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Dante’s Divine Comedy: 14122

The Simoniac’s Condemnation

Throughout the journey in *Inferno* by Dante Alighieri, the characters Dante and Virgil encounter various members of the Catholic clergy, specific and nameless, who suffer eternal damnation. These encounters serve as representations of Dante’s concerns with the Catholic Church as an institution. This ongoing feud between the renowned poet and the Church comes to a head in *Inferno* 19, verses 90-117, in which the character of Dante begins a tirade that addresses not only the actions of Pope Nicholas III, but of the Catholic Church as a whole. Based on his statements and his expressions in *Inferno* 19’s diatribe, I believe that Dante, driven by the Church’s failure and corruption, inscribed these grievances and condemnations not only due to his personal convictions, but also out of a sense of duty and responsibility.

Whilst traversing the 8th level of Hell, Dante and Virgil come across a pit full of popes guilty of simony. Finding the Pope Nicholas III protruding from the pit, Dante begins a diatribe against the disgraced clergyman. Beginning in verses 90-93, Dante declares, “Tell me then, just how much treasure / Did our Lord require of Saint Peter / before he entrusted him with a Key?” (*Inferno* 19.90-92). He poses this question rhetorically, knowing that the former pope is very much aware of the answer. In doing so, the poet invites readers to harken back to the origins of the Church. Specifically, to the days when Jesus Christ and his apostles preached Christianity to the gentiles at the expense of none other than themselves. As such, the practice of simony, the lining of one’s own pockets in exchange for supposed forgiveness and blessings, would thus,
according to Dante, be a betrayal of not only the faithful Christians who uphold the virtues outlined in the Bible, but also a direct violation of the faith the perpetrators claim to serve. The clergy’s betrayal of the faith placed in them by their followers enraged Dante, who sought to make more of his contemporaries aware of said betrayal. However, the act of simony is merely the first of Dante’s many grievances.

The “Key” (Inferno 19.92) which Dante refers to, I believe to be a symbol of Christianity and its ability to guide souls to heaven. In passing this key to Saint Peter, the first Pope, Dante refers to how the mission of the Catholic Church is to guide souls of great faith to heaven, regardless of wealth, property, or social status. The act of simony removes the central idea of faith from the equation, and when committed by Cardinals and Popes only serves to further the Vatican’s political agenda. Dante believed that the church has no right being involved in politics and that the institution had neglected its duty to guide souls to salvation. Dante believed that the church should be stripped of its spiritual purpose absent of any political power as a result. Political differences aren’t the only inspiration for Dante’s fervor, but personal passion serves to motivate Dante as well.

The fervor and vehemence of the rhetoric within the diatribe leads me to believe that the vendetta between Dante and the Catholic Church is not only a matter of professional and ideological disparities, but also of matters personally dear to the illustrious scholar. Previously, towards the beginning of canto 19, in verse 18, Dante writes, “in San Giovanni, my beautiful church” (Inferno 19.18). By referring to his church in a possessive manner, Dante conveys a sense of strong personal affinity with church which to me seems to indicate the belief that the church belonged to himself, a member of the congregation. This understanding, that of the
church belonging to the congregation instead of the papal hierarchy, would further explain his indignation as to the actions of the Papal office. Christian belief attests that the church is God’s body on earth. By controlling the people through both spiritual guidance and through earthly law, the Papal office imposed its own will upon all of Christendom. As a devout Christian, Dante would be infuriated that he and the congregation were being manipulated by the very individuals who were ordained to serve them. The substitution of the Divine Word for the ambitions of man would offend Dante’s Christian sensibilities and serves to add more religious fire to the rage burning within Dante. This anger would grow over time and eventually, it would lead to the bold language found in subsequent verses.

Unable to restrain himself any longer, Dante uses the most pointed and controversial language found in this entire diatribe. The poet declares, “The Evangelist John saw shepherds like you / in the woman who sprawls on the water’s blue / and whores herself out to the kings of the Earth,” (Inferno 19.106-108). Likening the Church to a prostitute, devoid of orthodox virtue, is already a powerful and controversial metaphor which is taken even further by the poet’s word choice. In saying that the Catholic Church “whores” (Inferno 19.108), Dante makes a statement far more bold than simple condemnations and claims of depravity. For Dante Alighieri, an educated scholar, a former politician, and poet to resort to using such a vulgar word in the 14th century is extremely powerful and shocking to not only the social elite of the era, but to the peasantry as well. This choice of language speaks as to the extent of Dante’s hatred and anger for the Catholic Church. In uttering such powerful condemnations, I believe Dante was likely hoping to inspire others to share in his outrage and put to words sentiments
harbored but not yet expressed by the greater population. In airing these grievances in such a form, Dante does more than boldly protest actions of depravity, he also maintains a legacy.

Regardless of its truth or validity, there are some secrets and truths that should be kept to oneself. Dante even said as much at the end of *Inferno* 16, stating “When it comes to truth that wears a liar’s face / a man should keep his mouth shut if possible, / for through no fault of his it can bring disgrace” (Inferno 16.124-126). The entire diatribe in *Inferno* 19 is, in essence, an insult directed not only towards the Catholic Church, but also the kings and nobles whom the Church services. Inciting the anger of these powerful individuals would seem to be in violation of his previous statements. The poet’s reasons for taking such a risk are explained shortly following the tirade. As he finishes his tirade the character of Dante states, “I think my leader was both pleased and impressed, / to judge by his contented look as he listened / to the sound of true words truly expressed” (Inferno 19.121-123). This is the enlightened author’s way of saying that no matter how risky or foolish it might have been to put those words to paper, Dante felt it was his duty. Throughout history philosophers and poets, such as Socrates, had served as voices of change who decried failing and corrupt institutions, often being punished for their actions. As a poet Dante believed that writing this tirade was his duty as a poet and in doing so he had honored the spirit of Virgil and his other poetic predecessors. As such, in the story, Dante recounts, “He wrapped both of his arms around me then, / and, gathering me up onto his chest, / climbed the path by which he’d come down” (Inferno 19.124-126). For fulfilling his duty, Virgil embraces Dante as a friend, symbolizing how Dante’s actions cement his legacy as a poet.
Despite the dangers of doing so, Dante Alighieri shared his convictions and condemnations behind his narrative veneer. In taking a stand against the depravity, greed, failure, and political ambition harbored by the Church, Dante not only avenges himself upon the Catholic Church, but also upholds his beliefs as to the duties of a poet.

Bibliography: