

The Purgatorio, VII

When Dante and Virgil step onto the terrace of envy, they are startled to find the sinners there sitting, propped up back to back, and their eyes sewn shut with wire. The reader of the comedy is shocked at this, repelled by what at first seems cruel and unusual punishment. We can't see very well what could be the purpose of this at first glance.

But that is because we don't see very well what envy is. Ponder the very word. It's from the Latin *invidia*, a turning in of sight if you will. This habit of turning inward, of looking only for one's own good and turning away from the good of others, is in a sense worse than pride. Pride is the most fundamental of sins to be sure, which seeks to puff up, to go up where it does not belong. But envy seeks to tear down the good accomplished by others. It is nastier than pride then in one way.

And others will see this. That is, if we give ourselves to envy, we will be left all alone sooner or later because no one will be interested in our company, as they do not want to be the victim of our next act of envy. Even friends will grow sick and tired of how we are going to take down this or that other person. And ultimately the envious man will experience the isolation of hell unless he repents.

Even the atheist Bertrand Russell knew that "Of all the characteristics of ordinary human nature, envy is the most unfortunate ... not only does the envious person wish to inflict misfortune... but he is also himself rendered unhappy by envy...Whoever wishes to increase human happiness must ... diminish envy."

So the eyes of the envious once looked upon the good things their neighbors enjoyed, and instead of deriving joy from this sight, they derived anger – a desire to deprive their neighbor of his blessings – and this cuts them off from the love of neighbor. So by being painfully deprived of their sight, and being back to back, they are forced to rely upon their neighbors.

The complete reliance on their neighbors tames the savagery of envy – a vice that destroys even the possibility of community. This was the sin of Cain, who wanted for himself the favor that God had bestowed upon Abel, and in the end killed him, rather than deriving joy from the friendship with God that his brother enjoyed.

I say the savagery of envy – which may be too strong of a word – but I don't think so. I listened to the interview of someone who called himself a survivalist (this was in the 70's when that odd and vicious movement was alive), and someone from the TV show *60 Minutes* was sent to question a representative. The fellow was simply asked, what is survivalism? The answer was simple. "Say you have something I want. Well, I kill you and take what you've got. And now that thing is mine. That's survivalism." It reminds me of present day anarchists who might respond with a slight difference. I think they would respond, "Say you have something I don't want you to have. I burn it, and now you don't have it." This is the sort of thinking one finds in hell.

But for those who repent, Purgatory restores sight, restores friendship. Sin isolates, but God is love, and therefore the nearer we come to God, the nearer we come to our neighbor. Thus in Purgatory the souls there not only have their old friendships repaired, but make new friends as well, only without a shred of envy but rather solicitude, which is joy for the good of others.

For instance, Dante comes across a man lying face down and in deep, intense prayer. But when Dante speaks to him, the man immediately gets up and answers his questions without reserve or hesitation and in good cheer, even though his atonement is interrupted. It is a pope, Pope Adrian V. Adrian V was good in leading the Church regarding matters of faith, and was an able administrator. But he was a fairly constant source of scandal because of his avarice. He was envious of the wealth of others. This it seems to me is in contrast to the pope of our day, who leads the Church rather well in simplicity of life, and doesn't have a shred of avarice. But he is a fairly constant source of scandal regarding matters of faith.

But notice, despite what Pope Adrian did, or failed to do, Dante falls on his knees recognizing and honoring the man's high office. However the pope checks him firmly in this, and calls Dante "brother."

Is there not a longing in our souls for community? Has not God made us for it? We receive it here and there, in bits and pieces almost...and what delight I take in seeing you at Mass, adoring the One, True God in spirit and in truth, or seeing you after Mass with the parents chatting or the young people in a group talking or the children running and laughing. It is how things should be.

But what of a deeper longing that no parish, no neighborhood no nation and even no family can ever fully satisfy? For that longing, only the cloister can satisfy it for some here below, and only God can satisfy it completely in the next life.

God calls no one to religious life as an escape from the hardships of marriage or the factory or the office or politics. Cloisters are not places for self-seekers. The monastic cowl or veil will never fit on the head of a coward, or on someone who is just running away. But if a young man or woman has a sober, thoughtful and prayerful awareness of their limitations, and has a sober assessment of the seductiveness and disintegration of modern society, then they will naturally see religious life as a wise option.

There is a reason for the noticeable absence of monks, friars and nuns in the inferno and even in the Purgatorio for that matter. It is an easy thing to fall into mortal sin out in the world. It is exceedingly difficult to commit a single mortal sin in a good cloister.

Fallen, weak and sinful men and women are far more likely to save their immortal souls in a community mandated by the Church for that express purpose. If such was the case in the bygone days of Christendom, how much more advantageous is religious life in our times of institutionalized vice and of state-of-the-art temptations!

How many lonely young men, sitting on their beds late at night, wish they had the courage not to visit certain websites on their cell phones...Let these young people run to the cloisters instead, where their cells will be computer-free but crucifix-fitted, and where in a communal room the Internet will be used only, if at all, to order new candles and incense, or to answer prayer requests left on the community's website.

How many young women, weary of hoping for a trustworthy partner, will reluctantly slip in their handbag the pills they should never have bought in the first place on their way to that party, feeling that 'there seems to be no other way to get a man's attention'?

Let them fly to a good convent instead. There, their faces surrounded by a comely wimple and bodies with a beautiful habit, their hearts supported through sisterly friendship and enthused with holy purity, they will strive under the constant protection of the manliest most chivalrous and most gallant of all friends, the Lord Jesus Christ, for whom every trusting soul is unique; or as Solomon put it: *One is my dove, my perfect one.* (Cant. 6:8)

And for the children here, the question is not “What are you going to be when you grow up?” The question is, “What does God want you to be when you grow up?”