

## The Purgatorio, IX

Purgatory is both a place and a state of being. It is a real, physical place, but a place which cannot be found by any human means, just as the Garden of Eden cannot be found by any human exploration. An angel with a sword of fire will prevent that.

But no concept of purgatory is complete until it is understood as a place and state where true freedom is achieved. It is a realm of liberation.

The same goes with the Scriptures, and in particular the Old Testament. In the literal sense at first reading, countless readers are repelled by the harshness of the stories. There was even a heretic named Marcion who thought the Old and New Testaments were so different that it was not the same God who authored them.

And so the true concept given of the Scriptures is given to us first through the ancient commentaries of the Rabbi's, eventually called the Talmud, which St. Paul studied intensely. He believed in much of their commentary, and some of it found its way into the New Testament, but lacking in the commentary *was* the New Testament, and the ones whom God raised up to put these testaments together in magnificent harmony were the Fathers of the Church.

We should have no problem believing the stories of the rabbi's to be true, and not just on the authority of St. Paul. It is a matter of common sense. Those stories were told over and over again by the campfires in the Sinai desert, with the crackling of the thorn bushes and acacia wood. Like when I would read a story to my nephews when they were little, as soon as I finished, they would ponder a bit and then say, "Read it again." I feel certain that the children hearing these stories clamored to hear them again. And just as if you tell a story wrong, the child will know, so the accuracy of the telling long before Scripture or the Talmud was written, ought to be accepted.

One of these is about the Tower of Babel. Much is contained in the Book of Genesis about it, but the rabbis passed down another account of it which is worth hearing. That is, the Tower was constructed by hand. A large brick was made with much labor by a group of workers, who then gave it to another group to fire and harden the brick. Another group then took the brick to the base of the tower, where it was passed to another group to carry it up, to what became a prodigious height. From morning until night the work went on, with no break.

But when a mishap occurred, and the carefully made brick fell to the earth and broke, a groaning, a great wailing of sadness took place that could be heard from a long distance. Yet when one of the workers on the scaffolding fell to his death, there was no wailing, just silence, and the living went on with their bricks. No joy, no comforting of the afflicted, no hearing of the orphan's cry, no concern for the widow, no help for the sick, just that wretched, stupid, hateful tower was all that mattered.

What a state of misery! What a grim, grueling existence the builders of that tower lived. And so God, to liberate man from that misery, gave a strict punishment, which was to confuse their tongues, so that they could not coordinate enough to finish the tower.

So it is with all His decisions – allowing confusion here, allowing even war there – all to frustrate the progress of sin and initiate the first steps on a pilgrimage to true liberty.

As they are engaged in an ultimate liberation, the souls in purgatory are not bound to this or that terrace by anything except their own free will. They are free to get up, free to walk around, and free to go up higher or lower on the mountain of purgatory anytime they want. But this is not true liberty; they do not go where *they* want, because by embracing their suffering, their wills are being made to conform to God's will, and they choose with all their hearts to remain on a particular terrace until – as we might adopt a lesson from our Lord Christ – until the last penny is paid. They all want to climb the mountain, but want more to stay where they are as long as God wills it.

Here on earth, they ignored His will in one or many things, but now they embrace it freely and with good cheer as on their terrace they find healing punishment.

But while Dante and Virgil are speaking to the souls on the terrace of avarice, an earthquake shakes the whole mountain, and from the throats of every last person in purgatory arose a tremendous cry of exaltation; *Gloria in excelsis Deo!* The poets wonder what this can mean, when the poet Statius comes up and explains to them that every time a soul completes its purgation, and the gates of heaven are opened to receive that soul, the mountain of purgation trembles.

The trembling is a sign of love. I remember well March 19, 1976, at 11 in the morning when at a Mass, I first believed in the Real Presence, and I knew more surely than I knew anything, that our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ was in the Most Holy Eucharist. The belief has deepened over the years, but I have long lost the consolation of the trembling.

Oh, to think for a moment about the entrance to heaven! Just as the news of a soul entering it elicits great joy and burning expectation in the poor souls, so should there be joy in us at the mere thought of a soul making it to heaven.

I spoke once to a couple who attended the Solemn High Pontifical Mass of a Pope, and the occasion was when the Ven. Pius XII canonized St. Therese of Liseux. When the pope arrived on the piazza del San Pietro, the immense crowds roared with approval. Trumpets blasted out exaltation; firecrackers went off – those being the poor man’s 21-gun salute – and all tried to follow into the basilica. What jostling and noise. What a sea of noisy humanity. Yet by the consecration of the Mass they told me, “The whole world was silent. We trembled in awe.”

And why is there such little exaltation in our times? We exchange sometimes trite bromides such as “She is in a better place.” Do you mean like a liquor store is a better place than a vape shop? Is this mediocrity the result of infection by the world, or shall I say the world’s religion; a religion of mediocrity which masquerades as equality? Is it the loss of exaltation in the sacred liturgy? Yes, somewhat, surely these are factors.

But more deeply, are Christians not very shy of even mentioning heaven sometimes? We are afraid of the "pie in the sky" and of being told that we are trying to escape from the duty of making a happy world here and now into dreams of a happy world elsewhere. But either there is a pie in the sky or there is not. If there is not, then all of Christianity is false, for the doctrine is woven into its very fabric. If there is, then this truth must be faced, whether the government official cares or not.

Is it that we are shy of thinking heaven a bribe and that if we make it our goal, we shall no longer be disinterested and lose our desire of it for the pure sake of God? But this is not true. Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul could desire. It is safe to tell the pure of heart that they shall see God because the pure in heart are the *only* ones who really even *want* to see God.