

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 44

Dante's *Inferno/Purgatorio/Paradisio*

Teach and learn Dante in a one-hour class?
It's daunting! But if we work hard with great care
We'll be literate before the time is passed.
So we begin with a poem, if we might dare¹
For Dante wrote in verse; it seems we should too.
As you read and listen, you will need to stare
So take a moment as you sit in your pew
Do you see the way these verses end in rhyme?²
Scholars call the pattern "terzine,"³ and you'll see
The lines end with rhyming every other time
And the rhyming lines then build on each other
As the poem grows, the net effect is sublime!

Okay, enough of that! Dante had over ten years to work on his poem, and we do not! So, we should stop rhyming and get to learning! Before we leave the subject of Dante's poetic structure, we should add two more interesting notes! First, Dante managed not only to rhyme in the pattern noted, but also to give each line exactly eleven syllables!⁴ Second, when Dante wrote, about 12 different dialects were being spoken in the various parts of Italy. Dante was from Florence and spoke the Florentine dialect. Dante's poem was so powerful that it became *the* Italian language, the same Italian used today.

¹ But not in the footnotes!

² This is a contribution of Christianity to Western civilization that we have not really covered. Going back to Biblical Literacy (the classes on the Psalms, for example), we remember that Hebrew poetry was built around successive lines that were parallel in thought. Hebrew poetry did not rhyme. Similarly, Greek and Latin poetry was more concerned over timing and syllables, than with rhyme. It was Christian songs that brought rhyming into verse. It was relatively unknown before. By Dante's time, we see the rhyming brought into poetry where it is still used today.

³ Terzine is the rhyming pattern where the lines are grouped in threes. The first three lines rhyme in an *a-b-a* pattern. Then, the next three rhyme in a *b-c-b* pattern. The following three lines will be *c-d-c*, etc.

⁴ We also imitated this pattern at the beginning of this lesson! Scholars call this "*hendecasyllabic*" from the Greek "*hen*," which means "one," and the Greek "*deca*," which means "ten." Hamlet's famous line, "To be, or not to be, that is the question" is hendecasyllabic.

We are looking at the three works that form Dante's trilogy called "The Divine Comedy."⁵ There are over 100 English translations of the work. Some maintain the poetic structure, others are written in more easily understood prose. Dante scholar Joseph Gallagher wrote that "there are said to be more books written about *The Divine Comedy* than about any other single work of literature," except for the Bible.⁶

The influence of Dante's work can hardly be overstated.⁷ But, why do we study it in Church History Literacy? First, it is the most monumental piece of Christian writing for almost a 1,000-year stretch of Christian history. Second, it gives great insight into the religious views as well as a person's daily life in Dante's era. Third, *The Comedy* will provide inspiration for countless pieces of Christian fiction to follow, from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*. Finally, we might get some insight that wakes us up and changes a little of how we see ourselves and our own Christian walk.

The Divine Comedy is written in three volumes. They are the *Inferno* (Hell), the *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and the *Paradiso* (Paradise). Dante was big on the number "three." As a holy number, it represented the Trinity, God in his fullness. Dante chose the Trinity of "three" for the structure of the entire *Comedy*, but Dante did not stop using "three" with the three volumes. Each individual volume is divided into sections (called "Cantos"). There is an introductory Canto and then 33 for each of the 3 volumes (totaling 100 Cantos). The "three" structure does not stop there. Remember the rhyme pattern? It is a three-line rhyming pattern. Add to that the fact that each line has 11 syllables, and the three-line rhyming scheme produces exactly 33 syllables within each verse.

⁵ Dante called his work simply, "*The Comedy*." Commentators who wanted to stress that this was a sacred poem which bore the imprint of heaven's hand added "*Divine*" to the title around one hundred years later.

⁶ Joseph Gallagher, *A Modern Readers Guide to Dante's The Divine Comedy* (Liguori/Triumph 1999) at xi.

