

The Purgatorio, II

“Five of them were wise, and five foolish.” When we read this in the Parable of the Bridegroom about the virgins who were invited, we are immediately struck with the reality that Our Lord was speaking about believers. And the Fathers of the Church took this very seriously and conclude that at any one time, only half of believers are acting with wisdom, such that they have oil for their lamps; the oil a metaphor for sanctifying grace.

Who then, makes it to Purgatory? Is it many or is it few? Our Lord said that the path to perdition is wide and that there are many who take it, and the path to heaven is narrow and there are few who take it. We do not have the numbers of these; they have not been given to us. All we know is that “few” does not mean “many”, and “many” does not mean “few.”

And we know that the Fathers of the Church took a strict view on this, seeing in Noah’s Ark a typology for salvation. Of the many species of animals, only a few of each species found a place in the Ark. And as the animals could enter into the Ark only on its left or port side looking from the stern, so the only ones who will make it to purgatory will be the ones who enter through the wound on Our Lord’s left side which leads to His Sacred Heart.

But the Fathers were writing about heaven and hell. What about purgatory? This was speculated upon much later. Medieval saints wondered about one of my favorite lines from scripture said by St. Isaias the Prophet, “The bruised reed he shall not break, and the smoldering wick he shall not quench.” This gives me hope because I am a bruised reed, and I hope I am at least a smoldering wick upon my arrival at the Judgment.

And in 1769, James Boswell had this exchange with Samuel Johnson:

“What do you think, Sir, of purgatory, as believed by the Roman Catholics?”

Johnson: “Why, Sir, it is a very harmless doctrine. They are of the opinion that the generality of mankind are neither so obstinately wicked as to deserve everlasting punishment, nor so good as to merit being admitted into the society of blessed spirits; and therefore that God is graciously pleased to allow a middle state, where they may be purified by certain degrees of suffering. You see, Sir, there is nothing unreasonable in this.”

Boswell: “But then Sir, their Masses for the dead?”

Johnson: “Why, Sir, if it be once established that there are souls in purgatory, it is as proper to pray for them as for our brethren of mankind who are yet in this life.”

These are the souls we shall meet in the Purgatorio – souls whom were not obstinately wicked but neither were they so good as to merit immediate heaven. The story is told you know, of St. John Bosco, that there was a woman whose husband had died but did not receive the sacraments and did not practice his faith. She was in anguish about the state of his soul, and could find no consolation, when her parish priest told her to speak with Don Bosco. When she walked up to him, she did not ask the question, but seeing her, he said simply, “He’s in purgatory.” She was astounded and asked how this could be, and the saint said it was because he always stopped whenever he passed a church with the Blessed Sacrament, and took off his hat. He was a smoldering wick. Not much flame there!

But enough of a spark was left in him of our holy Faith, that after his judgment he went to purgatory.

Now let's not think this gets us off the hook! St. Paul said we were to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. He did not say to work it out by tipping our hats. *To whom much has been given, much will be expected* Our Lord said. And we have been given much.

This applies then to the first group of souls that Dante and Virgil meet at purgatory. They are the late-repenters; souls who dawdled and delayed and postponed up to the moment of their deaths; that time in life when they could no longer commit the sins in which they had indulged themselves.

And the next group are those who died a violent death, and they are different than the negligent, who barely stirred themselves to look at Dante, let alone greet him. The souls who died a sudden, violent death approach Dante with eagerness.

They beg for Dante's intercessory prayer; they know the miracle of grace, because they were blessed with that miracle at the moment of their deaths. They did not see their sins by their own light, but by the light of heaven that burst through their darkness and made them see. Their violent lives ended in both violence and peace. And so in purgatory the violence of their extreme longing to see God is coupled with the peace of knowing that someday, they will.

The first character they meet in this part of the Divine Comedy is Bonconte. He was saved from eternal damnation through the Blessed Virgin Mary's intercession. He died with her name on his lips and received the saving grace of God. Because he lived a violent life, Bonconte has no one to pray for him; his widow, his relatives all think he must be in hell. He wants Dante to spread the news of his story among the living; not only because Bonconte will benefit from their prayers, but also because his story is a lesson about God's mercy that all need to hear.

We meet one other character here; the soul of a woman named Pia, who had been murdered by her own husband. There are only a few lines about her, yet they give us the sense of her womanly character filled with disappointed love, just indignation against her husband, and the bittersweet memory of her wedding day. But she hopes that her words might get to her husband, and do him good.

Dante explains in the opening lines of the canticle, Purgatory is the place in which "the human spirit purges himself, and climbing to heaven makes himself worthy." What is this climbing?

He paints with words the picture of an island mountain, the only piece of land in the southern hemisphere. Divided into three sections, Antepurgatory, Purgatory proper, and Earthly Paradise. The late repenters, the violent with Bonconte and Pia are in the Antepurgatory, not quite ready to enter Purgatory proper, because they delayed their penance on earth, and their entrance to Purgatory is justly delayed. The upper part of the mountain has seven terraces if you will; each one corresponding to the seven capital sins. And the top of the mountain is paradise, where Dante will meet the one who inspired the Divine Comedy.

God grant that as we follow Dante through the Inferno and up the Purgatorio, we would remember our own deaths, and prepare for them. Spending huge amounts of time upon health in this short life,

and neglecting the preparation for the next life which is forever, is the very definition of imprudence.

And to prepare for that time in life which will sever us from this world forever, we could pray the beautiful hymn called the *Te Lucis*, which is said or sung each night in the Office of Compline, before we close our eyes to sleep.

To thee before the close of day,
Creator of the world, we pray
That, with thy wonted favor, thou
Wouldst be our guard and keeper now.

From all ill dreams defend our sight,
From fears and terrors of the night;
Withhold from us our ghostly foe,
That spot of sin we may not know.

O Father, that we ask be done,
Through Jesus Christ thine only Son,
Who, with the Holy Ghost and thee
Doth live and reign eternally. Amen.