

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

(1821-1881)

QUESTIONS: What is the principal “indictment” that the Grand Inquisitor levels at Jesus in this “poem in prose”? What does such a story tell us about our own story, our own vocation? What should we make of the kiss at the end of the story? Is there anything in this story that has contemporary relevance to us?

INTRODUCTION TO DOSTOEVSKY

A few lines in the gospel of St. Matthew (4: 1-11) that tell of the temptations of Jesus become the grounds of a stunning leap of the imagination caught in the “Grand Inquisitor,” a self-contained story taken from the novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky’s story of the Grand Inquisitor is set in 15th Century Spain during the period when the Church’s Inquisitions searched out and prosecuted religious heretics. Some 2,000 people were burned at the stake for their beliefs. While the Inquisition was instigated by the Catholic Church and the Inquisitor was a church leader, in Spain it became an integral part of the state’s control over its people. The sentences were announced at an elaborate public ceremony, called the *auto da fe*.

The novel, the last written by Dostoevsky, draws on aspects of the author’s own extraordinary life. As an epileptic with an irresponsible father who was murdered by his serfs, Dostoevsky was educated in Moscow and the School of Military Engineers in St. Petersburg. Commissioned a lieutenant in the army in 1841, he left the service three years later to devote himself to literature, only to be arrested for belonging to a socialist group concerned with the desperate plight of the Russian masses under the feudal Czarist regime. Tried and sentenced to a bogus execution, a coffin was readied, he was bound to a stake, and last rites were observed. He was then informed of a sudden reprieve and sentenced to four years of hard labor in Siberia—where he considered himself buried alive.

In the ten years following his mock execution, he served as a private in the Russian army in Siberia, but then was allowed to return to Russia’s capital cities. A journal, which he began with his brother, was dedicated to Christian nationalism and to the proposition that the Russian peasantry was the peculiar repository of Russian spiritual values. The government, misunderstanding the purpose of the journal, suppressed it to Dostoevsky’s financial ruin. He tried to recoup his fortune at the gambling tables, but only compounded his losses and was forced to turn out stories at an enormous speed to earn enough money to stay alive. Though he was plagued by epilepsy, poverty, and a gambling mania, the last twelve years of his life were richly creative. *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* were all written during this period. *The Brothers Karamazov*, which he started in 1878, was to have been part of a cycle of five novels entitled *The Life of a Great Sinner*. He later scaled down his plan to two novels, of which

The Brothers Karamazov is only the first half. Dostoevsky died shortly after completing it.

THE GRAND INQUISITOR

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY¹

Do you know, Alyosha—don't laugh! I made a poem about a year ago. If you can waste another ten minutes on me, I'll tell it to you."

"You wrote a poem?"

"Oh, no, I didn't write it," laughed Ivan, "and I've never written two lines of poetry in my life. But I made up this poem in prose and I remembered it. I was carried away when I made it up. You will be my first reader—that is, listener. Why should an author forego even one listener?" smiled Ivan. "Shall I tell it to you?"

"I am all attention," said Alyosha.

"My poem is called The Grand Inquisitor; it's a ridiculous thing, but I want to tell it to you. ...

My story is laid in Spain, in Seville, in the most terrible time of the Inquisition, when fires were lighted every day to the glory of God, and 'in the splendid *auto da fe* the wicked heretics were burnt.'

In His infinite mercy He came once more among men in that human shape in which He walked among men for thirty-three years fifteen centuries ago. He came down to the 'hot pavements' of the southern town in which on the day before almost a hundred heretics had, *ad majorem glorium dei*, been burnt by the cardinal, the Grand Inquisitor, in a magnificent *auto da fe*, in the presence of the king, the court, the knights, the cardinals, the most charming ladies of the court, and the whole population of Seville.

"He came softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone recognized Him. That might be one of the best passages in the poem. I mean, why they recognized Him. The people are irresistibly drawn to Him, they surround Him, they flock about Him, follow Him. He moves silently in their midst with a gentle smile of infinite compassion. The sun of love burns in His heart, and power shine from His eyes, and their radiance, shed on the people, stirs their hearts with responsive love. He holds out His hands to them, blesses them, and a healing virtue comes from contact with Him, even with His garments. An old man in the crowd, blind from childhood, cries out, 'O Lord, heal me and I shall see Thee!' and, as it were, scales fall from his eyes and the blind man sees Him. The crowd weeps and kisses the earth under His feet. Children throw flowers before Him, sing, and cry hosanna. 'It is He—it is He!' repeat. 'It must be He, it can be no one but Him!' He

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: The Modern Library, Random House) 257-270. Used with permission.