

The Sin of Simony

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Monday, June 13, 2022

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Years ago I read Dante's *Divine Comedy*. I cannot say I got much out of it, but I did get through the poem, mostly because I can be a little obsessive at times. I had put a task before me, and by George I was going to complete it. Most of what I remember from the poem are some very graphic images from the nine levels of *Inferno*, and almost nothing of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. I decided somewhat later that I would listen to the audio book, but first read the Cliff or Spark Notes on each section/conto before listening to them. I quickly became bored with that exercise and ceased and desisted. My OCD was not quite strong enough to carry me to the finish line this time.

As a regular reader of my silly little blog may remember, the last couple years we have purchased an annual subscription to [The Great Courses \(now Wonderium\)](#). *Señora* and I will find a course of joint interest and watch an episode or two each night until done. We both really enjoy our subscription. I've been watching many other of their classes as I work out in our little basement gym. For these I pick courses I know that *Señora* will have little or no interest such as the 24 episode class on Russian literature and various Victorian / Edwardian authors whose books fascinate me.

Flipping through the course list, looking for a new adventure, I came across a course on Dante's [Divine Comedy](#), surely it would be more interesting than the Cliff Notes. It has been surprising good, and also surprisingly, I remembered more of the poem than I thought. It is tagged team taught by two medieval historians from the State University of New York, Geneseo. The two professors have an amazing amount of enthusiasm for their subject as well as profoundly deep knowledge of the work. One of the things I did not appreciate in my solo reading of the work is that it is as much a discussion of politics as it is of religion. Dante actually wrote the poem while in exile from his native Florence. His politic party, the *Guelphs*, was on the outs, and he had been banned from the city as retribution for his participating in the exiling of some members of the opposing party, the *Ghibellines*, when his party was in power...those Italians.

Watching this course has given me the urge to try to read or listen to the *Divine Comedy* again. Perhaps this time it will be easier as I understand more of the many obscure (to the modern reader) references that Dante employs...we will see.

One concept that I had forgotten that I knew, I was reacquainted with, the sin of simony, a sin so base that it lands the malefactor in the penultimate level of hell, level number eight, the level where the

transgressor is burned in flames. At the lowest level of hell there is an absolute absence of heat, and sinners are encased in ice, aware but immobile for all of eternity.

What is simony? *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it as: “*the buying or selling of a church office or ecclesiastical preferment.*” If you have read almost any European novel from the 16th, 17th, 18th or 19th centuries you will be familiar with how rampant this was in the Catholic Church, the Pope, Cardinals and Bishops often holding immense political and ecclesiastical power as well as frequently accumulating great material wealth. Just think of Cardinal Richelieu in Alexandre Dumas’ *The Three Musketeers*.

All of this fire and brimstone created the dreaded cross connection in my cerebral cortex, perhaps not quite the public health no-no it is in plumbing, but you can be the judge.

The Catholic Church was an exceedingly dominant power in this time period, while not totally enfeebled today, it is not the power it was. At least in this country the closest analog to the Church of the earlier period as a power broker, grantor of preferments, and accumulator of wealth would be the corporations, multi-national and otherwise. While not a monolithic organization, it frequently feels that they are...talk about your conspiracy theories. And who are the most visible actors of these gargantuan besides their Cardinals, aka CEOs, but our politicians, who all too often appear to be covered with corporate logos. If you just change the words church and ecclesiastical to political, the definition of simony fits.

The lowest level of hell is reserved for those who have committed what Dante terms fraud, complex treachery against those who they had a duty of protection such as kin, country, guest and rulers. Any number of politicians, here and abroad, seem doomed to inhabit this zone of frozen torment if you apply this criteria.

And what level of the *Inferno* do you put the Gaetz, Greenes and Boeberts whose sin appears to be acute stupidity coupled with overwhelming egotism. But then again that is almost the definition of a politician, especially so when you also add greed to that train wreck of traits .

However given the current crop of MAGAs, white supremacist, willfully ignorant and other members of the basket full of deplorables that is the Republican party, I wonder if there is some way to bring Dante back to add a 10th level to his *Inferno*. As bad as the 8th and 9th levels seem, I am not sure they are sufficient castigation for the likes of Trump, McConnell, Cruz, Lindsey et al. And for a punishment? I could imagine a few horrid scenarios, but perhaps having to listen to Greene and Boebert non-stop for all of time would surpass an eternity of frozen immobility.

And so it sadly goes...

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