

The church militant: depictions in dante



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In no other part of *The Divine Comedy* does Dante present his vision of the Church Militant, or the body of living believers who must struggle against sin and reach for virtue, than in *Purgatorio*. Striking parallels exist between the experiences of the shades in Purgatory and the experiences of humans on earth. On earth and in Purgatory, Christians walk out the journey of sanctification in an attempt to draw closer to God and gain entrance into Paradise. Though the moral state of the shades' souls vary, much like in the Church on earth there are varying degrees of moral discipline, they are all unified by their salvation through Christ. Each shade in Purgatory walks the same path toward Paradise, and on the journey, the shades play a significant role in Dante's own purgation. The shades pray for the Church Militant on earth, worship in unison, and even guide Dante and Virgil through Purgatory. In contrast with the images of the failed Church in *Inferno* and the admonitions of Church leadership by the saints in *Paradiso*, the depiction of Purgatory demonstrates the roles of the Church Militant in an individual's sanctification. Dante the poet crafts *Purgatorio* to show the Church Militant on earth when its roles are completely fulfilled.

The similarities between Dante's entrance into Purgatory and a new believer's entrance into the Church Militant on earth introduce the comparison of the Church Militant and Purgatory. Dante finds himself in Purgatory on Easter morning, at the time of Christ's resurrection (19). Dante's time course recalls Paul's declaration in *Romans 6: 4*: "we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life". Dante was buried in *Inferno* and saw the wrath of God, and

now he is being raised from the dead as he experiences Purgatory. This also parallels an individual's entrance into the Church Militant. Upon their acceptance of Christ, the new Christians are raised from the depth of their sin and begin their walk through sanctification.

Although salvation and sanctification concern a personal relationship with God, both the Bible and Dante stress the importance of relationship with other believers. In fact, Dante's vision for the purpose of the Church Militant is the building of relationship, both with God and with other Christians. He uses the early Church in Acts as a starting point for his description of the roles of the Church Militant. Acts 2: 42 describes the Church continuing "steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers". Based on the biblical precedent, Dante argues that the principle roles of the Church Militant include three things: the instruction of theological truths, the mentorship of the Christian community, and the glorification of God through unified worship and prayer. These aspects of the Church serve to increase the faith of the individual while allowing the Church to be a testimony to unbelievers. In this way, Dante's picture of the Church Militant on earth clarifies the role of the Church at a time when that role was tainted by the poor leadership of corrupt popes.

Theological truths are prevalent in The Divine Comedy, and while the punishment for sin is revealed in Inferno, in Purgatorio, ideas of God's nature are explicated by the shades that walk with Dante through his sanctification. For example, Dante learns of the generation of the soul from Statius. Statius encourages Dante's questioning, saying: "let it be my excuse that I cannot refuse thee" (327). Statius cannot help but provide Dante with the adequate

theological truths to aid him in his journey through Purgatory. This duty is not begrudgingly performed, but instead springs out of a desire to glorify God and develop Dante's faith. Later, in the Terrace of the Avaricious, Forese Donati describes the relationship between the condition of the soul and the body, elucidating how human nature is perfected although there is no physical body in Purgatory (301). Both of these examples show the Church Militant deepening Dante's love of God through understanding.

In the same manner, when he meets Marco Lombardo in the Terrace of the Wrathful, Dante asks him to explain why the world is "barren of every virtue" and is "overspread with wickedness" (211). Lombardo agrees to be a "faithful scout" and answer Dante (213). In his response, Lombardo points out that although most of the "living refer every cause up to the heavens alone", the true cause of evil in the world is one's own free will (213). He does, in addition, place blame on the shepherds who "snatch only at that good for which they themselves are greedy", referring Pope Nicholas, who is in the realm of the Avaricious in Hell, and other popes like him (213). Unlike Pope Nicholas, who shirked his responsibility as a shepherd to the Church, Lombardo recognizes his responsibility as a member of the Church Militant to teach about God and is faithful to his duty (Inferno, 243). Beatrice echoes Lombardo's sentiments when she criticizes the preaching done in the Church, describing sheep "fed on wind" instead of theological truths (Paradiso, 421). She continues on, stating: "Christ did not say... 'Go and preach idle tales to the world', but gave them a true foundation" (423). In this discourse, Dante the poet depicts a Christian who acts in a way consistent with the role of the Church Militant by answering the pilgrim's

theological question while pointing out the Church's failure to fulfil this role on earth.

Not only do the shades contribute to Dante's improved comprehension of God through theology, but Virgil, an outsider of the Church Militant, also teaches Dante. He elucidates many theological mysteries in Purgatory, while in Hell, these expositions are noticeably absent. It seems that the environment of Purgatory, with the availability of God's presence and the transforming power of his grace, enables the pagan Virgil to educate Dante in spiritual community, love, and the motivation for sin (201, 225, 233).

Dante the poet uses Virgil's theological knowledge, which cannot be founded on reason alone, to show how the institution of the Church Militant, not solely the individuals in the Church, fosters the learning of truths about God and the nature of man.

The second of the prominent roles of the Church Militant on earth is the direction of individuals in their walk through the Christian life. During his experience in Purgatory, Dante meets numerous shades who help him navigate the mountain. In the same way, the Church Militant guides Christians through their sanctification. Even on the shores of Purgatory, Sordello, a shade, introduces the idea of the Church's guidance through his explication of day and night. He tells Dante and Virgil that the shades do not travel at night and will only guide them during the light of day (97). In *The Divine Comedy*, daylight represents God's presence, and the shades' unwillingness to travel without the light of God signifies their submission to God's will. In a similar way, Dante suggests that upon one's entrance into the

Church Militant, the Church should assert its reliance on God for sanctification.

The shades, the angels, and even Virgil continually prompt Dante to move on or go faster in Purgatory. This is in direct contrast to Dante's journey through Hell, where Virgil constantly reminds Dante to "wait" and "show courtesy" to the souls instead of rush through the realms (Inferno, 205). When Dante attempts to delay his progression up the mountain so that he can speak more with Pope Adrian V, Adrian says: "Go thy way now. I would not have thee stop longer" (Purgatorio, 251). Pope Adrian V goes on to suggest that Dante's delay hinders both Adrian's and Dante's sanctification (251). The shades treat Dante's sanctification with a sense of urgency; they understand that the time for righteous decision-making can end at any moment. From these conversations, Dante the poet conveys the Church's duty to challenge its members with the continual and aggressive pursuit of Christ.

More than simply showing Dante a way up the mountain, the shades direct him toward a path faster than the route they have to go themselves. On the Terrace of Pride, Omberto Aldobrandeschi tells Dante to follow a path to "an opening for a living man to climb" rather than walk up with him (145). Aldobrandeschi's only concern in this situation is that Dante complete his sanctification; Aldobrandeschi does not compare Dante's plight with his. With this mindset, the shades take a more active role in guiding Dante than the souls in Hell. The shades approach Dante and engage him, while in Inferno, it seems as if the souls are interrupted when Dante begins to talk to them (Purgatorio, 47). The sense of urgency that drives Dante's sanctification is the same sense of urgency that compels the shades to help Dante. All in

Purgatory are hungering after God's will and guide each other to that end. For the Church Militant, the success of an individual means success for the body of Christ as a whole, and so the Church should be expected to actively invest in the sanctification of others.

The investment in the members of the Church Militant also comes in the form of a more mutualistic relationship. The shades in Purgatory treat Dante as a welcome member of the community of Purgatory, which is not always the case in the Church Militant on earth. Peter, in *Paradiso*, laments the division in the Church Militant, saying: "It was not our meaning that on the right... should sit one part of Christ's people and the other on the left; nor that the keys which were committed to me should become the device on a standard for warfare on the baptized" (389). Because of the corruption of Church leadership, Christians have turned against one another, diverging from the example set by the early Church led by the apostles. Dante implies, in Peter's discussion of the Church, that this division has contributed to the ineffectiveness of the earthly Church. Through this, Dante asserts that the Church Militant on earth has an obligation to unify believers.

One of the most moving moments in *Purgatorio* is when the shades pray for the Church on earth in unison. The shades pray for all of the Christians in Purgatory, and the last portion of their prayer is devoted to the Church Militant on earth (143). Dante the poet deliberately adds the earthly Church to the prayer to convey the sense of unity and completeness within the Church Militant and to provide an example of this role of the Church being fulfilled. Dante implores the Church Militant on earth to pray for the shades

in Purgatory, implying that unity in prayer specifically is a duty of the Church (145).

Not only do the shades pray in one accord, they worship as a group as well. In each of the terraces, Dante hears the shades worshipping God through song, and he is made aware of the rareness of this, noting: “ ah, how different these passages from those of Hell” (161). In Hell, the souls’ wailings are cacophonous; Dante hears many voices coming from all around him (Inferno, 167). In Purgatory, however, the songs of the shades seem to come from one center behind him, as Dante transitions from one terrace to the next (Purgatorio, 199). The shades left behind in the former terrace are worshipping God for Dante’s progress. In the same way, the shades sing “ Gloria in excelsis Deo” when Statius completes his purgation (263). Even though one of their own is ascending more quickly than them, the shades are rejoicing free from jealousy because they truly see themselves as a united entity. As Paul called Christians to “ with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” and to “ receive one another to the glory of God” in Romans 15, Dante also asserts that unity in worship—in addition to the worship itself—honors God. Through these touching images of selflessness in the body of Christ in Purgatory, Dante reveals the duty of the Church Militant on earth to bring believers together for a common goal: the glorification of God.

The Church Militant as it is presented in Purgatorio represents a united body of believers that are centered on empowering its members in their walk with God. These ideal characteristics of the Church Militant are exemplified in the way that the shades in Purgatory act toward Dante. These shades, because

they have the revelation that accompanies the transition from earthly to eternal life, are comparable to the Church leadership on earth, and provide a thorough example of how the leaders of the Church Militant should empower the Church to fulfil its duties. When put in the context of *Inferno* and *Paradiso*, which show readers an examples of the failed Church, *Purgatorio* offers insights into what must be done to rectify these problems. Above all, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is a call for the Bride of Christ to return to her spouse: Dante, through his journey, gains the understanding that is intended to provide "vital nourishment" to the Church Militant (*Paradiso*, 249). Because of Dante's vision written in these three parts, the Church Militant can begin to turn its ways back toward Christ.