

NANCY ENRIGHT

## Dante and the Scandals of a Beloved Church

THE CHURCH OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY is no stranger to the word “scandal,” with headlines on a weekly, even daily basis, dealing with sexual abuse by priests and the Church’s past tendency to cover up these failings. Often reporters remark on the “surprising” faithfulness of devout Roman Catholics to their Church despite the abuses of some of their priests—actions that have obviously hurt and damaged family members and friends. To Dante, however, these failings and what appears to be the paradoxical faithfulness of Church members would be neither remarkable nor contradictory.

Living in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Dante was fully aware of the sinfulness of members of the Church on earth—the Church visible—and, at the same time, deeply committed to the Church invisible, existing in heaven but including also all the faithful members of the Church on earth, the Body of Christ. In fact, *The Divine Comedy* can be seen as Dante’s exploration of how both Churches—visible and invisible—exist together and how a faithful believer needs to affirm the Church rooted in heaven by relentlessly confronting the evil of the Church visible, wherever and

whenever it appears. It is confessing and repenting of sin, not hiding from it, that leads to salvation.<sup>1</sup> This is the great lesson of *The Divine Comedy*, a lesson that is crucial to the life of the Church today.

Dante's confrontation with the sinfulness of his own Church probably begins at the very threshold of hell, in the whirling mass of souls who are "hateful to God and to His enemies"<sup>2</sup> because they have chosen neither good nor ill. Among them Dante recognizes "the shade of him/ who made, through cowardice, the great refusal" (Canto III, 60). This line is widely believed to refer to Pope Celestine V, although not all scholars agree. According to Charles Singleton, in his commentary on Canto III, this belief was generally held by the earliest commentators, including Pietro di Dante, son of the poet, who wrote,

I believe he places among them Frate Pietro da Morrone, who is known as Pope Celestine V. He could have led as holy and as spiritual a life in the papacy as he had in his hermitage: and yet, he pusillanimously renounced the papacy, which is the seat of Christ.

Celestine abdicated the papal throne so that he might go to a monastery. A humble man, Celestine felt unfit for the papacy and longed for the life of a monk, focusing on God alone. He was canonized in 1313. However, his "refusal" of the papal crown led to the ascendancy of Benedetto Caetani, Boniface VIII, a man whom Dante believed to be completely wicked and who was the pope reigning during the fictional time of the *Divine Comedy* (that is, at 1300).<sup>3</sup> If Celestine is indeed the person described here, Dante is interpreting his abdication as a cowardly act of selfishness, not the act of humility and devotion it is now believed to have been. Celestine is placed among those who have made no choice, either for or against God—the souls linked in damnation to the "neutral" angels who neither rebelled overtly nor made a choice for God. Michael D. Aeschliman, in a lecture published in *Lectura Dantis*, argues that the entire mod-

ern culture of nihilism, rooted in lack of belief, follows in the same kind of whirling wind as these sinners in Canto III.<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, however, the key point here is that Dante's introduction to hell most likely includes a glimpse of a pope among these damned souls, and this ambiguous reference only paves the way for his later scathing and explicit denunciations of other popes and clerics in the three books, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.

The most notorious of the religious leaders denounced by Dante is Boniface VIII, mentioned above in the context of Celestine's abdication. To Dante, Boniface represents all that is corrupt in his contemporary Church, and he is placed in Hell in the circle of the Simoniacs (Canto XIX). Dante begins Canto XIX of the *Inferno* with an impassioned apostrophe to Simon Magus, the magician who sought to buy from Peter the power to cast out devils.<sup>5</sup> For Dante, the buying and selling of the things of God is the sin of his Church that is most reprehensible. The "fornicat [ion]" referred to in the quote that follows is spiritual. Wedded to Christ, these Church leaders commit immorality with the things of this world:

O Simon Magus! O his sad disciples!  
 Rapacious ones, who take the things of God,  
 that ought to be the brides of Righteousness,

and make them fornicate for gold and silver!  
 The time has come to let the trumpet sound  
 for you; your place is here in this third pouch.