⁷ T. S. Elliot learned Italian just so he could read the *Comedy* in its original language. Elliot would write, "Shakespeare gives the greatest width of human passion; Dante the greatest altitude and depth. They divide the modern world between them; there is no third." Harold Bloom, ex-head of the Library of Congress wrote that Dante and Shakespeare do not "belong" to the Western Canon; "They *are* the Western Canon." Rodin's statue, *The Thinker*, was Rodin's effort at capturing Dante and his essence. Many symphonies and other musical works have come from the *Comedy*. Entire encyclopedias have been written on it as well. Michelangelo illustrated a volume of the *Comedy*. Raphael included Dante in two of his Vatican frescoes. There are well known illustrations of the *Comedy* from Dore A (1833-1883) as well as Blake and Botticelli.

We will look briefly at Dante's life to put his writing the Comedy into perspective. We will then probe the first volume (the *Inferno*) following the basic story line, and detail a few sections of each part to better understand some of Dante's points. We will then give a more cursory explanation of the other two volumes.

One more word before we begin. *The Comedy* is not what we today call a "comedy." There is really nothing "funny" about it (though one can see a bit of humor in a few passages). In Dante's time, a "comedy" (Latin: *Comoedia*) refers to a work where the main character has a happy ending.

DANTE'S LIFE

Dante Alighiero was born an Italian Catholic in Florence, Italy in 1265. He lived to be 57, dying of malaria in September 1321. His parents were neither wealthy nor poor. Dante's mother died when he was between 5 and 8. His father remarried and had three more children. Dante's father then died when Dante was 18, but Dante remained close to his half-siblings for the rest of his life. At the age of nine, Dante fell in love with the beautiful "Beatrice" (who has quite a major role in the *Comedy*). However, he married another. At the age of 12, Dante was engaged to Gemma Donati. They later wed and had at least three children—two sons and a daughter.

Within Florence, Dante took a civil position of merit! He became what we might today consider the mayor. The job lasted two months. At the time, great civil discord engulfed Florence and its surrounding area. The "Guelphs" and the "Ghibellines," two rival powers, competed for control of Florence. The Guelphs⁸ came into power and, although Dante counted himself among them, they exiled Dante from Florence. Subsequent to the exiling, a death sentence was announced upon Dante should he return to Florence.

Dante spent the last 20 years of his life wandering in the countryside and towns other than Florence, exiled from his home and family, including his wife and children. It was during this exile that Dante wrote his Comedy.

As we consider the Comedy, we might begin by quoting from Professor Gallagher,

Here then is the masterwork written by a man separated by exile from wife and children, and under a death sentence—a man with no wealth, no high-born family connections, no fixed address, no church status, no political base, indeed with a slandered political reputation. Yet he dares

⁸ The Queen of England has Guelph ancestry!

to do the unthinkable: to write a work of high seriousness encompassing the whole universe—not in the obligatory Latin, but in a vulgar tongue still in the turbulent state of formation.⁹

DANTE'S *INFERNO*

We should never forget our Biblical Literacy as we study our Church History Literacy! As we consider Dante's work of fiction about what awaits in the afterlife, we should remember that the *Comedy* is a work of imagination and fiction. It may be a divine comedy (again, not in a funny sense) but it is *not* divine revelation!

We begin our study of Dante's *Comedy* looking at the first volume, *Inferno*. The plot line is very simple. The introduction (Canto I) sets the stage. At middle age (35ish), Dante is lost walking sleepily in a dark, shadowed forest. As dawn is coming, Dante believes he has found a way out of the woods, but his path up a mountain is blocked by three different wild animals. The animals (a leopard, a lion and a wolf) frighten Dante, divert him from his exit, and drive him deeper into the forest. Dante then meets the dead poet Virgil¹⁰ who explains he has come to guide Dante through Hell and Purgatory. Virgil adds that another (Beatrice) will then guide Dante through Heaven.

The setting is the evening of Good Friday. The journey through Hell will take roughly two days, one day to go through Hell and one day to get back out! Thus, we see Dante going into Hell and returning on Easter/Resurrection Sunday.

Dante starts his descent into Hell with the help of Virgil, his guide. Dante places Hell in the bowels of earth. The journey is downward away from the "living surface."¹¹ As Dante enters Hell, he walks through the gates inscribed:

⁹ Gallagher at xxv.

¹⁰ Virgil (70–19 B.C.) was an ancient Roman poet famous for writing the *Aeneid*. This 12-volume work recounted a legend of Aeneas, a Trojan who came to Italy and became the ancestor of the Romans. Virgil's account became the national myth, of sorts, for the Romans. Together with Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, the *Aeneid* makes up the three great poetic adventures of Greco-Roman civilization. Even today, Latin students read and study the *Aeneid* (usually in about the third year!).

¹¹ While Dante did not have a concept of the earth as a full globe, he certainly did not see it as flat! Consider his view of earth as an inverted bowl, or half a ball. When Dante descends into the center of Hell, he spirals down in circular patterns until he reaches what is, in essence, the center of the world. At the center, he then has a gravity change and returns on the other side of the world (or opposite end of the inverted bowl!)

THROUGH ME THE WAY INTO THE SUFFERING CITY,
THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE ETERNAL PAIN,
THROUGH ME THE WAY THAT RUNS AMONG THE LOST.
JUSTICE URGED ON MY HIGHER ARTIFICER;
MY MAKER WAS DIVINE AUTHORITY,
THE HIGHEST WISDOM, AND THE PRIMAL LOVE.
BEFORE ME NOTHING BUT ETERNAL THINGS
WERE MADE, AND I ENDURE ETERNALLY.
ABANDON EVERY HOPE, WHO ENTER HERE.¹²

Dante writes of Hell in concentric circles. He follows the circles and they go deeper and deeper into the earth. Each circle of Hell has different kinds of lost souls whose sins vary within the layers of Hell. For all layers, however, the wretched and painful noises make it hard to believe there might ever be a worse level. There are no happy souls in Hell!

The first circle (called “Limbo”) has those who were not baptized into the church (men, women and children) along with those who lived before Christ but failed to worship God in some fitting fashion. Virgil tells Dante that a “Great Lord with a crown of Victory” [whom we understand is Jesus, even though Virgil did not know him] came into Hell/Limbo just shortly after Virgil arrived (Virgil died in 19 B.C.) and carried off a number of souls including Abel, Noah, Moses, and others.

In this limbo, the souls live eternally lamenting their absence from God’s presence. Dante never hesitates to put actual historical figures in the places where Dante believes they belong. This is true for famous people as well as actual contemporaries of Dante. So in limbo, we have Dante meeting the famous poets Homer, Horace, and Ovid.

Souls that do not live eternally in the limbo state, actually go into an appropriate circle of Hell. These souls find their destination by switch of Minos’s¹³ tail.

Dante actually journeys through each of Hell’s circles, often visiting with the miserable souls found there. The souls inhabiting the various circles typically have their greatest guilt from sins that are of the same “type.”

¹² There are many, many translations of the *Comedy* in English. We will be using the poetic translation by Allen Mandelbaum (1980) (Canto III, 1-9).

¹³ In Greek mythology (which Dante draws from extensively), Minos was a cruel king who fed children to his Minotaur, a creature that was half man, half bull. Virgil in his *Aeneid* had Minos as a judge of the dead.

In the second circle, we see a “hellish hurricane, which never rests, drives on the spirits with its violence: wheeling and pounding, it harasses them.” Dante hears the “desperation” and “mighty lamentation” of the souls whipped about by this furious storm. These cries come from “those who undergo this torment [and] are damned because they sinned within the flesh, subjecting reason to the rule of lust.” The image Dante gives is that of innumerable souls being thrown about without purpose or direction by a violent wind and storm. The picture is clear – those who live their lives thrown about by the wind of lust, lose their direction, their purpose, their moorings and will be condemned to such justice for eternity.

The third circle is “filled with cold, unending, heavy and accursed rain.” There are “gross hailstones, water gray with filth” and the ground smells rancid. The sinners in this level are the gluttons in life. Never satisfied in life without more, these souls suffer an eternity of an unending, assaulting rain of misery.

The fourth circle has the souls of misers and squanderers together! Dante finds those who greedily held onto their possessions on the same level as those who wasted their possessions. Both the misers and squanderers spend eternity pushing stones in their circle of Hell. As they howl loudly over the strain and pain, they put their chests against the huge stones to roll/push them. The misers push one direction and the squanderers push the opposite. Of course, since they are pushing in a circle, they eventually bump up against each other. At that point, the misers yell, “Why do you squander?” and the squanderers yell, “Why do you hoard?” Then, they turn around and push their stones the opposite direction in a circle only to meet again and continue this for eternity.

One cannot miss the lesson of those who fail to use their possessions for God’s purposes in life. Whether by hoarding or squandering, the poor steward is pointlessly toiling in ways that amount to little more than pushing a boulder that will never meet its end purpose. Dante includes at this level some notorious clergy, including some popes and cardinals!¹⁴

The fifth circle has sullen and slothful souls living in a swampy morass gurgling just under the surface. These are people whose eternity is spent hitting each other and “not with hands alone, but with their heads and chests and with their feet.” They also tear “each other piecemeal with their teeth.” Which sinners spend eternity in this horrid state? “The souls of those whom anger has defeated!” Their anger gave them an eternity “wedged in the slime” and “bitter in the blackened mud” in the swamp of destruction.

¹⁴ Dante was a believing Italian Catholic who had respect for the office of the Pope, but had little respect for many who had held that office. He has no trouble placing different popes in Paradise, Purgatory, or even Hell.

The next levels of Hell are enclosed within the walls of a city called “Dis.” The river Styx surrounds the city. The city’s architecture includes the towers of the Islamic mosque. The inhabitants of Hell from this level on are those who actively and aggressively set themselves against God. Dante finds thousands of fallen angels here. In the sixth circle are “arch-heretics” and their followers. Dante calls out Pope Anastasius by name finding his tomb on this level. Dante explains that these are people who spent their lives teaching a road to death, while claiming it was a road to life. They now spend eternity trapped in the very flaming tombs they laid out for others with their heresies.

As Dante comes to the seventh circle, he finds three rings within the circle. All of the rings, and those inhabitants of the seventh circle, are punished eternally for the violence they lived in life. Those who lived violently against others find themselves in boiling blood for eternity in the first ring.

In the second ring are those who were violent against their own bodies (people who committed suicide). They are doomed eternally to being gnarled and thorny bushes and trees that speak only when someone breaks their branches, although they moan in pain and misery constantly.

The third ring has those who spent life violent against God and his creation. The violent against God are the blasphemers. Having spent life in defiance of God, who started creation placing man in the Garden of Eden, Dante has blasphemers spending eternity in a dry desert where flames fall constantly from the sky. The blasphemers have an eternal posture as well. They spend eternity lying flat on their backs forced to look up at the heavens they spent life blaspheming.

A second zone in this ring has those who were violent against God’s creation by living in sodomy. They spend eternity in the dry barren desert that defined their life. A sodomite life that by definition is dry, barren, and fruitless.

The third zone has the souls that were violent against God’s creation making money from usury (charging outrageous interest rates for loans to people who were in desperate need for money). Dante contrasts these people against the Sodomites, though they both end in the same circle of Hell! The sodomites took something that was fertile (sexuality) and made it infertile (through sodomy). The Usurers took something that was sterile (money) and made it fertile by loaning it to those in need at abusive interest rates. Both are considered violent against God and his creation by turning His creation around on its head.

