

## The Purgatorio, IV

When we consider the late repenters, and how they lacked zeal in this life, and are only beginning to recover it in the antepurgatory, two ways come to mind as to how zeal can diminish and even disappear.

One way is through error. Some six hundred years before Christ was born lived a prince in India whose name was Siddhartha Gautama. Later people simply referred to him as the Buddha – the enlightened one. He arrived at the conclusion that the question of joy was so complicated that the only way out was to eliminate joy altogether. That is, if you can have joy, then that means you can have pain which is experienced when joy ends. Life, decided the Buddha, was so spoiled by suffering that the less you wanted to live it the better. Do away with joy and you will not want to live. This bland indifference to human emotion may have something to recommend it to some, but you'll find nothing, absolutely nothing like it in the Gospel. Yes, this is a valley of tears to be sure, but the Gospel would have us take pleasure and pain, and sadness and joy and fear and anger and make them into a positive thing by turning them into prayer as Our Lord turned His crucifixion into salvation.

In contrast with Gautama we could take St. Francis of Assisi, who embraced equally the beauty of creation and the ugliness of leprosy. But those statues of the chubby contented Buddha have him with his eyes shut. He can't see either beauty or ugliness. Buddha feared joy. St. Francis radiated joy. Buddha kept life away as far as possible and died in a state of placid boredom; St. Francis welcomed every moment of life as it came along, and despite his blindness, sickness and poverty at the end, he died in a state of ecstatic joy.

The thing about error that is often so tricky is that the word means a step off the path. That is, embrace an error about something really important, and you're off on another path. Which may run parallel to the true path even for some time. But sooner or later, they diverge. The path extolled by Christ goes uphill, is narrow, is hard to walk in itself, and on top of that He said we'll need to carry a cross.

The path error takes is flat, or going downhill slightly, is easy to walk, and if there is a cross, it is preferably made out of Styrofoam with a couple of wheels at the bottom.

The second way zeal is lost is similar to the first, which may be understood in the strange episode of Homer's *Odyssey*, where Odysseus lands on the island of the lotus eaters. He orders his men to get fresh water and some food, but also find out whose island it was, and what sort of people lived there. Odysseus says "They started at once, and went about among the Lotus-eaters, who did them no hurt, but gave them to eat of the lotus, which was so delicious that those who ate of it left off caring about home, and did not even want to go back and say what had happened to them, but were for staying and munching lotus with the Lotus-eaters without thinking further of their return; nevertheless, though they wept bitterly I forced them back to the ships and made them fast under the benches."

Notice the emphasis on the home. His men eat the lotus, and then have no care of going home. The desire to go home is central to the *Odyssey* as the hero has nostalgia, which is a Greek word deriving from *nosta* – home, and *algo* – pain or sickness. He is homesick. Sometimes by the way, those who love the traditional Mass are accused of having mere nostalgia, and longing to go back to earlier times. But this does not explain 90% of the parishioners here, who were not raised in the Traditional Latin Mass. It certainly does not explain the priests here, since none of us were raised in it. But nostalgic? You bet I am. I am homesick for my true home which is heaven.

Losing that longing is something I've seen many times. You see this amongst the youth, and yes at this parish too. If a boy or a girl smokes marijuana, which is a 21c lotus, and gets high even once, they will leave off caring about their true home. Any zeal to return to their true home will go up in the pot smoke they exhale. Heaven knows I wish there were benches on a ship to which they could be fastened until the euphoria wears off, but alas, no such benches exist.

Now we must enter Purgatory proper. But before we do so with the eyes of Dante, I'd like to give an overview of what purgatory is, using the insight of a marvelous French spiritual writer, Mgr. Maurice D'Hulst.

On leaving this life, many souls saved by mercy are completely strangers to heaven; they know not its tongue; they are not fitly clothed to enter into it; they would not be able to find their places there. Then, mercy sends them away to be purified. And there are three phases to this purification.

The first is humiliation. God gives them His light, and they see themselves as they are; the confusion thence arising is an agony like that of Jesus in the Garden, when He found Himself covered with the sins of the world. On earth, these poor souls had drunk sin like water; now they are filled with the horror of it, and they find they are loaded with it. This torment lasts a long time unless it be shortened by sacrifices and prayer rising from the earth.

When these souls have won at their own expense a true notion and hatred of sin, God, by a second illumination, shows Himself to them from afar in His beauty, and kindles in them desires such as they knew not what it was to possess. Then they remember the time when God was quite near, when He was knocking at the door, and when they would not open, preferring some pleasure or plaything or piece of money. Now they are all on fire to go to Him, and it is He who draws back. These desires are a torment, but a torment that purifies and prepares the way for love.

When the second work is over, love comes upon the scene. It enters into souls and melts them with its heat. Then, they recall their scorn, and the repulses they inflicted on love; and perfect contrition, the contrition of great penitents, such as they were incapable of at the moment of receiving absolution here below, the contrition of love, takes possession of them, purifies them inwardly, and raises them to heaven.

What a difference from the Inferno! In that sorry place, the souls there bear the burden of time, but without hope of going anywhere; it is a dread, dreary sameness, and everything is perpetually old. But in Purgatory, things happen to the souls there that strike them with joyful wonder; they are learning, and they are growing. In Hell, the souls are crammed into a funnel of punishment, with no freedom of movement. In hell, the souls go nowhere at all.

But in purgatory, the souls are on their way, like we are. As they climb the mountain, they are refined, and as they get nearer to their destination, they see more and more. It is as if the Truth becomes for them wider and wider, like what happens with climbing any mountain.

As St. Malachi the Prophet once said speaking of God 3:3, "And he shall sit refining and cleansing the silver." I asked a silversmith once, "How do you know when the silver is finished begin refined?" He said, "When the silversmith can see his reflection in the silver."