(XIX, 1–6)

Within this circle of Hell, those guilty of simony are embedded in fiery tombs, headfirst. They are trapped, literally, as they trapped themselves metaphorically in the things of this world. They are upside down, as they inverted the true values of spiritual and material things. They are in a position of great indignity. Dante speaks first to Nicholas, pope prior to Boniface, who died in 1280 and, in the

chronology of the poem, is now in his twentieth year in hell.<sup>6</sup> Nicholas mistakes Dante for the current pontiff arrived early to hell,

and he cried out, “Are you already standing,  
already standing there, o Boniface?  
The book has lied to me by several years.

Are you so quickly sated with the riches  
for which you did not fear to take by guile  
the Lovely Lady, then to violate her? (XIX, 52–57).

This encounter illustrates several important points. The two popes assigned here by Dante to hell are both guilty of simony, and the last two lines make clear the profane and blasphemous nature of their sin. First they took “by guile” and “violate[d]” the “Lovely Lady,” the Church. The metaphor depicts the popes as careless and base lovers, wronging an innocent, worthy lady. To Dante, writer of *La Vita Nuova* and devoted lover of Beatrice even after her death, such unfaithfulness is inexcusable—though even he, according to his high standards, is guilty for turning to other, lesser images, as we shall see in the final cantos of the *Purgatorio*. As St. Francis was “wed” to Holy Poverty, the prelates are “wed” to the Church and must be faithful to her over all material pleasures and possessions. To do otherwise is to commit fornication (“adultery” in Singleton’s translation)—the very essence of Simon Magus’s sin, as Dante refers to it in the beginning of the canto.

Second, the blasphemous nature of their sin is emphasized in Nicholas referring to Boniface’s having “not fear[ed]” to have done this. A reverence for all things holy and specifically for the Church pervades the entire *Divine Comedy*. The Church invisible—the Body of Christ—is so holy that Dante is spared at one point from its manifestations—the smile of Beatrice and the symphony of heaven, lest he be “like Semele when she was turned to ashes” by the revelation

of Jupiter (*Paradiso*, XXI, 5–6). Beatrice, part of the Church in Heaven and symbol of the grace available through it, abashes Dante often with her loving rebukes, her beauty, and that same heavenly smile—withdrawn at this point, but manifested elsewhere. There are moments when he dare not look at her, as at the end of the *Purgatorio* when she rebukes him for neglecting her image after her death and for wasting his talents, and he hangs his head like a scolded child (Canto, XXXI). The gravity of betraying the trust of the “Lady” Church is as grave as the high identity she has.

The holiness and beauty of the Church invisible is implicit throughout the *Divine Comedy* but especially so in the latter cantos of the *Purgatorio* and throughout the *Paradiso*. In preparation for the first meeting of Dante and Beatrice, just before Virgil leaves him, the splendor of the Church is revealed to Dante in the triumphal procession of the Griffin. Dante and even Virgil stare in amazement (*Purgatory*, XXIX, 55–57). Then those follow whom Dante calls “the truthful band that had come first between / the griffin and the Seven Stars”; these now look “toward / that chariot as toward their peace” (XXX, 6–8). One of these holy souls sings three times, “*Veni, sponsa, di Libano*,” echoed by the others. The image becomes a foreshadowing of the eschaton:

Just as the blessed, at the Final Summons,  
will rise up—ready—each out of his grave,  
singing, with new-clothed voices, Alleluia,

so, from the godly chariot, eternal  
life’s messengers and ministers arose: . . .

All of them cried: “*Benedictus qui venis*,”  
and, scattering flowers upward and around,  
“*Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis*.” (XXX, 13–21)

Thus Dante is ushered into the world of the Church in Heaven, in all its holiness and splendor. It is only in the context of this glorious

Church that he is outraged by the sins of the Church on earth. And, from this point in the *Purgatorio* and all through the *Paradiso*, every reference to the sins of the Church on earth occurs with the full awareness of the unassailable holiness of the Church above.

However, Dante does not see these two “Churches” as disparate entities; they are completely united. For the Church invisible is linked to the Church visible in the communion of saints, with Dante himself representing the struggling Church on earth, destined for heaven and helped on his way there by the prayers of the saints. It is this vision of holiness that enables Dante, pilgrim and poet, to confront the sins of the Church of his day in the only way that makes sense—with complete truthfulness, deep repentance, and total faith in the availability of forgiveness through grace.

This double awareness, of both sin and the grace that can heal it, is the thread that flows through all the many references in the *Paradiso* to the sinful Church on earth. For example, the lives of saints, like Dominic and Francis, are contrasted with the failings of members of their orders. The words of St. Benedict, father of monasticism, emphasize these contrasts:

What once were abbey walls are robbers' dens;  
 what once were cowls are sacks of rotten meal.  
 But even heavy usury does not  
  
 offend the will of God as grievously  
 as the appropriation of that fruit  
 which makes the hearts of monks go mad with greed;  
  
 for all within the keeping of the Church  
 belongs to those who ask it in God's name,  
 and not to relatives or concubines. (XXII, 76–84)

As Jesus rebuked the merchants in the Temple (Matt. 21:12–17, Mark 11:15–18, Luke 19:45–48, John 2:13–22), Benedict rails

against the misuse of Church funds because the practice is a sin against charity. The sexual sins of the clerics, implicit in their use of Church funds for concubines, is glossed over in the more serious accusation that the funds given to mistresses are intended for “those who ask it in God’s name.” For Dante, sexual sin is bad, but one of the least bad sins, punished in the upper circles of hell and purged close to the top of Mount Purgatory, nearest to Paradise. However, even usury, in Dante’s schema a far more serious sin than lust, is not as offensive as neglecting the poor as a result of greed. Love is the life of the Church in heaven, and all sins are measurements of the “failure in love,” to use Dorothy Day’s apt phrase. As she says in her account of the Catholic Worker movement, regarding the forgiveness of all such failings, “We can turn to our Lord Jesus Christ, who has already repaired the greatest evil that ever happened or could ever happen, and trust that He will make up for falls, for our neglects, for our failures in love.”<sup>7</sup> The love of Christ is big enough to subsume all our deficiencies, and the life of heaven is rooted in this love.

Paradise experiences a rapture of love in Canto XXVII. Like Beatrice, who often smiles, heaven as a whole smiles, and Dante says, “What I saw seemed to me to be a smile / the universe had smiled” (4–5). Dante himself is flooded with love at this moment, which even he finds indescribable:

O joy! O gladness words can never speak!  
 O life perfected by both love and peace!  
 O richness so assured, that knows no longing! (XXVII, 7–9)

At this moment of ecstasy, Dante, member of the Church on earth and at this point deeply at one with the Church in heaven, sees the flame of St. Peter literally blushing, along with all the ranks of heaven, over the conduct of the Church on earth.<sup>8</sup> Dante describes his ensuing conversation with the great apostle:

. . . I then heard: “If I  
change color, do not be amazed, for as  
I speak, you will see change in all these flames.

He who on earth usurps my place, my place,  
my place that in the sight of God’s own Son  
is vacant now, has made my burial ground

a sewer of blood, a sewer of stench, so that  
the perverse one who fell from Heaven, here  
above, can find contentment there below.”

Then I saw all the heaven colored by  
the hue that paints the clouds at morning and  
at evening, with the sun confronting them. (XXVII, 19–30)

Along with the rest of Heaven, Beatrice also changes countenance, a change Dante likens to the eclipse of the sun at the death of Christ (XXVII, 31–36). The significance of the disgrace felt by the Church in heaven as a result of the conduct of the Church on earth could not be more greatly emphasized.

Like Beatrice’s and the others’ blushing faces, Peter’s words underline the seriousness of the Church’s offenses, a seriousness rooted in the sacred nature of the papal office, as Peter calls it thrice “my place, my place, my place . . . vacant now” because it is filled by the wicked Boniface. After listing various abuses existing in the current Church on earth, Peter offers the key to dealing with this kind of evil in his charge to Dante: “and you, my son, who through your mortal weight / will yet return below, speak plainly there, / *and do not hide that which I do not hide*” (emphasis added; XXVII, 64–66), advice as pertinent to today’s Church as it was to Dante’s. As in all *The Divine Comedy*, the method of dealing with sin in the Church is confession and repentance. Hiding it, even at the risk of great embarrassment, of scandal, can never be the right response for the fol-

lowers of the One who hung naked on a cross, bearing shame as well as guilt.

The truthful confession of the Church's guilt, like all individual guilt, is based on the awareness of God's mercy and power to heal the repentant heart. The kind of recognition of sin demanded by *The Divine Comedy* would be unbearable and probably impossible were it not for the simultaneous awareness of God's grace. This sense of God's ability to deal with the sin so relentlessly disclosed is reiterated throughout *The Divine Comedy* and particularly in the *Paradiso*. For instance, after St. Benedict rails against the worldly monks and brothers (as noted previously), he ends on a note of the deepest faith and hope for their redemption: "And yet, the Jordan in retreat, the sea / in flight when God had willed it so, were sights / more wonderful than His help here will be" (XXII, 94–96). The same God who acted miraculously in biblical history can similarly set free the sinners in the Church on earth. True, it will take something "wonderful," but the Scriptures are filled with wonderful interventions of God in human history. The "help" necessary to correct the abuses of the Church will not need to be even as extreme as the help needed by Israel in crossing the Jordan to enter Jericho (Josh. 3) or going through the Red Sea into the Promised Land (Exod. 14; Mandelbaum, note, 389). God can handle his wandering Church and lead them to the promised land of Heaven.

Similarly, in Canto IX, Folco of Marseille explains how sin, once confronted and repented of, is absorbed into the light and love of Paradise. After recalling his own youthful sins of the flesh, he explains, "Yet one does not repent here; here one smiles— / not for the fault, which we do not recall, / but for the Power that fashioned and foresaw" (103–5), with words echoing those of the revelation given to Julian of Norwich: "Sin is necessary, but all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."<sup>9</sup> As if to underline his point, Folco shows Dante the light of the spirit of Rahab, the harlot, who hid the Israelite spies from the soldiers of

Jericho (Josh. 2 and 6; Mandelbaum, note, 343). The same combination of awareness of sin and, simultaneously, of the power of God to deal with it occurs later in the same canto. Here, Folco specifically criticizes Church leaders of yet another kind of sin—intellectual sin, specifically their focusing on less important matters at the expense of essentials, though even here the motive is still the love of money:

For this [the florin] the Gospel and the great Church Fathers  
are set aside and only the Decretals  
are studied—as their margins clearly show.

On these the pope and cardinals are intent.  
Their thoughts are never bent on Nazareth,  
where Gabriel's open wings were reverent. (IX, 133–38)

The Decretals, dealing with Church laws and pronouncements of councils, would be seen by Dante as less important than the actual words of Scripture or those of the Church Fathers, closest in time and spirit to Christ. In fact, Dante blamed the Decretals for being the basis of some of the Church's claims to temporal power and privilege, claims that were being abused (Mandelbaum, note, 344). However, the key point is that the focus of Church leaders is misdirected; even if the Decretals are seen as a good thing, they are less good than the other goods mentioned. The churchmen's error is at least as bad as that of Dante, when he looks overmuch on the face of Beatrice. However, once again the recognition of the sin is followed by a quick promise that all will be righted: "And yet," says Folco, "the hill of Vatican . . . will soon be freed from priests' adultery" (139–42).

Folco can make such a promise because the Church of Heaven in the *Paradiso* is intimately connected with the Church on earth. Not only are the saints in Heaven aware of the sins of Church leaders, they are also aware of the high destiny of the Church, the Body of Christ, consisting of all true believers, whether on earth or in Heaven. The two Churches, visible and invisible, are essentially one

Church, though the Church visible has both wheat and tares growing alongside each other (Matt. 13:24-30). The Church in Heaven is concerned about the sins of the Church on earth, not from a high place of exalted judgment, but from a position of loving concern, of deep involvement. As Dante says at the end of his apostrophe against sinful Church leaders, focusing specifically on John XXII, pope during the writing of *The Divine Comedy* (he is not mentioned by name because his papacy is not within the chronology of the poem): “Peter and Paul, who died / to save the vines you spoil, are still alive” (XVIII, 131-32).<sup>10</sup>

All the great leaders of the past ages of the Church are not mere memories, lost in the wake of current leaders with their weaknesses and sins; they are alive and even more powerful in their activity on behalf of the Church than they were when they were physically present. This deeply comforting sense of the communion of saints is the vision that Dante conveys to the scandal-ridden Church of the fourteenth century, one that is also very relevant to the Church today.