Circles eight and nine are the last two circles in Hell. They are reserved for those who purposefully lived lives of fraud and treachery. In Circle eight, there are ten

pockets or ditches that have souls of those who committed deliberate, knowing evil. These pockets have those who were:

- Pimps. These are constantly whipped by demons in eternity (appropriate since they spent life in service of those same demon lords with such purposefully evil choices).
- Flatterers. These spent life puffing people up with lies in order to get what they desired in life (their pocket is full of human excrement...in today's parlance, they would be spending eternity in Bull excrement!).
- "Simoners" (from Acts 8 where Simon Magnus sought to get God's holy power working in him by paying money). Dante here includes Pope Nicholas III. These souls spend eternity buried head first in rock with flames burning on their feet.
- Sorcerers/Fortune Tellers. This is one of the few places in Hell that is quiet. For these souls spoke on earth when they had no business speaking! These souls also have their heads twisted backwards and are forced to spend eternity walking backwards. This is just punishment for those who spent life trying to see ahead where man was not to look (Astrology was big in the middle ages. Dante and Aquinas were two out-spoken critics of looking to the stars for future and fortune.)
- Corrupt politicians. This sixth pocket has corrupt politicians immersed in a lake of boiling tar. It speaks for itself!
- Hypocrites. Dante sets out a conversation on this level with burdened travelers who can't find their way and who are being deceived by those giving directions. They spend eternity in a horribly painful journey constantly lost and deceived.
- Thieves. These people lose their identity in eternity. They are souls that are besieged by snakes, get bitten, and are then transformed (some into snakes themselves).
- Evil Counselors. Those who spent life giving evil and fraudulent advice are set for eternity encased in their own individual flames.
- Sowers of Discord and Schism/Division. People who spent their lives causing discord and turning people against others spend Dante's eternity before a devil with a sword that cuts their bodies open from the chin to the crotch. The wounds heal, only to be reopened by the demons sword, over and over for eternity. Dante places Muhammad and his successor Ali in this pocket.¹⁵ Potiphar's wife is also found here!
- Counterfeiters. These falsifiers of reality (including alchemists, perjurers and other falsifiers) spend eternity contracting all sorts of different diseases.

¹⁵ Many, if not most, Arabic translations of the Inferno leave this passage out!

Giants from the Bible (*e.g.*, Nimrod from Genesis 10) surround the ninth and final circle. Inside this circle, the very pit of Hell, is a frozen lake.¹⁶ The final circle is for traitors and it has 4 zones. The first zone is named “Caina” after Cain, who slew his brother Abel. This is the area for traitors to their families. In the second zone are political traitors who spend eternity frozen up to their necks in the frozen lake. The third zone has the traitors to guests. The final zone (named “Judecca” after Judas Iscariot) has its sinners totally encased in the ice in all sorts of contorted positions. At the center is Satan himself. He has three heads in a perversion of the Trinity. While in God we see “power” (Creator God the Father), “love” (Jesus God’s love for the world), and “wisdom” (God’s Holy Spirit), in Satan we see a head of yellow/white (for impotence in contrast to God’s power), a head of red (for hatred in contrast to God’s love), and a head of blackness (for madness in contrast to God’s wisdom). In the mouth of the center head of Satan lies the ultimate traitor of eternity...Judas Iscariot.

Having plumbed the depths of Hell, and hopefully learned its lessons, Virgil leads Dante back out the other side of Hell and returns to earth’s surface on Easter.

PURGATORIO

When Dante leaves Hell and resurfaces on earth, he finds himself at the foot of a mountain island. It is Purgatory where, under Dante’s Catholic belief system, souls correct their flaws as they prepare to enter God’s Paradise.

The initial groups Dante meets are souls that were excommunicated (who are detained from proceeding through purgatory for a period 30 times longer than they were excommunicated), as well as those who delayed repenting until right before death. They are delayed entrance for the same time they lived on earth.

Dante then goes through seven terraces of purgatory. The terraces correspond to the seven deadly sins. The souls in each level can proceed only upward, since the goal of each is reaching God in Heaven. They can only move forward during daylight hours because the light of God is their guidance.

The first terrace is pride. These souls carry giant stones on their backs and are unable to stand up straight. This is to teach that pride weighs down a soul and should be cast off.

¹⁶ Yes, Hell is supposed to be “hot,” but Dante has the innermost pit of Hell frozen. There is a point where freezing is so intense that it burns hotter than heat (much like “freezer burn” that can occur in an icebox).

The second terrace is envy. As a falconer would train a falcon by sewing its eyes shut, so the eyes of those here are sown shut. They are clothed in fabric that is indistinguishable from the ground. The goal here is to learn there is nothing worth envying. God will direct the souls love toward him rather than the life or possessions of others.

The third terrace is wrath. These souls walk around in burning, foul-smelling smoke to learn how wrath blinded their vision on earth.

The fourth terrace has sloth. The lazy have to run everywhere here as a lesson for zeal in desiring penance.

The fifth terrace has the greedy and extravagant lying face down. They are there to learn to turn desires for possessions, power, or fame into a desire for God. Until they learn such, they are unable to move.

The sixth terrace has the gluttons. These hungry souls are unable to eat. To make things worse, they stay near cascades of clear, cool water which they are unable to drink. The goal is to starve the gluttony out of the soul!

The seventh terrace is lust. Those who committed sexual sin are purged through an immense wall of flame. This is to correct misdirected sexual desire into a love for God and his holiness.

After the seventh terrace is learned, Dante finds himself at the Garden of Eden, the summit of the Purgatory mountain. There, Virgil (an unsaved soul) leaves because he can go no further. Dante then meets his beloved Beatrice who guides him the rest of the way. The souls ready to leave Purgatory drink from two rivers. One causes the soul to forget its past sins. The second allows the soul to remember good deeds.

PARADISO

Beatrice then takes Dante up through the nine spheres of Heaven. Dante quickly explains that he is providing only what humanity can understand.

All the levels of heaven experience God. Indeed, all the levels are heaven. But, Dante gives nine different spheres based on levels of love a human is able to give to God. Noteworthy people found along the way include Solomon and St. Francis of Assisi (4th Sphere). In the fifth sphere, we find Joshua and other warriors for God.

In this book, we get a bit more of Dante's theology. For example, in the second sphere, Beatrice explains God's salvation. She explains the "mankind lay sick, in

the abyss of a great error, for long centuries, until the Word of God willed to descend.” Man’s nature “had been banished from paradise, because it turned aside from its own path, from truth, from its own life.” Then, Jesus died, and “from one action, issued different things: God and the Jews were pleased by one same death; earth trembled...and Heaven opened.” Beatrice explains further that “God had to pardon man.” Man could not do so on its own. “Man, in his limits, could not recompense; for no obedience, no humility, he offered could have been so deep that it could match the heights he meant to reach...Man lacked the power to offer satisfaction by himself.”

At the end of the journey, Dante comes face to face with God Himself. He has a vision that words cannot express nor can human mind comprehend. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three circles joined and yet separated. Dante does not understand how the circles fit together, but Dante’s heart and life will never be the same after the vision.

A FINAL NOTE

Dante died in exile and was buried in a Franciscan Church in Ravenna. For centuries, an apologetic Florence has tried to move Dante’s body back to Florence. Florence has even reserved a “spot” for Dante’s remains inside the Santa Croce Church. Ravenna has never consented to the move! However, Florence is allowed to supply the oil that burns in the lamp at Dante’s tomb.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Beatrice is right. All man has sinned and fallen short of God. “Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin.” Rom. 3:9
2. Dante does not give us a theological production on justification. It is important as we contemplate eternity that we remember the words of Jesus himself. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16. Paul would say it, “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9).
3. For those who still choose to reject the sacrifice of Jesus, Jesus himself goes on to say at the end of John 3: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” John 3:36

4. God's word gives us a "glimpse" of what hell will be like:

Luke 16:19 – 31 "...Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man ... At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus ...The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire'. But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'"

And yet, the Bible speaks most often about Hell in simple straightforward terms such as, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).