



Wyoming  
Catholic College

Center for  
Distance Learning

*Humanities*

*The Divine Comedy:*  
**Dante's Guide to the Spiritual Life**  
*Study Guide*

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## INTRODUCTION

Wyoming Catholic College is a four-year coeducational Catholic college whose primary educational objective is to offer a traditional liberal arts education that schools the whole person in all three dimensions—mind, body, and spirit. We accomplish this by immersing our students in the beauty of the outdoors, by introducing them to the wisdom of Western tradition and thought as found in the Great Books and Good Books of the past millennia, and by making the best of the Catholic spiritual heritage part of the rhythm of daily life in our College community. Students graduate with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts.

The Center for Distance Learning shares the mission of Wyoming Catholic College by offering courses, podcasts, retreats, and other opportunities designed to provide adult learners with sound reasoning skills, growth in the virtues, and a broad understanding of the rich heritage of Western Civilization in the context of Catholic faith and practice.

## ABOUT THIS COURSE

The early twentieth-century author, essayist, and Christian humanist Dorothy Sayers learned Italian so that she could read Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* in the original language. Sayers, whose translation of the *Comedy* is still in print, once called the poem "the drama of the soul's choice."

C. S. Lewis read the *Inferno* in Italian when he was a teenager. He read the *Purgatorio* in a military hospital while he recovered from wounds received in the trenches of World War I. Then in 1930 he read the *Paradiso*. Writing to a friend about its overwhelming power, he said, "I think it reaches heights of poetry which you get nowhere else; an ether almost too fine to breathe. It is a pity I can give you no notion what it is like." Soon after, Lewis, the adamant skeptic, became a believing Christian.

Pope St. John Paul II said, "Dante's art evokes lofty emotions and the greatest convictions, and still proves capable of instilling courage and hope, guiding contemporary man's difficult existential quest for the Truth which knows no setting." Pope Benedict XVI said that in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, he "wanted to try to express for our time and our existence some of what Dante boldly summed up in his vision." And Pope Francis as he announced the Year of Mercy urged Catholics to turn to Dante in order to "rediscover the lost or obscured meaning of our human path," calling its author "a prophet of hope, herald of the possibility of redemption, of liberation, of the profound transformation of every man and woman, of all humanity."

This masterful work of epic poetry, with its great sweep of time and eternity, depths of Hell and heights of Heaven, is our subject. In this course Dr. Baxter gives you the tools needed to appreciate and benefit—intellectually and spiritually—from one of the greatest pieces of literature ever composed. "My desire," he said, "is to help readers, to help you, come to appreciate the depth of this poem, to understand its extraordinary and radical message, and to recognize the contemporary relevance—perhaps even urgency—of this medieval poem."

## YOUR PROFESSOR

Dr. Baxter is Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Fine Arts and Humanities at Wyoming Catholic College, where he teaches Greek, Roman, and Medieval humanities courses, as well as art history from antiquity through the Baroque. Dr. Baxter has also taught rhetoric within the Trivium sequence and is responsible for designing Trivium 302, the Junior Author Project. Dr. Baxter's primary research interests include medieval aesthetics; the relationship between the Platonic tradition and poesis, both visual and verbal; Dante and the Platonic tradition; Dante, medieval mysticism, and monastic spirituality; and the relationship between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. His scholarly publications include articles on the Platonic tradition in the Latin West, and writings on Dante.

He earned his Ph.D. in Literature and an M.A. in Italian Studies at the University of Notre Dame and a B.A. in Classical Philology at the University of Dallas. In 2018, two books by Dr. Baxter were published: *A Beginner's Guide to Dante's Divine Comedy*, published by Brazos Press, and *Falling Inward: The Humanities in the Age of Technology*, from Cluny Media Press.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

While the lectures in this series can be shown to large groups, this guide is designed for either individual study and reflection or small group (up to fourteen people) study and discussion. If you are using this course with a small group, someone will need to serve as a facilitator. This could be the same person for the entire course or a different person for each lesson. It is important that this person see himself or herself as a facilitator, not the group's teacher. A good facilitator has a grasp of the material, but rather than sharing what he or she knows, asks questions and fades as much as possible into the background. This allows the group to struggle with the questions through conversation. Not only is this much more interesting for the group, but it is a far more effective way of learning.