Another part of Dante’s vision of the Church involves those who are saved but still being purged of sin in Purgatory. In a sense, the world of the *Purgatorio*, more so than that of either the *Inferno* or the *Paradiso*, is most like our world—the souls in Purgatory are not yet perfected and are struggling on the road to Heaven. However, these souls no longer can sin, and with the clarity of vision given to all the saved souls in both the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, they can see the truth in a way that earthly believers cannot. In the *Purgatorio*, Dante once again includes reference to the sins of an important Church figure, Pope Adrian. In Canto XIX, Dante meets Adrian, who tells him of his prior status on earth, as well as his conversion: “Why Heaven turns our backs / against itself, you are to know; but first / *scias quod ego fui successor Petri*” [“know that I was the successor of Peter.”] Adrian tells Dante how, unlike several other popes mentioned in *The Divine Comedy*, he was turned toward repentance

through his awareness of the seriousness of his responsibilities as pope (97–105). Though serving for only a little more than a month, Adrian learned “how the great mantle weighs on him who’d keep it / out of the mire.” He laments the lateness of his conversion (“Alas, how tardy my conversion was!”) in words that echo St. Augustine’s: “Late it was that I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new, late I loved you!”<sup>11</sup> Adrian admits, until that point, he was “a squalid soul . . . wholly avaricious,” and because of this sin, he is being purged appropriately here in Purgatory, with his head to the ground as it was fettered toward the things of earth through avarice (115–26).

At this point in the conversation, Dante kneels, and Adrian rebukes him:

“Brother, straighten your legs; rise up!” he answered.  
 “Don’t be mistaken; I, with you and others,  
 am but a fellow-servant of one Power.  
 If you have ever understood the holy  
 sound of the Gospel that says ‘Neque nubent,’  
 then you will see why I have spoken so.” (133–38)

Adrian is pointing out the nature of all hierarchies on earth, even religious ones. No matter how significant the distinctions of our various ministries, in one sense we are all “fellow heirs with Christ,” as St. Peter reminds Christian husbands concerning their wives in 1 Pet. 3:7. In light of eternity, we are “all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). In an interesting application of a scriptural passage, Adrian is quoting Jesus’ remark to the Saducees, “Neque nubent,” or “[they] neither marry [and the rest of the clause which follows] *nor are given in marriage*,” referring to life after death (Luke 20:35). In this passage, Jesus is answering back the Saducees, who had presented him with a strange scenario of a woman who had married seven brothers in succession, all of whom predeceased her. They, who disbelieved in the resurrection, wanted to know “Whose wife will she be?” after her death, asking the question in order to make the idea of resurrection

seem ridiculous. Jesus, on the other hand, turned their example back on themselves by answering as above:

The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, *neither marry nor are given in marriage*; for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. (emphasis added; Luke 20:34-36)

Now, Adrian is applying this principle of loss of earthly status after death to all earthly honors, not just marriage. Though Jesus spoke nothing of ecclesial positions in this context, in another Scripture, St. Paul does, in fact, talk about how it did not matter to him who were “of high reputation” in the Church at Jerusalem (Gal. 2:6). Though he offered the Church leaders respect, he suggests that—on a certain level—hierarchical positions do not matter in light of the unity of all believers.

Similarly, Dante’s position here does not suggest that he is against the papacy or other Church positions. Not at all! Dante’s intense anger at sinful prelates and popes is rooted in the deep respect he has for such offices. However, he is emphasizing that on the deepest level we are all equal, brothers and sisters in Christ. This way of viewing the Church is important in terms of the sins and scandals over which Dante is grieving, as well as those over which the Church grieves today.

For Dante, his growing vision allows him to see these sinful Church leaders as mere souls, who are answerable to God, just as any other soul would be. No office absolves a Church leader of the need for personal salvation in Christ, involving true repentance of sin. It is crucial for Dante that these erring Church leaders are seen first and foremost as fellow sinners in need of salvation. Their power and position only make them more answerable to God for their actions than the ordinary person would be; they need grace and forgiveness

as we all do. Seeing them in this way, as fellow sinners rather than as representatives of God, allows Dante to separate them—in one sense—from God and the Church invisible. Though the Church in Heaven blushes at the actions of these Church leaders, it is never held by Dante to be responsible for their actions. The Church invisible is untouched morally by their wickedness, though it is, as we have seen, touched emotionally. As individuals, each sinful Church official is damned or saved according to his willingness to repent and to receive forgiveness, as are all other believers.

Salvation in *The Divine Comedy* is shown nowhere else so clearly as in the final parts of the *Purgatorio*. When Dante stands before Beatrice he is confronted with a “terrible good,” as Charles Williams uses the term. As a symbol of divine love, of grace,<sup>12</sup> she offers him the opportunity of salvation, but he must first admit his own sinfulness and need of it. As Dante clearly depicts, this admission of guilt and of need is not easy. He needs all the help that Beatrice can give him. And their conversation is an intensely personal example of the interaction between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven.

Dante, having just passed through the fire for the purgation of lust, sees a woman: “above / a white veil, she was crowned with olive boughs; / her cape was green; her dress beneath, flame-red” (XXX, 31–33), red the color of love that she wore on Dante’s first seeing her,<sup>13</sup> now embellished with the colors of the two other Theological Virtues, faith (white) and hope (green). She has been dead ten years in the chronology of the poem. Dante says, “I felt the mighty power of old love” (39). He turns, as he habitually has done, to Virgil, only to find he is not there, and Dante weeps. It is here that Beatrice begins her rebuke, with a sternness rooted in love and intending to lead him to salvation. For the first time in the poem, the poet’s name is used; “Dante,” Beatrice says, “though Virgil’s leaving you, do not / yet weep, do not weep yet; you’ll need your tears / for what another sword must yet inflict” (55–57). Her reference to the sword is similar to the biblical use of the term “sword

of the Spirit” for the word of God (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12); its wounding is meant only to heal.

However, despite her benevolent motivation, Beatrice is neither meek nor gentle in her approach to Dante. He likens her to “an admiral” (58) and describes her demeanor as “regal and disdainful” (70). She asserts herself, in recognition of her role: “Look here! For I am Beatrice, I am!” (73). As Charles Williams discusses this scene in *The Figure of Beatrice*, he says that she is aware of the role she has played as an image of salvation, even while on earth, to the younger Dante. He says, “She is justified by her office, her nature, and her passion; she knows her part in him and has accepted it by her care for his salvation.”<sup>14</sup> In helping Dante to recognize his sin, she must help him to see his own weakness and unfaithfulness in light of his high calling. She is doing in a particular situation what *The Divine Comedy* as a whole is doing for the entire Church on earth. As she explains to the angels, who show sympathy for Dante, “I’m more concerned that my reply / be understood by him who weeps beyond, / so that his sorrow’s measure match his sin” (emphasis added; XXX, 106–8). Like the early Church, the youthful Dante was highly graced; as Beatrice says, “he / when young, was such—potentially—that any / propensity innate in him would have / prodigiously succeeded, had he acted” (114–17). And like the Church of Dante’s day, he must recover his earlier vision in full repentance, with sorrow “to match his sin.”

The vision Dante has had of Beatrice warrants some explication, as it cannot be misunderstood as mere ordinary physical attraction. It is that, but more. Charles Williams talks of this love at great length in *The Figure of Beatrice*, as well as in *Religion and Love in Dante*, and has developed his own “theology of romantic love” in large part on his reading of Dante.<sup>15</sup> According to Williams, Dante, in the *Vita Nuova*, where he first sees and begins to love Beatrice, is describing a kind of romantic love where the lover sees in the beloved a vision of divine glory. Ideally, all romantic love—if it qualifies as love at

all—involves this revelation. However, not all lovers, in fact, probably most lovers, do not realize its significance. Dante, with his high poetic destiny, is among those called to understand it. However, despite this high calling, Dante has failed as a lover by not being faithful to the image of Beatrice. She details the nature of his falling off:

My countenance sustained him for a while;  
 showing my youthful eyes to him, I led  
 him with me toward the way of righteousness.

As soon as I, upon the threshold of  
 my second age, had changed my life, he took  
 himself away from me and followed after

another; when, from flesh to spirit, I  
 had risen, and my goodness and my beauty  
 had grown, I was less dear to him, less welcome:

he turned his footsteps toward an untrue path;  
 he followed counterfeits of goodness, which  
 will never pay in full what they have promised. (121–32)

If Beatrice were merely acting in jealousy, angry with Dante because he has not remained faithful to her as an earthly lover after her death, these words would not be spiritually significant. However, she makes clear that she is speaking of something far greater than this kind of personal betrayal. She knows her image, her “youthful countenance,” started Dante on a path of salvation because of his seeing in her “glorious image” a reflection of divine love. When death “changed [her] life” to a better one, Dante should have been more faithful than ever to the revelation conveyed by her original image. Instead, he turned to other, lesser images, “counterfeits of goodness,” empty in what they pay, though promising much. It is like the “fornication” of the Simoniacs, who turn from “the Lovely Lady,” the Church, to base things unworthy of replacing her.

Beatrice's concern for Dante's salvation is intense and relentless. She speaks of calling him back through dreams and other "inspirations," but "he paid so little heed!" (133–35). At last the only option left to Beatrice is to "let him see the people who were lost" (138). She explains, still speaking to the angels about Dante and not to him, that "the deep design of God would have been broken" had he drunk of Lethe before fully repenting of his sin (142–45). Again, as with the sins of the Church officials, they cannot be glossed over in a false pretense of forgiveness. Such an act would be like the superficial "healing" offered by the prophets and priests of ancient Israel, rebuked by the prophet Jeremiah: "And they have healed the brokenness of My people superficially saying 'peace, peace,' but there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14).

As difficult as such confession is, Dante manages to reply to Beatrice's request for him to affirm the accuracy of her accusations; he answers with a "yes" barely heard: "that *Yes* was such— / one needed eyes to make out what it was" (XXXI, 14–15). However, it is enough to begin the process of repentance. Finally, Dante admits more completely, "Mere appearances / turned me aside with their false loveliness / as soon as I had lost your countenance" (34–36). Immediately, Beatrice affirms the power of confessing sin, not hiding it:

. . . Had you been silent or denied  
 what you confess, your guilt would not be less  
 in evidence: it's known by such a Judge!

But when the charge of sinfulness has burst  
 from one's own cheek, then in our court the whet-  
 stone turns and blunts our blade's own cutting edge. (37–42)

She continues, however, with her accusation that he "may feel more shame" and that, when again tempted by "the Sirens," he "may be more strong" (44–46). How could he, she asks, when disappointed

by the loss of what seemed to him the fairest of all mortal things—her “buried flesh,” *mia carne sepolta*, how could he have turned to lesser things, equally mortal and ephemeral? Told by her to look at her face, Dante sees Beatrice gazing at the Griffin, the two-natured creature symbolic of Christ, the source of all forgiveness. Seeing her beauty as she thus gazes, Dante says, “The nettle of remorse so stung me then, / that those—among all other—things that once / most lured my love, became most hateful to me” (85–87). He collapses and is plunged in Lethe, his sins washed away.

Once cleansed, Dante is surrounded by the four nymphs, symbolizing the Cardinal Virtues, who will lead him on to “the three beyond, who see more deeply,” the Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and charity (110). His redemption from sin is complete, and he is ready to enter Paradise, though he must grow in wisdom and love once he is there; as Dante describes it, “remade, as new trees are / renewed when they bring forth new boughs, I was / pure and prepared to climb unto the stars” (XXXIII, 143–45).

The encounter between Dante and Beatrice perfectly encapsulates all that *The Divine Comedy* teaches about how the Church in heaven deals with the sinfulness of the Church on earth. The glory of the heavenly Church and its love and concern for the sinful earthly Church are embodied in Beatrice, shown in bliss and heightened beauty but venturing even to hell on Dante’s behalf. Despite his exalted calling and high potential, his sin of neglecting her image parallels exactly the wickedness of the sinful Church leaders who have blasphemed their high dignity and that of “the Lady” they serve by following after base and worthless things—for the most part, money and power. Most important, Beatrice leads Dante through the essential steps of conversion: recognition of sin, deep sorrow for it, and a true turning away from it—*metanoia* in Greek—a turning around from one direction to another. After this profound repentance, which is painful for Dante, he experiences the fullness of salvation rooted in the grace of God. These specifics occurring between Dante

and Beatrice are exactly like what he elsewhere shows as needing to happen in the Church as a whole.

How do these truths apply to the Church of the twenty-first century? Like Dante and the Church of the fourteenth century, the Church today cannot hide from its sins. When it has hidden from its sins—in denial and inappropriate silence—these things also must be confessed as sin. Being forced to face one’s wickedness, whether individual or collective, is always painful—a little death to self, to pride, to the desire to appear better than one is. However, as Beatrice points out to Dante, confession leads to healing and the fullness of salvation. The Church of the twenty-first century is being forced to confront evils it has, generally, preferred to ignore or to suppress in fear of “scandal.” But the lesson of *The Divine Comedy* is that the Church need not fear this fiery ordeal of painful confession, even shame. When the Church has passed through the wall of fire, as Dante does at the top of Mount Purgatory, Beatrice—symbol of God’s love—will be on the other side (XXVII, 16–36). And this love will lead the Church, like Dante, to that point in the heavenly rose where “our image” is forever united, despite our fallenness, with the Second of the Three Spheres of the One Light.

### Notes

1. John: 1:8-10, *The New American Standard Bible* (Lockman Foundation). Further biblical references are to this translation.
2. Dante Aligheri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1982), *Inferno* III, 63. Further references to this text will be given parenthetically.
3. Charles Singleton, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno, Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 47–51.
4. Michael Aeschliman, *The Heirs of Canto III of Dante’s Inferno*, in *Lectura Dantis* 2 (Spring 1988).
5. Acts 8:14-24.
6. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy*, 339.
7. Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1963, 1983), 184.
8. Singleton interprets this changing of color as blushing, *Commentary on Paradiso*, 429; Mandelbaum interprets the change of color as “flushing with righteous indignation”

in his note. Though I am using Mandelbaum's translation, I prefer Singleton's interpretation as it conveys the sense of shame, not anger, that seems most fitting here. Singleton also points out that Beatrice's change in color may be pallor, not blushing, and he quotes a passage from the *Convivio* (IV, xxv, 7) that would suggest either is possible: "Pudicity is a shrinking of the mind from foul things, with the fear of falling into them; as we see in virgins and in good women and in the adolescent, who are so modest that not only where they are urged or tempted to err, but where only a bare imagination of venereal pleasure can find place, are all painted in the face with pale or with red color."

9. Mother Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), 55.
10. Allen Mandelbaum notes that John XXII is referred to in this passage, where Dante talks of a churchman who is devoted to John the Baptist, as John XXII was, but with a double reference to the florin, which had John's image on it. *Paradiso*, Notes, 376.
11. St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Mentor, Penguin, 1963), Book X, Chap. 27, 235.
12. Allen Mandelbaum considers Beatrice a symbol of Divine Knowledge or Theology, and, therefore, he sees the olive branch as a sign of Minerva, goddess of wisdom. However, even if Beatrice is equated with Theology, it is a means of grace and, ultimately, an expression of God's love. *Purgatorio*, Notes, 396–97.
13. Dante Aligheri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Barbara Reynolds (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971), II.
14. Charles Williams, *Religion and Love in Dante* (Westminster, Engl.: Dacre, 1941; repr., Norwood, Pa.: Norwood Editions, 1978), 29.
15. Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (New York: Octagon Books, 1980).