

Dante turns 750: His Medieval Masterpiece and our Modern Search for Meaning

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Abstract: Last year marked the 750th anniversary of the birth of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), the Florentine poet. As our culture becomes more distant from the coherent, religiously informed world view that produced it, interest in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* continues to grow, especially in the English-speaking world. This essay argues that the source of this interest is not just awe at Dante’s remarkable *summa* of medieval culture, but the fact that his *Comedy* touches something peculiar to the modern condition. The adjective “*Divina*”, added after Dante’s death, might suggest an unearthly meditation on the other world. In fact, Dante is most interested in the human condition. The essay explores the notion of “religious sense”, coined by Pope Paul VI, developed by Luigi Giussani and a leitmotiv in papal writing up to the present, as the key to the relevance of this medieval masterpiece to our modern search for meaning.

Key Words: Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Giussani, religious sense, Paul VI

The 750th birthday of Dante Alighieri—he was born under the sign of Gemini, so, May–June 1265—has been celebrated in style. Italian astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti from inside the International Space Station read lines from the *Paradiso* on the glory of the created universe, her reading beamed to a public audience in Florence. Academy Award winning director and actor Roberto Benigni recited by heart the final canto of *Paradiso* to a rapt Senate in the Italian Parliament. In his birth place, Florence, trams bearing the poet’s likeness and quotes from the *Comedy* took the city’s favourite son to all parts of town and life-size cut-out figures appeared in unpredictable locations with a hole cut out at the face so tourists could become the poet for the time it takes to take a selfie. 750-year-old Dante has his own Facebook page and hashtag: #dante750.¹

In the half century since the seventh centenary of his birth (1965), no fewer than a dozen English translations of the entire *Comedy* have been published,² to say nothing of translations of parts of it, usually the *Inferno*. Dante continues to inspire work in the

¹ This article is based on a talk given in 2014 to the Christopher Dawson Society for Philosophy and Culture, Perth.

² I will simply list the names of the translators/editors here: Mark Musa (1967), Charles S. Singleton (1970), Allen Mandelbaum (1980), C.H. Sisson (1981), Robert M. Durling (1996), Robert and Jean Hollander (2000), Anthony M. Esolen (2002), Benedict Flynn (2004, audiobook), Robin Kirkpatrick (2006), Burton Raffel (2010), J. Gordon Nichols (2012), Clive James (2013). James’ translation is an original and brilliant version, ideal for those with no Italian.

creative arts—visual arts, sculpture, poetry.³ In popular culture interest in Dante embraces emerging technologies: music (from hip-hop to goth-electro to post-hardcore), novels, films, comics, graphic novels, videogames, advertising (forgettable was a campaign by Foxy, an Italian brand of toilet paper) and apps like “iDante.”

This growing interest in Dante seems to validate the claim made in 1965 by Nobel Laureate Eugenio Montale, that “the farther his world recedes from us, the greater is our desire to know him and to make him known.”⁴ Dante’s is a vision of reality in which “every aspect of life and every facet of personal and historic experience is illuminated by a metaphysical vision of the universe as an intelligible unity.”⁵

As our world view and our understanding of reality forget more and more of the past of which they are made, Dante continues to speak to the humanity that, now no less than then, is driven by its very nature to ask the ultimate questions.

A MEDIEVAL MASTERPIECE

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was written between 1307 and 1320. It is one of the great masterpieces of the imagination of medieval Europe. A good place to get a preliminary overview of Dante and his *Comedy* is in the religious centre of his home town. In the cathedral of Florence, St Mary of the Flower, a painting entitled “Dante and his poem” honoured the second centenary of his birth in 1465. As you walk up the central aisle of the cathedral and just before you get to the transept, if you look at the left wall, a bit above eye-level, you will see “Dante and his poem” by Domenico di Michelino.⁶



In the centre stands Dante, holding a copy of the *Comedy* open at page one, “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita.” He is facing to his left and showing his book to his beloved city of Florence, that cruelly banished him, on pain of death, in 1304, so that he spent the remainder of his life—during which time he composed his masterpiece—in exile relying

³ In the Australian context I cannot fail to mention John Kinsella’s *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2008), not a translation but a poetic “distraction” on Dante, set in the wheat belt area of Western Australia.

⁴ Eugenio Montale, “Dante ieri e oggi”, in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi danteschi* (Florence: Sansoni, 1966) Vol. II 315-333, at 333.

⁵ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York, Doubleday, 1957) 194.

⁶ Domenico di Michelino, “Dante e il suo poema”, 1465 (Florence, Santa Maria del Fiore), [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

on the generosity of friends and patrons in various cities of central and northern Italy. Dante is shown wearing the red cloak that was his during his term as “Prior”, one of the highest offices in self-governing Florence. On his head sits a laurel wreath, the sign of the master poet. The stance that Dante assumes, facing out and holding an open book, is familiar. However the people we are accustomed to seeing in this pose are saints and the books they are holding are sacred texts. The earliest examples show Jesus as “Christ Pantocrator”, holding the Book of Gospels, usually closed. When he is depicted as Teacher, the book is open, its contents displayed to the viewer.⁷



During the Renaissance, as Michelino executed his portrayal of Dante, major figures in the history of the Church were being represented in the same pose. A Renaissance depiction of St Thomas Aquinas features his *Summa Theologica* open at the first page.⁸



The founders of religious orders—such as Francis, Dominic, and Benedict—hold their Rule open for all to see.⁹



⁷ “Christ Pantocrator” (St Catherine’s Sinai, 6th or 7th c., the oldest such icon), [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons; “Christ Pantocrator” (Monreale, Duomo), [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

⁸ Benozzo Gozzoli, “Triumph of St Thomas Aquinas”, 1470-1475, Paris, Louvre (formerly Pisa Cathedral), [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

⁹ Anonymous, “St Francis”, 1235-1240, Paris, Louvre, [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons; Fra Angelico, “Saint Dominic holding his Rule” (part of the Pala di Perugia), 1437, Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell’Umbria, [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons; “St Benedict holding his Rule”, New Norcia, Monastery grounds. Used with permission Peter Hocking.

Dante is not a saint, however, and the *Divine Comedy* is not a sacred text. Yet he is shown in the traditional pose of a saint, holding his *Comedy* as if it were a sacred text. And this saint-like depiction of him was placed in the most important sacred building of the city.¹⁰

Dante's right hand is pointing to the other side of the painting. Here we see the subject-matter of his book. This is the other world, the world of the afterlife, or perhaps we can already acknowledge that this is not so much the "other world" as the "other dimension" of this world, the meeting of time and the infinite in the eternal present of the divine, opened out for us by the poet for us to contemplate and meditate. It is structured in three parts: Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. These are the three parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

We see the souls of the damned passing through the open gate of Hell on the way to their allotted places. We see the mountain of Purgatory and at its summit the Earthly Paradise from which the purged souls are now free to fly to Paradise and take their place in the heavens, in their eternal revolution.

Dante is standing in the painting looking towards his city, showing his book and challenging his fellow-citizens to contemplate his account of the eternal truths, of moral choices and their consequences. His story of ultra-mundane travel is a guide to life in the here and now.

Dante's book was the summation of a life's work of research and experiment in philosophy, theology, politics, linguistics and, above all, poetry which was for Dante a form of knowledge, a path to discovering and communicating the truth.¹¹ When it came to selecting the form he chose for this *summa*, he made some original choices. He did not give his work a title, but once in the text itself he refers to his creation as a *comedia*, or in modern Italian *commedia*. The epithet 'Divine' was added some time after Dante's death.

There are two reasons for this title: following the practice of the ancient Greeks comedies were stories that moved from sadness to happiness (unlike tragedies which have the opposite development). The second reason is to do with the style and the kind of language he used. Whereas tragedies were written in noble, refined, elegant language, befitting the highest form of poetry, comedies included a whole mix of different styles. So the *Comedy* contains the most sublime language used for meditations on love or praise of God, the most vulgar and harsh descriptions of evil and malice, and everything in between. This extraordinary range of language, embracing all the facets of human experience, led T.S. Eliot to claim that "Dante and Shakespeare divide the world between them: there is no third."¹²

The story opens with Dante, in the middle of his life. He has been in some crisis—emotional, intellectual, spiritual—and comes to his senses in a dark forest. He cannot find the way out. He sees a mountain bathed in sunlight and tries to head towards it, but is

¹⁰ The best account of the painting is still Rudolph Altrocchi, "Michelino's Dante", *Speculum* 6/1 (1931): 15–59.

¹¹ Among the best introductions to Dante and his *Comedy* is John A. Scott, *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame, 2004).

¹² T.S. Eliot, *Dante* (London: Faber & Faber, 1929) 51. Also in T.S. Eliot, "Dante", in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950) 199–237.

stopped by three wild animals that block his path. He is now completely helpless. At this moment help arrives in the form of a companion. This is the soul of the ancient Roman poet Virgil. Virgil explains to Dante that he *can* make it to the mountain, but by a different route. So they set out on the journey that will take Dante through the three realms of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven.

Virgil takes him first down through Hell. This is a huge pit which reaches down to the centre of the earth. As he goes down through the various levels of Hell, each for a different sin, he sees huge numbers of souls who are damned for all eternity, a countless number: “so many there were, I would not have believed death had undone so many.”¹³ Each soul is assigned a place in Hell, according to the evil they deliberately pursued in their life on earth.

On the way down he discovers how Hell was formed. At the beginning, when God created the angels, the brightest of them all, the light-bearer “Luci-fer”, rebelled against God. God punished him by casting him out of Heaven to the point in the universe most distant from Heaven, the centre of the earth. God hurled the Devil out of Heaven with such force that when his body hit the surface of the Earth boring a huge hole it was only stopped when wedged at the very centre of the planet. This hole is the pit of Hell.

As the Devil drove into the Earth, he pushed ahead of him an enormous amount of soil, that all came out the other side and formed a mountain, the mountain of Purgatory. The pit of Hell is under the sacred city of Jerusalem, so Mount Purgatory is at the antipodes.

Dante and Virgil reach the bottom of Hell, at the centre of the earth, and see the Devil himself. They turn through 180° and climb *up* to the surface of the earth on the other side. They emerge into the light at the base of the mountain, which they then climb during three days. Here too Dante enters a realm that is tightly structured, in seven levels, and encounters a large number of souls speaking directly with many of them. All the souls in Purgatory are saved, their eternal destiny is union with God. However they are not yet completely ready for this and must undergo a period of purification, or purgation. They are purged of the sinful tendencies that characterized their lives on earth and purified of the consequences of sin.

At the top of the mountain, the souls have returned to the state of perfect innocence, the same state that Adam and Eve were in before the Fall. So, at the summit of the mountain, Dante enters the Earthly Paradise, a kind of Garden of Eden. He too is purged of sinful tendencies and so is free to continue his journey into the third realm, Heaven itself. No longer weighed down by the structural disproportion between his will and his capability, he is filled completely with the desire for complete satisfaction and so flies upwards of his own accord towards Paradise.

He has a new guide, Beatrice, the woman he had loved on earth and who inspired the love poetry that had made him famous in Florence. Although Heaven is a single state of being, Dante’s medieval mind imagines it divided into levels, like the other two realms. Paradise is revealed as composed of nine heavens, which are all eternally present in the

¹³ *Inferno* III: 55-57. The English version cited here is from T.S. Eliot, “The Wasteland.”

tenth, the Empyrean. At each level he sees the souls of people who excelled in particular virtues and speaks to many of them. Finally, near the top, Beatrice hands Dante over to St Bernard, with whom he ascends to the very heart of Being and glimpses a vision of God himself outside of time and space. At this point his intelligence is no longer able to cope with all he is experiencing and he cannot find the words to shape his thoughts. So the vision ceases and the poem stops.

The journey takes place in 1300, at Easter. Dante sets out into Hell on Good Friday and continues through Holy Saturday. He comes out at the base of Mount Purgatory at sunrise on Easter Sunday. After three days and nights on the mountain, he rises up to Heaven at noon on Easter Wednesday.

... AND THE MODERN SEARCH FOR MEANING

Dante tells us in a number of places that his story is a kind of allegory. Not, he provocatively claims, the “allegory of the poets” in which a fictional story contains a meaning of real relevance, but rather the “allegory of the theologians”, wherein the literal level of the text is claimed to be real while at the same time bearing other levels of meaning, in the way that much of the Bible does.¹⁴

He meets many souls of real people who lived in Italy in the century or so before his time and also Italians and other Europeans from earlier centuries. They discuss all manner of subjects. He also meets historical figures from all ages, persons named in the Bible, and characters from classical literature. Their conversations are never just about specific events and people but always about the ultimate questions: what do all these issues have to do with him? how does he make sense of all these different aspects of his own life? of reality itself?

His journey has other layers of meaning. It is his way of explaining his vision of truth, of the truth of things, the truth of reality. So through all the things he sees, the persons he meets, the conversations he has, the experiences he undergoes, he manages to communicate his view of the meaning of life, but also his views on politics, philosophy, theology, science, music, literature, beauty, indeed all branches of medieval knowledge. And, most importantly, how these things all cohere.

We should not romanticize medieval life. It was usually hard and often short. Medieval people experienced a lot more of life than we do now in our sanitized, compartmentalized Western societies. Everyone was exposed to stuff that we are protected from these days. Sickness, pain, death did not happen in institutions, out of sight and out of mind, but in your own home or next door. You saw those who were suffering and you heard them. You smelt the smells of decay, of sickness, and of death. The punishments inflicted on criminals and on enemies were brutal, direct, and public.

Medieval Europeans experienced life as part of something incommensurably larger than human understanding, but it was obvious that—through all the messiness of human life—reality made sense. Luigi Giussani simplifies matters but grasps an essential truth

¹⁴ See Robert Hollander, “Allegory in Dante”, *Princeton Dante Project*, 1997-2000, <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/allegory.html>.

when he observes that “until the end of the Middle Ages, those societies that had ‘recognized’ the ‘anomalous fact’ that had occurred in history identified something greater as the origin, the destiny, the path’s ideal: God. The multiplicity of factors were drawn into a unity; they were gathered together and realized in a single whole. In this way, an unfragmented conception of the person—and so also of the cosmos and of history—was assured.”¹⁵

They inherited a view of the universe as being, while mysterious, fundamentally rational. The memory of this intuition survives in modern European languages, through a word that Dante didn’t know—because Italians in his time did not understand Greek—but was introduced into Italian and then into other European languages towards the end of the Renaissance. This is the Ancient Greek word for “order, pattern, structure”: κόσμος, kosmos. It was this belief in the intelligence of the creator, the rational nature of creation and the ability of reason to penetrate the truth of reality, that laid the foundation for the medieval scientific revolutions.¹⁶

This view of the unity of all things was a regular part of the landscape and soundscape of everyday life. Time and space were organized according to the living memory of the Christian event. The hours of the day were reckoned from the bell of the first Ave Maria. In Florence, New Year’s Day was 25 March, the feast of the Annunciation, the memory of the first entry of the Christian event into human history.

While the ancient Greeks had developed maps based on the earth’s axis of rotation with the northern Polar Star as the fixed point of reference, medieval maps were more exegetical than geographical. At the top of the *mappamundi* one often finds East as the primary reference point—a usage that survives in the “orientation” of churches towards the sun rising in the Orient—and at the centre of the map is a place of cultural (religious) significance, most often Jerusalem. North only took over the top of maps with the widespread use of the magnetic compass by navigators in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁷



¹⁵ Luigi Giussani, “Religious Awareness in Modern Man”, *Communio* 25 (1998): 104–140, at 109.

¹⁶ See James Hannam, *God’s Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science* (London: Icon Books, 2009).

¹⁷ The earliest printed map of Europe, based on the seventh century map T-O map of Isidore of Seville, 1472. At the top of the map is Oriens, “East”. [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

To recall the coherent, all-embracing, Christocentric world-view of late-medieval Italy is not to invoke nostalgia and a return to the past. Pope Benedict XVI, in a famous essay, argued that the role of the Church in the third millennium is not to try to rebuild Christendom, as a political and religious structure that belongs to past times.¹⁸ The role of the Church is rather, to support the existence of “creative minorities”; in fact he speaks of the Church itself as a creative minority, “helping Europe to reclaim what is best in its heritage and thereby to place itself at the service of all humankind.”¹⁹

Thus when we read this story of the *Divine Comedy*, we are introduced into a world-view that may in many ways be very attractive but can no longer hold for us. When we read Dante’s integrated, holistic, inter-connected, symmetrical vision of reality, we read it as 21st century persons. Our understanding of the nature of reality is quite different from the medieval world, and to read Dante today challenges us in two ways: first, it is perhaps more difficult today to see the unity of creation, to see the beauty in our existence; modern science seems to focus on the size of things, whether very big or very small, and on the unpredictability of things; and, second, we now understand more of the “what” and the “how” of reality, thanks to scientific progress, but have perhaps lost the understanding of the “why”, of the “what really matters.” We may have lost a sense of wonder, as the basis for all philosophy, and have inherited the Enlightenment conviction that the basis of philosophy is doubt, systematic and relentless doubt. Dante lived before that time and still shared the intuition that came from the ancient world.

Dante’s vision of reality as ordered, structured, rationally organized is manifest in the way he constructs the world of his poem and builds the poem itself. The basic building block of the eternal architecture is the number three, the number of the Trinity. Hell and Heaven—the two permanent, eternal states of being, each have nine divisions ($9 = 3^2$).

Purgatory, the temporary state—it will cease to exist at the end of time—is a mountain with seven levels, one for each of the deadly sins. Seven was often the number of humanity, and Dante’s *Purgatory* captures humanity in its essential tension between desire and freedom.

The *Divine Comedy* is 14,223 lines long. It is divided into one hundred cantos, of around 120-150 lines long each. After an Introductory Prologue, there are 33 cantos in *Inferno*, 33 cantos in *Purgatory* and 33 cantos in *Paradise*. Now 33 is three (the number of the Trinity, of perfection) times eleven, which is ten (the number of completion) plus one (unity). It is also the number of years that Jesus Christ was believed to have lived on earth.

Threes occur everywhere in the poem. There are three beasts that block Dante’s path at the beginning, Dante has three guides on his journey. Things happen in threes. Dante makes important statements about his ideas on politics in Canto 6 of *Inferno*, and in Canto 6 of *Purgatory* and in Canto 6 of *Paradise*. Each of the three Parts ends with the same word *stelle* ‘stars’, and so on.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, “Europe and its discontents”, *First Things* 1 (2006). Also in J. Ratzinger and M. Pera, *Without Roots* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Dante invented his own rhyme scheme, known as *terza rima*. The lines are organized in groups of three. In each tercet the first and third lines rhyme, while the line between them has a different rhyme sound which will be picked up by the first and third of the next tercet: aba bcb cdc ded, and so on. Each canto is bound together by this interlocking web of sound. Dante writes, without exception, in hendecasyllables, lines of eleven syllables, so that each group of three lines contains thirty-three syllables in all.

Dante structures his story carefully and mathematically, to create a representation of how reality actually is. In building his poem around the number three, he has created a work of literature that is designed to imitate Nature, the child of God. "The created world is like a book in which the creative Trinity shines forth, is represented and read" wrote St Bonaventure in the 1250s.²⁰

ALL FOR AN "I"

Dante's journey is my journey, our journey. Dante establishes his universal claim in the first lines of Canto I, "In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost." In the shift between first person singular and plural Dante's individual journey of discovery becomes an investigation of the elementary experiences of our shared humanity.

It is at this level that Dante's journey becomes more and more relevant today. In the words of the future Pope Francis, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, "The drama of the world today is the result not only of the absence of God but also and above all of the absence of humankind, of the loss of human physiognomy, or human destiny and identity, and of a certain capacity to explain the fundamental needs that dwell in the human heart."²¹ Those remarks were originally made at a presentation of *The Religious Sense* by Luigi Giussani. Giussani's first volume of that title was a slim pamphlet of barely thirty-two pages published for Catholic Action in 1957. Rewritten several times, its definitive Italian edition appeared in 1997, the same year as its English translation.²²

This concept, of the "religious sense", had first been discussed systematically in that same year, 1957, by another future Pope, Giovanni Battista Montini, in a Lenten Pastoral Letter written for his archdiocese of Milan and entitled "Sul Senso Religioso."²³ Montini defines the religious sense as "the human openness to God, the inclination of the human person towards its beginning and towards its ultimate destiny."²⁴ It is the crisis in this sense of what it is to be human, more than the loss of "faith" or "piety" or "spirituality", that lies at the heart of the cultural drama of Western societies. This loss of the sense of

²⁰ For the "ternary structure" of the poem, and the sentence from Bonaventure's *Breviloquium*, 2.12, see John A. Scott, *Understanding Dante* 175.

²¹ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, "For Man", in Eliza Buzzi (ed.), *A generative thought: an introduction to the works of Luigi Giussani* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003) 79–83.

²² Luigi Giussani, *Il senso religioso* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1997); *The Religious Sense* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

²³ G. B. Montini, *Discorsi e scritti milanesi (1954–1963)* (Brescia, Istituto Paolo VI, 1997), 1212–1235. The English translation is *Man's Religious Sense* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1961). Montini's and Giussani's texts have recently been republished together as Giovanni B. Montini and Luigi Giussani, *Sul senso religioso* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2009), from which quotations are taken (translated by this author).

²⁴ *Ibid.* 51.

our own humanity makes it increasingly difficult for the modern mentality, as Montini put it, to “think God” (*pensare Dio*).²⁵ The future Paul VI was clear that the religious sense is the essential foundation and context for the re-imagining and re-experiencing of religion in the modern world: “The issue of religion today must be studied and resolved principally at the level of the religious sense.”²⁶

Dante journeys through the human soul, exploring the depths and heights of all that humanity is capable of. Though he would have run directly to the top of the mountain bathed in divine light, his journey is a search for the nature of his own humanity. “We are born as worms, though able to transform into angelic butterflies that unimpeded soar to justice” (*Purgatory*, X: 124-126).²⁷ It is in the structural disproportion between spirit and flesh, between imagination and fall, between the ultimate horizon and human capacity, that lies the drama and the essence of the human condition.

At the centre of Dante’s understanding of human existence, indeed of all reality, is love. Love and freedom. What connects me to reality, to myself, to God, is love, in freedom. Love and freedom: there cannot be one without the other. There can be no true love without freedom. And there can no be true freedom without love.

The Christian understanding of Ultimate Being, is of a Trinity of three persons—“divine Power, supreme Wisdom and primal Love” (*Inferno*, III: 5-6)—bound together, in infinite freedom, by mutual love. The substance of Being is revealed as relationship. From such a creator, Dante says, all things are created with a primal, fundamental force of attraction within them. Each created thing is attracted to what is right and appropriate for it. This is the simplest manifestation of love.

So we know, Dante says, that fire is naturally attracted to high air because we see flames burn upwards. In the same way human beings are naturally attracted to what satisfies their desires (*Purgatorio*, XVIII: 28-33). This is morally neither good nor bad, it is the natural tendency in us, just as it is natural for plants to produce green leaves and bees to make honey. Human beings are unique in having *free will*, which is the use of reason to judge different sources of satisfaction and different objects of desire. That is what makes us human and what we are responsible for: the way we use our reason to direct our desire, in view of our ultimate destiny.

Desire and free will are the heart of what it is to be human, at the centre of Dante’s view of reality. For Dante desire is attraction, love, the search for complete satisfaction, the search for completeness, and this is the presence of God in us. “Everyone can vaguely apprehend some good in which the mind may find its peace. With desire, each one strives to reach it” (*Purgatory*, XVII: 127-130).

We are hard-wired to desire, so that we might discover in all our experiences of desire and satisfaction that there is always something missing. Even in our greatest

²⁵ Ibid. 63.

²⁶ Ibid. 54

²⁷ All quotations from the *Comedy* are from the translation by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander: *Inferno* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), *Purgatorio* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) and *Paradiso* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

experiences of satisfaction and completeness, we still desire something that is missing. This is the understanding of St Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."²⁸

Dante sees the source and the object of all his desire right at the beginning of the story. When he comes to his senses in the dark wood, he sees a mountain bathed in the light of the morning sun. He instantly recognizes that that is where his true happiness will lie, in union with his God.

However Virgil tells Dante a central truth of human experience: that the method to discover the meaning of our lives is not through miracles but through a journey. The event of Jesus Christ and our encounter with him in the reality of our lives opens us up to life in all its richness, all its highs and lows, all its glory and its squalor, all its heaven and all its hells. We modern people, as we attempt to live the Christian event, need to remind ourselves daily that what Jesus offers is not a miracle but a journey.

The journey that Virgil takes Dante on is especially relevant to us in our modern search to recover our inborn religious sense.²⁹ Virgil asks Dante at the outset if he is ready for a real experience of self-discovery, if he is prepared to reject second-best substitutes and stay true to what he knows to be his authentic fulfilment. Benedict XVI succinctly outlined the contemporary dimension of the search for "false infinities": "the thirst of the soul and the longing of the flesh the Psalmist speaks of cannot be eliminated.³⁰ Therefore human beings, unbeknownst to themselves, are reaching out for the Infinite but in mistaken directions: in drugs, in a disorderly form of sexuality, in totalizing technologies, in success at every cost and even in deceptive forms of piety."³¹

Dante's journey is headed, from beginning to end, for the top of a mountain but it starts by heading downwards and only then can move upwards. This was the experience of Jesus himself. Tradition tells us that between his death and his resurrection Jesus first descended into hell and only then rose to glorious new life. This is the journey that Virgil leads Dante on, and the journey that we too must take if we, like Dante, are to reach full knowledge of where our true happiness lies. I must first journey into myself: I must recognize my need, desire the light, realize I cannot make it alone. Happiness is not something I can give myself, it must reach me from somewhere else. At no stage of his journey, from beginning to end, is Dante alone. He is always accompanied.

In *Purgatory* XI Dante has the souls on the first terrace of Purgatory recite together a long paraphrase of the Our Father. After the terrible loneliness of Hell, in which each of the countless throngs of sinners is alone with their guilt and their punishment, the two realms of the saved glow and ring with the harmony of shared humanity. In the prayer Jesus

²⁸ *Confessions* I, 1: "fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te" (author's translation).

²⁹ This understanding of the meaning of Dante's journey and in particular the conversation Dante has with Virgil in Canto I of *Inferno*, benefited greatly from a reading of Franco Nembrini's essays, *Dante, poeta del desiderio* (Castel Bolognese: Itaca), Vol. I *Inferno* (2011); Vol. II *Purgatorio* (2012); Vol. III *Paradiso* (2013).

³⁰ Benedict is referring to Psalm 63 [62]: 2: "O God, you are my God, from dawn I have looked for you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh desires you, in a dry arid land without water."

³¹ Benedict XVI, "Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the 33rd Meeting for Friendship among Peoples (Rimini, 19-25 August 2012)", http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/pont-messages/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120810_meeting-rimini.html [accessed 26 April 2016].

taught his friends the first person is always plural, never singular. The prayer rises up not from a vague collective but as the expression of a shared companionship of discrete and unique individuals. This is the Christian method.

The old Catechism taught: “What is prayer?—Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God.” Dante understands something that is even more crucial for us modern people. It is important to know what it is that I am raising. What is my heart, what am I? An honest examination of myself, of what I am, of what reality is, very quickly takes me to a position of wonder. In a spirit of wonder, when I look at myself, the greatest and truest thing I know of myself is that I do not make myself. I am not making myself, I do not give myself being. I am ‘given’. Therefore I depend.

My being, my ‘I’, is not something I give myself, it is given to me by an Other. At the very depths of my I, I find the mysterious presence of an Other, an Other who made me and who makes me in every instant. The most profound thing I can say about myself is “I am You who make me.”³²

This is prayer: to be conscious of oneself to the very centre, to the point of meeting an Other. It is the ultimate awareness of self, the awareness of structural dependence.³³

This is the reason why the first step on Dante’s journey to God is downwards and inwards, towards self-awareness. Before anything else, he needs to recover his own awareness of his need, his dependence, his nature as a dependent creature. Only then is he able to rise and raise the mind and heart to God. He has to remember who he is and what he is, so that he can move to his God with all of himself, confident that he will find mercy and love and perfect freedom.

This is why the three Parts of the *Comedy* all end with the word “stars”:³⁴ to show me that all this has to do with me. All that I am and all that I live has to do with the stars, it has to do with the cosmos; it all seems to die in my hands but what is at stake in every moment is nothing less than my relationship with my ultimate destiny. Giussani defines destiny as the element that gives meaning and integrity to each moment. The lived awareness of this is what we call sanctity: “It was characteristic of the Middle Ages to uphold the figure of the saint as the exemplary image of human person.” The saint’s claim to exemplary status is not a function of moralistic coherence but of a lived relationship between the particular and the whole, between the now and the eternal: “the saint is a man [sic] who has realized the unity between himself and his destiny.”³⁵

When we reach the end of the text, and the story rather abruptly stops as Dante is overwhelmed by the vision of God, we are driven to go back and begin again. The meaning

³² Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense* Chapter 10.

³³ Luigi Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University, 1998) Chapter 8.

³⁴ *Inferno*: “Then we came forth, to see again the stars.” (XXXIV 139).

Purgatory: “pure and prepared to rise up to the stars.” (XXXIII 145).

Paradise: “the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars.” (XXXIII 145).

³⁵ Giussani, “Religious Awareness in Modern Man” 109. See also Remi Brague, “Christianity: a fact in history”, in Eliza Buzzzi (ed.), *A generative thought: an introduction to the works of Luigi Giussani* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University, 2003) 34–39.

of the journey is revealed in its destination, the particulars acquire their meaning in relation to the whole.

T.S. Eliot captures the same insight into the circular nature of what seems a linear journey, that the prophet is not one who can see into the future but one who can read the present, that we already have all that we need (cf. “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift”, *1 Cor 1:7*):

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.³⁶

Reading the story of this journey may look to modern readers like an escape into an extraordinary, breath-taking world, where everything makes sense, it is all beautifully structured and we can feel safe because everything is—in the story at least—in its place. But it is not an escape, it is a window, a frame, the “other world” is another dimension of this world. We read Dante and we can never look at ourselves or our daily personal circumstances, in the same way, ever again. That is the gift of a great work of art.

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³⁶ T.S. Eliot, “Four Quartets: Little Gidding.”