

The Four Last Things, VIII

Remember that Dante had not just fallen into sin, but into repeated sin, over and over, and found himself utterly lost and alienated from his true home. He cried out for help. Our Lady heard him, and she knew that he was a man who had never really looked at or considered hell in any depth or length of time. Maybe the thought of it occurred to him once in a while, but it quickly left.

Why was the attempt to think about hell so brief? Because he didn't know *how* to think about it. He needed a guide. And he had never really thought about or faced purgatory, and he was a man who never really thought about heaven. He would need a guide for those too.

In this he is every man. Very few, very few of us ever think deeply about or look into the abyss of hell, nor do they ever really focus their gaze on purgatory or heaven. With a shrug of the shoulders, their eyes do not fix on what is eternal. They doggedly keep their eyes on what is temporary; on this life, which St. Paul calls a passing shadow.

So his guide Virgil takes him down into hell, so that he can see for himself the truth written in the Book of Wisdom, 11:16-17 "For according to the thinking of their irrational iniquity, because some, going astray, were worshiping mute serpents and worthless beasts, you sent upon them a multitude of mute beasts for vengeance, so that they might know that *by whatever things a man sins, by the same also is he tormented.*" That is one of the purposes of the Divine Comedy, to enable us to understand that by whatever things a man sins, by the same also is he tormented.

And so Dante and Virgil go deeper into the inferno, into the Fifth Circle, there to see a strange spring, stream and marsh. They have arrived at the marshes before the river Styx.

We cut across the circle to a bank above a spring, which bubbled as it ran through a deep gully leading further downward. Blacker than ink was that forbidding stream; by a rough path we took our way below, and when that dismal stream has reached the foot of the malignant dusky precipice, it spread into a marsh that men call Styx. And I, who stood intent to gaze and wonder, beheld a host of spirits foul with mud, all naked, and with hatred in their looks. They struck each other, not with hands alone, but with their feet and heads and breasts as well, and tore each other piecemeal with their teeth.

The goodly master said, “My son, see there the souls of those whom wrath has overcome; also I wish that you should truly know that other people lie beneath the water; their sighs produce those ripples on the surface that you can see, whichever way you look. Sunk deep in loathsome slime, they try to say: “Sullen were we, in the sun-gladdened air, bearing within ourselves the fumes of sloth now we are sullen in this black morass!” This dreary chat they gurgle in their throats, unable as they are to speak it clearly.

The fourth circle of hell contains then two related groups of sinners – the greedy and the prodigal. These remember, are two distinct sins based on the same principle, namely, an immoderate or disordered attitude towards wealth. In the fifth circle there are also two groups of sinners, but we are surprised at first that they should be grouped together. One group is the sullen, and the other the wrathful.

It would be useful here to know a little etymology of the words. The word sullen comes from the Middle English *solein*, meaning something that is persistently and silently ill-humored, and it was a word also used for a slow moving stream. Another translation is sloth, which was a Middle English word that meant slow, tardy, or sluggish. That’s why Dante describes the punishment of the slothful as being in a sluggish stream, or the slow moving, brackish water of a marsh. Wrath is an Old English word which means angry, but literally meant tormented or twisted, like the face twisting in rage.

So the question remains, why are the slothful punished in the same circle as the wrathful? These sins seem so opposite. The answer has to do with an inner, spiritual faculty we have, which Aristotle and St. Thomas called “the irascible faculty.” It is an ability or capacity to grow angry at injustice, and to strive – not in pride but in generous self-devotion – for that which is truly excellent. But this gift may be abused by yielding to the pleasures of wrath or by refusing to recognize the beautiful, preferring instead the mud of sullenness; a spiritual torpidity we call “sloth.” So wrath and sullenness are basically two forms of a single sin: anger that is expressed (wrath) and anger that is repressed (sullenness).

And for their punishment, they continue in the same things they were doing here on earth, though stripped of any pleasure. And notice, the wrathful say nothing, the sullen say nothing.. The wrathful scream in rage, the sullen sigh, and the sighs make little ripples or bubbles in the black inky stream. How appropriate! Speech is a sign of intelligence, but wrath and sullenness have the characteristic of living without intelligence. The wrathful man is often incoherent if he does try to speak, and the most the sullen man can muster is to shrug his shoulders and say “whatever.”

Fr. Kluge addressed the vice of wrath in one of his sermons, so here let us turn to St. Thomas for a deeper understanding of sloth. Sloth in general then, is voluntary and culpable repugnance for work and for effort of any kind, and thus a tendency to idleness, or at least a negligence, and to cowardice, which is opposed to generosity.

We’re not talking about the languor we feel when we are sick, rather, this is an evil disposition of the will and the appetites, by which we fear and refuse effort, wish to avoid all trouble; what the Italians call a *dolce farniente* – a carefree idleness. The sullen are like a parasite then, who live at the expense of others, and are as tranquil as a koala bear when undisturbed in their idleness, but cranky and grumpy if obliged to work.

When idleness affects the accomplishment of religious duties necessary for sanctification, then we call this *acedia* (the root word is similar to acid); a disgust for spiritual things, which leads to the performance of religious duty negligently, or to shorten them, or to omit them altogether. It is the cause of lukewarmness, and Our Savior used some His harshest words of all for the lukewarm. “I wish that you were hot or cold, but since you are neither hot or cold, I will vomit you out of my mouth.”

So what is the remedy? In the natural order, it is usually to be found in good recreation. Often that is something gravely missing in many of the lives of the faithful. They aren’t doing anything for fun; anything which truly recreates. Mother Goose was right. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

And on the supernatural order, to recover the spirit of faith, enthusiasm, and generosity in the love of God, we must every day courageously impose some sacrifices on ourselves in those matters in which we are weakest. It is the first step that costs; but after a week of effort the task becomes easy: for example, to rise at the appointed hour and to be obliging to everybody.

Thus instead of losing time which flees, we recover it and gain it for eternity. And gradually we recover spiritual joy, that of which St. Paul speaks when he writes to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice.