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Tenth and/or Eleventh Grade English Class

Una Voce: The Liturgy and the Divine Comedy

The medieval world was marked by many things; but if it can be embodied in a single word, the medieval world was markedly liturgical. Daily life was measured by the regular recitation of the Psalms that is the Divine Office; the Angelus rang out three times a day to announce the hour to the towns and the fields; all time was centered around the Liturgy. It was truly right that life should follow the Liturgy, for at its heart the Liturgy is Trinitarian, God the Son's praise of God the Father through God the Holy Spirit. In turn, all Liturgy was centered around the Resurrection, Easter, and the three days preceding it: Holy Thursday, commemorating the Last Supper, Good Friday, commemorating Christ's death on the Cross, and Holy Saturday, commemorating the period when Christ was in the tomb, days known together as the Paschal Triduum. This was the life into which Dante Alighieri was born, this the world in which he wrote his *Divine Comedy*. Liturgy pervades his entire work, content and structure; even time in the *Comedy* is liturgical. For not all time is constant: clocks tick regularly, keeping the time of the ever-changing material world, known as *chronos*—but humans do not tick. *Kairos*, the time that measures human change undulates, moving faster or slower according to the change, and Liturgy embraces this time as well. The Paschal Triduum's Liturgy, as the Son's praise of the Father through the Holy Spirit, inspires the structure of Dante's *Divine Comedy* through the twofold medium of *chronos* and *kairos*.

The concept of structure, however, is far too broad to be covered in a single essay. Let us therefore choose a single manifestation of the concept: structure is the reason why one writes one's content where one does. Canto XI of the *Inferno* is widely cited as the canto where Dante

gives the structure of Hell. As Virgil describes the placement of fraud in Hell, he employs a formula typical of the canto: “However, fraud is man’s peculiar vice; / God finds it most displeasing—and therefore, / the fraudulent are lower, suffering more” (Mandelbaum *Inf.* XI.25-7)¹. Virgil could have said only the last line, were he merely describing the form of Hell and its various levels. He does not say only the last line, so we may surmise that he is doing more than that. He is not explaining Hell; he is explaining its structure. The Guide thus includes the primary and secondary causes of fraud’s position, the reasons why the celestial Poet writes it where he does. In a similar way, Dante’s readers ought not see only the form of his work, but also its structure, the reasons why he includes his content where he does—for he too is a poet. In the case of the Liturgy and the *Divine Comedy*, the primary and secondary causes correspond to the two philosophical types of time, *chronos* and *kairos*.

Chronos, measured time, and *kairos*, human time, can be seen as the filters through which to view canticles of the *Comedy*. When the demon Malacoda tells Dante Pilgrim that “In just five hours it will be, since the bridge fell, / a thousand two hundred sixty-six years and a day” (Ciardi, *Inf.* XXI.112-4), the journey has already been proceeding for a day. Because the bridge fell in the earthquake at Christ’s death, the current time is around 10:00 AM Holy Saturday; the journey thus began on Good Friday. This is the starting point for time in the *Comedy*, both *chronos* and *kairos*; *chronos*, which views time in a measured, methodical way through most of the first two canticles, and *kairos*, which looks at time through the ebb and flow of human life. This second genus of time takes each canticle as a separate, complete entity with a beginning and an end: a day according to *kairos*. In beginning so, the poem temporally follows the literal and allegorical journey of Dante Pilgrim. It opens with *Inferno*, which is largely

¹ All references are to Ciardi’s translation of the *Divine Comedy* unless otherwise noted.

concerned with current affairs on earth and is thus chronological, and continues with *Purgatorio*, which describes the soul's purification of earthly loves for the sake of the love of God and is thus both chronological and, if the term may be used, kairological. The poem closes with *Paradiso*, the perfect life of the soul; the final canticle is thus almost exclusively kairological. Each canticle's time is unique, and each canticle should be interpreted accordingly.

Absence characterizes *Inferno*, and so there is no better liturgical time to begin the poem than Good Friday. It is a curious fact that Christ is never directly named in Hell (Ciardi, Note to *Inf.* IV.53). He is as absent there as God can be; his direct presence is kept to a minimum literally and literarily. Hell is to all appearances anti-liturgical. How coincidental it is, then, that Mass is never celebrated on Good Friday, when the poem begins, and that Holy Saturday proper is devoid of the pinnacle of the Liturgy—the only Mass on that day is the Easter Vigil, which is the beginning of Easter Sunday. The Mass, the liturgy where Heaven meets earth, is absent, and the church building is bare. Nevertheless, the Son's praise of the Father continues in the order and routine of the Divine Office, which is still recited at the normal hours. Indeed, it is this connection, not the more superficial resemblances, that truly brings *Inferno* together with Good Friday and Holy Saturday: even when the heart and center of praise is removed, the order of the Son remains. As the Divine Office continues the Liturgy on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, when the Mass is silent, just so the order of Hell praises its Maker when its inhabitants will not. Dante was doubtless aware of the tendency of theology to appropriate certain attributes of God's Nature to one or another of the Three Persons; thus, the Father is Creator, the Son is Orderer, and the Holy Spirit is Love, despite the fact that all three Persons have all three agencies. Thus, even in Hell, the Father is Creator and the Son Orderer, and the Son's order, the entire system of

circles and cities and river and rounds, is what praises the Father in Hell. The people are silent, so the very stones cry out.

Purgatorio's stones, on the other hand, are drowned out by the Holy Saturday psalms and the Easter melodies of its pilgrims. Here the souls "grow worthy to ascend to Heaven" (*Purg.* I.6). The very fact that they must grow worthy indicates that they are imperfect. Mount Purgatory is a path of forgiveness, and one cannot be forgiven without having first offended. The canticle can thus be interpreted by both sin and forgiveness, Hell and Heaven, *chronos* and *kairos*. Again drawing from the Liturgy, Dante strongly emphasizes the theme of redemption, as the *Purgatorio*'s chronological parallel, Easter Sunday, does in its Liturgy. "Agnus redemit oves," "A Lamb the sheep redeems," reads the Easter Sunday Sequence hymn (Missal, 509), and Dante makes the opportune time for exploring redemption by exploring *Purgatorio* on Easter Sunday. Kairologically, however, the canticle is set on Holy Saturday, the day in which the Church liturgically awaits the Resurrection. It is fitting, then, that the canticle explore the concept of waiting for the Lord, and Dante does so by the long sentences, sometimes centuries or more, given to the souls there (cf. *Purg.* XXI.67-8, XXII.92-3). As it is Easter Sunday, the souls are redeemed; as it is Holy Saturday, they must wait for their Redeemer.

Perhaps most intriguing of the canticles of the *Comedy* is *Paradiso*, which largely disregards *chronos* for the sake of the far richer *kairos*. Concerning the time, Dante says only that "the south was all alight, / while darkness rode the northern hemisphere" (*Par.* I.44-5). The description itself, with its emphasis on light and darkness, seems more symbolical than literal; yet one may gather from the position of the sun in relation to the hemispheres that it is roughly noon. No clear indication of the weekday appears, and by now the reader is probably lost in the ambiguity of previous temporal descriptions. According to the kairological scheme, however, it

is simple to realize that *Paradiso* begins on Easter Sunday. The fact that it is midnight in the northern hemisphere further indicates that the canticle is to be interpreted in the light of the Easter Vigil, the culmination of the Liturgy, which traditionally takes place at midnight Easter Sunday. Possibly the most striking and unique part of this liturgy is its use of the Sacraments of Initiation. On this night, the catechumens, who have been studying and learning about the Catholic Faith, are finally received into the Church. They are baptized, becoming adopted children of God and members of His Church; they are confirmed and sealed with the Holy Spirit; their initiation into the Church is completed with the reception of the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ Himself under the appearances of bread and wine and the ultimate expression of man's union with God. The Easter Vigil is a liturgy of unification: as the catechumens receive each of these sacraments, they are united more closely with Christ and His Church. Dante's *Paradiso* is, most concisely, union with God. It is through this union that Christ the Son praises the Father; yet this union could not be maintained but through the Holy Spirit. The focus of unity in *Paradiso* is most evident at the end, when, as Dante writes some of the last words in the entire poem, he says, "I yearned to know just how our image merges / into that circle [the Second Person of the Holy Trinity], and how it there finds place" (*Par.* XXXIII.137-8). Man's union with God, and God's becoming man, is the natural conclusion of *Paradiso* and the entire *Divine Comedy*; it is the culmination of the poem, as the Easter Vigil is the summit of the Liturgy.

Dante's structure, therefore, is closely tied to the Liturgy of the Paschal Triduum by the bonds of *chronos* and *kairos*. All his literary decisions, all the *terze rime* of all the canti of all the canticles, can be studied by the light of the Triduum Liturgy. Count Ugolino is no longer merely a damned traitor. He is an apostate trapped inside a church; he tries to remove all traces of God,

but he is tortured by the remnants of the building itself. Statius is no longer a pagan become Christian, but a soul redeemed through Christ's Resurrection and awaiting his King. St. Bernard is more than the perspicacious mystic; he is a man united entirely with God by virtue of God's grace conferred by the sacraments. Every soul's condition is enhanced and intensified by its association with the Liturgy of the Paschal Triduum.

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