The facilitator's role is to keep the discussion on topic and directed at the lecture and the texts under consideration, while allowing the group to draw its own conclusions. Whether studying alone or in a group, discovering the beauty and meaning of classical literature is a life-long pursuit. There is no hurry, and this kind of audio-based adult distance learning program allows you to proceed at your own pace. Having said that, however, it's easy to allow the busyness of the day to keep you from seemingly optional activities such as reading and study. Set realistic goals for doing the readings, listening to the lectures, and reflecting on what you have learned. You will probably not "find time" for this course. You will need to "make time."

Each lesson has five parts: Getting Started, Read, Listen, and Reflect. These do not need to be done all in one sitting. At the same time, we encourage you not to skip over any of the sections or questions. We also encourage you to begin and end your study with prayer for a teachable spirit, clarity of thought, and wisdom in application.

• **Getting Started:** This section has two goals. First, it allows the individual learner or small group members to transition from all the things that have occupied their attention through the day to the topic under discussion. Second, it is designed to connect the topic with personal experience, engaging the mind and the imagination.

• **Read:** The lectures and this guide are companions to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, not a substitute. Thus, it is highly recommended that you read the assigned canti before listening to each lecture. The more reading you do, the more you will get out of the course. Even if this extends the course by weeks or even months, taking the time to read the *Comedy* will deepen your understanding and make the course that much more beneficial. Whenever possible, we recommend you use your own copy of the *Comedy*, allowing you to read with a pen in hand to underline and make notes.

• **Listen:** Set aside some undisturbed time to listen. Each lecture lasts between 30 and 45 minutes and is best considered as a whole rather than a bit at a time as you run errands around town listening piecemeal in your car. We strongly encourage you to listen with the text open and a pen in hand to take notes in the space provided in this guide, in the text's margins, or in a separate notebook. Remember that if you miss something Dr. Baxter has said, you can always go back and replay a portion of the lecture or the entire lecture.

• **Reflect:** The guide comes with questions for you to consider after listening to each lecture. Reading them prior to listening to the lecture may help you focus on the issues raised. These questions are not an exam, but are designed to help you interact with the speakers and—much more importantly—with the authors of the great works of literature you will be studying. Again, have a pen in hand and use a notebook to jot down your thoughts.

**On Reading Poetry:** The texts we will be considering in this course are poetry, and most people today no longer read poetry. As a result, some of you may be in unfamiliar territory. Reading poetry simply takes practice. Here are two suggestions. First, consider reading at least parts of the *Comedy* aloud. The poets use words in part for their sound, so sound them out and listen as you read. Try reading a bit of the Italian as well. Second, pay attention to the punctuation. Phrases will often continue from one line to the next and pausing at the end of every line will obscure rather than clarify the meaning. The more you read poetry, the better you will become at understanding it and the more you will appreciate it—a life-long benefit of this distance learning course.

**On Translations of the *Comedy*:** While there are numerous good translations of the *Comedy*, the one recommended for this course is one by Robert and Jean Hollander. The edition includes the original Italian along with the English, plentiful notes, and outstanding introductions. If you choose another translation, we urge you to make sure it is in verse form, not converted into prose.

# LECTURE 1

## Lover, Poet, Exile: An Introduction to Dante's *Comedy*

While the *Divine Comedy* describes a spiritual journey that all humans share, the work also reflects the particulars of Dante's time, place, and personal history. Written around the turn of the 14th century, the *Comedy* is filled with allusions to the politics of Dante's home city of Florence as well as the politics of Italy, the papacy, and Europe. Dante built the poem on Medieval theology and cosmology. And the poem reflects Dante's personal life: his youth, his love for a girl and her subsequent death, his career as a poet, soldier, and politician, and his exile from the place where he was born. Understanding the literary, cultural, political, and personal context of the poem is step one in understanding.

