

LIFE IS *THE* COMEDY

by G. Tyler Fischer, Veritas Academy • Medieval History and Literature Series

On a visit to Florence, I saw something that shocked me. Florence is a city full of art and architecture. In the early 1500s, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Donatello, Raphael, and Botticelli were all working in Florence simultaneously. Still, the city belongs to one man. It is a city full of glorious churches. In the Church of Santa Croce, many famous Florentines are buried. Michelangelo, Galileo, Ghiberti, and many others are all buried together. The man with the largest tomb, however, is only present when he throws his shadow (or at least the shadow of his giant statue) over part of the church. Michelangelo's beautiful tomb looks like a coffee kiosk in the mall next to the tomb of Dante Alighieri (this was the shocking part!) and Dante's body has never been in that tomb. Florence had exiled its greatest poet, and he had never returned.

As classical and Christian educators, we have a lot to do. There are many subjects to teach, papers to write, and students to disciple. Dante's *Comedy* is a challenging book and it could be tempting to neglect it. It makes demands on its readers. Having admitted all this, *The*

Divine Comedy is an immensely useful book to explore with your students and diving into it should be part of their (and your) classical education.

When beginning your journey into *The Comedy*, there are a few important things to keep in mind. First, the reader must approach *The Comedy* with the right understanding. *The Comedy* measures you; initially, you are not prepared to measure it. You must work, read, reread, simmer on, muse on, and reread if you want to love *The Comedy*. We live in a world of 140-character tweets and books that melt on the tongue like cotton candy. No effort; all pleasure. This sort of world does not prepare us to read *The Comedy* (or the Bible). Reading *The Comedy* often leaves readers feeling something like



G. Tyler Fischer has been the headmaster at Veritas Academy since 1997. He serves on the board of the Association of Classical and Christian Schools. He presently serves as the managing editor of Veritas Press' Omnibus Project. You can follow Ty's thinking on his blog called "The Leaky Bucket" by clicking on the bucket icon at www.VeritasAcademy.com.

vertigo. Teachers need to help their students make it through this initial shock. Those early cups of coffee are improved by a little cream and sugar. Read with your students and give them previews of what is coming up

I am arguing for reading the entire *Comedy*: *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. Most people today never make it out of Hell and they tend to think of Dante as the Poet of Hell. (Jonathan Edwards suffers the same fate because



in their reading—especially help them with the obscure historical characters sprinkled throughout *The Comedy*.

Second, you need to see the immense value of *The Comedy* for your life today. Dante helps us to see the motives not just of the historical people but also of people today. The people in *The Comedy* are models of people that we meet at church, in class, and in the world today. It also teaches us to look through things and see God. It teaches us to see the world and the people in it “sacramentally” (they are signs of God’s justice, love, and wondrous work).

Third, I want to place a caveat on my argument here.

all most people read of him is “Sinner’s in the Hands of an Angry God.”) Our culture is fascinated with sin and with the horrific. Dante shows us sin, but he shows it to us to reveal that it is a cold, dark, dead end. The end goal of our walk through Hell with the Poet is to get us to the place of repentance.

Finally, we have to get past some things that are challenging and odd about *The Comedy*. Chief amongst these “oddities” is Dante’s relationship with Beatrice. Note well, Dante does not want to go on a date with Beatrice. When she arrives in the story (about two-thirds of the way through!), she does not give Dante a hug and

a peck on the cheek. Instead, she gives him a rap on the knuckles and a kick in the pants. For Dante, Beatrice is particularly a sign of God's grace. While we don't tend to view others this way, we should not let this relationship distract us as we approach *The Comedy*.

The Comedy is essential reading because it makes us sick when we should be. When Dante and Virgil make their descent into Hell, they are not there for a morbid reality TV vignette. They are there because Dante has lost his way. He is a believer who has wandered off course by life's hard knocks. He has fallen into despondency and sin. He has almost given up. Hell is exactly what he needs! He needs to see sin for what it is. In *The Comedy*, Hell shows us sin without illusion. Many throughout history have been both horrified by and drawn to Dante's *Inferno*. In the end, however, sin—for all of its shock value—ends up being boring, infantile, useless and cold. There is no change in Hell. Those in Hell are unchanged by their punishment. They hate God; they always will.

In class, this is a great time to help students see sins in the culture around them. One activity (for the brave of heart) is to invite in real advocates of particular sins and have them present their best argument for it. A couple of years ago, we had a local newspaper columnist come and argue for homosexual marriage. Our students listened (respectfully), asked questions, and then wrote responses to him. This sort of activity is much better than playing the "devil's advocate" for your students. Real battle and real debate engages the mind and the heart. I would add a few cautions. First, have time for the students to get to know the person with whom they will be arguing. The columnist that we debated with was a fellow named Gil Smart. He was gracious enough to come to school the day before the debate, have lunch with us, so we could get to know him. This time allows your students to understand and value the person they are arguing against. This helps to cut out the ranting that passionate students are prone to do (but that is the opposite of persuasive). During the interview, we found

that Mr. Smart was a really likable guy and agreed with us on a number of issues. In the best-case scenario, you can be blest to find new friends even if minds are not changed in the process.

The Comedy is also useful because it shows us how God works in our lives through suffering. We see this mainly in Dante's *Purgatory*. Now don't get me wrong. I am a Protestant through and through and I do not believe that there is an invisible mountain somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere where souls are being purged of their sins. I do not believe that there is a Purgatory that offers people a second shot at Heaven. (Dante didn't believe this either.) I do believe, however, that Dante's Purgatory is the most helpful part of *The Comedy* for Christians today. It challenges us to see God's purpose in our suffering. The souls in *Hell* and in *Purgatory* are suffering very similar punishments. The ones in Hell curse God, curse others, and curse themselves. In *Purgatory*, the souls of those redeemed by Christ are being prepared to enter Heaven by being taught to love Christ and hate sin. They suffer and they praise God while they are suffering. They are learning contentment in God's plan. Suffering—even suffering we richly deserve—is used by God to grow us into the people He wants us to be. This is a lesson that we can apply today!

In class, *Purgatory* is a great time for projects—especially art projects. On each level, or cornice, of Purgatory, souls of believers are taught to hate a particular sin. One of the ways that they are encouraged is by art and music. These works of art are called "whips" and "bridles." The whips drive the souls on by showing them examples of particular corrective virtues. The bridles show negative examples of the destructive powers of particular sin. Put your students' creativity to work here. Have them create or choose artwork that inspires virtue and dissuades from vice. If you have time have them present music or art that you should play or exhibit at your school to inspire holiness.

Finally, *The Comedy* is crucial because it makes us hungry for Heaven. As Dante and Beatrice make their way through planets (which serve as the levels of Dante's Paradise), they get to see the redemption of individuals, but also the restoration of relationships in the family, church, and community. My favorite example of this is the interaction between Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure in the Heaven of the Sun. These great teachers represented two great groups of believers—the followers of St. Dominic and St. Francis. In the church of that day, these two groups were often at each other's throats. In Heaven, the representative of each group spends his time praising the founder of the other group. The early church father Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a man fully alive." In Heaven, we see other people for what they really are: the glory of God being revealed as they are conformed to Christ's image. Reading *Paradise* should make us hungry for fellowship and it should make us yearn to bear glory.

In class, Dante's *Paradise* gives us ample opportunity to value people different than us. One of my favorite assignments is to have students (which are my older students) do presentations on someone who is in a different branch of the church from theirs. During these presentations I really challenge them to restrain their critical faculties and help us to see what is wonderful about someone very different than them.

So, dive into *The Comedy*. Your life will be made richer and deeper because of it. Your students will profit from it.