?

For this I really like the explanation of C.S. Lewis, who thought that each of the redeemed shall forever know and praise some one aspect of the divine beauty better than any other creature can. Why else were individuals created, but that God, loving everyone in heaven infinitely, should love each differently? And this difference, so far from impairing, floods with meaning the love of all blessed creatures for one another, which we call the communion of saints. If all experienced God in the same way and returned Him an identical worship the song of the Church triumphant would not be a symphony, but would be more like an orchestra performance in which all the instruments played the same note.

Dante has not thought then of his baptism as he should. And so he must look at Limbo, and meet the souls there who have not had baptism. He and Virgil leave the sounds of the tormented, and enter into something utterly different.

We came before a noble citadel engirdled seven times by lofty walls; a lovely river served them as a moat. This we crossed over, as upon dry land, and with those sages I passed seven gates and came upon a meadow, fresh and green.

They have entered Limbo, a word which comes from the Latin *limbus*, meaning border. It is described by Dante as a place of perfect natural happiness. The Church has never solemnly defined Limbo, and we are not required to believe in it. For a long time many Catholics thought that for example, unbaptized children would be sent to hell, but punished in the mildest way possible. This was the position of St. Augustine. But this was unsatisfactory to the scholastics, in particular St. Anselm. And it was St. Thomas Aquinas who thought that since hell was a place of eternal punishment for unrepentant mortal sinners who had rejected God, and since the unbaptized could not enter heaven, then there should be a third place and state of being called limbo.

But you might remember that St. Thomas, and the vast majority of our Fathers and Doctors believe that the loss of heaven and the Beatific Vision was a far greater punishment than any sensible torments of hell. So how could limbo be a place of happiness? St. Thomas added that the souls in limbo do not have any knowledge of what they have missed. They are in a state of ignorant bliss, of perfect courtesy, and perfect natural virtue. And it is in this sense that limbo is described in the *Divine Comedy*.

Dante leaves the first and almost blessed circle of limbo to enter the second circle of hell. And he and Virgil come immediately to Minos.

There Minos stands and snarls, with gnashing teeth; examines, at the entrance, every sin, and by his writhings judges and condemns. I mean that when the soul is foredoomed to grief comes in his presence, 'tis confessed outright; and that discerner of transgressions wills to which infernal it shall be plunged, coiling his tail around himself, each turn denoting a degree of woe. Before him stand ever waiting multitudes: each spirit passes alone before the judgment seat, speaks, hears its fate, and then is hurled below.

These are in great distinction from the virtuous pagans of the first circle. Minos is horrible and "grunts like a bull." This is the first of many associations in the *Inferno* of sin with an array of deficiencies, and these are meant to arouse our contempt; the slide of man into a beast, physical awkwardness as a sign of spiritual disorder; a darkened intellect sinking into the stupid and the inane.

In this second circle then, we meet sinners whose love was disordered; they loved what is genuinely good, but they loved it in an evil way. The human body is, as expressed in the 139th Psalm, "wonderfully made," fashioned by the very finger of God. It is right to love the body. But precisely because the body is holy – a temple of the Holy Ghost – it can be profaned or fouled; such is the sin of the adulterers. These sinners who subjected their reason to their passions suffer an embodiment of that essentially spiritual sin. They are snatched up in a whirlwind, shrieking, lamenting, and cursing God.