• **Getting Started:** What are your hopes for this course? What would you like to achieve? When you hear the word "Medieval," what comes to mind?

• **Read:** Rod Dreher, "How Dante Saved My Life" in *The American Conservative*, April 9, 2014 ([www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/how-dante-saved-my-life/](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/how-dante-saved-my-life/)).  
Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6.

• **Listen**

• **Reflect:**

1. "It's a famous fact," says Dr. Baxter, "that the more you read in Dante, the harder it gets. . . . Dante structured his poem to get higher, lighter, and more abstract as we ascend and get closer to God." Why would you expect Dante to do that? How is sin more concrete and comprehensible than holiness?

2. After quoting Pope Francis, who said Dante was "a prophet of hope, a herald of the possibility of . . . the profound transformation of every man and woman," Dr. Baxter asks, "Could it really be true that an old poem can redirect the course of our world, which seems too eager to destroy itself?" How would you answer Dr. Baxter's question?

3. Dante began as a love poet, writing popular songs about emotion and romance. Yet in his book *Vita Nuova* or *The New Life*, he showed the "desire to elevate a popular form of writing—the love song—to a theological level." How would you explain the connection between romantic love and theology? In what ways is the love of man and woman analogous to the love God has for his people?

4. "For Dante," argues Dr. Baxter, "love is not just exciting, it's ennobling. He believed along with the vernacular literary tradition that when you fall in love, then you are braver, more virtuous, and so on, but most importantly, you are more alive and vital. You see the world with new vigor." Why do you agree or disagree? How can this kind of love (*amore*) also be bitter (*amaro*)?

5. How did Dante's love for Beatrice and her subsequent death inform his view of love? How, according to Dr. Baxter, did his love for Beatrice inspire Dante to pull together the joys of earthly love and the joys of heavenly bliss?

6. How did Dante's suffering—the death of Beatrice and his exile from Florence—inform his poetry? How did it form in him what Dr. Baxter calls “prophetic sensibility . . . the power to look down into the root causes of problems of society and awaken men to a love of goodness again”?

• **Additional Resources:**

C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays*, HarperOne; Revised edition, 2001.

C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: A Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge University Press; Reprint edition, 2012.

## LECTURE 2

### The Hero and the Coward in the Dark Wood

Midway in the journey of our life  
I found myself in the midst of a dark wood  
—the true way was lost.

With those now famous words, Dante the poet began his vast epic of the spiritual life. And with those words we meet Dante the pilgrim, someone to whom we immediately relate. The dark wood—“savage, harsh, and difficult”—is not unique to this one man in the early fourteenth century. Most people at some point in their lives have been to that place of defeat, disillusionment, depression, and despair. And many find, as Dante did, that the way up is the way down.

• **Getting Started:** When was it that you came to yourself “in a dark wood?” How did you lose the straight way? How did you find your way back?

• **Read:** *Inferno*, Canti 1–5

• **Listen**

• **Reflect:**

1. How would you explain the distinction between “Dante the poet” and “Dante the pilgrim”? How does this correspond with Dr. Baxter's comments about the poem being “a cinematic experience”?

2. Dr. Baxter comments, “The whole of Canto 1 is an extraordinary poetic achievement in its ability to create a dream-like feeling. It's almost nightmarish, isn't it? We feel the kind of irrational pain and fear of the pilgrim, as he's locked in a terrible dream.” What elements of the canto contribute to this feeling of a dream or nightmare? How does Dante communicate that he was very much awake

rather than asleep?

3. At the end of Canto 1, Dante eagerly entreated Virgil to lead him where he would, but in Canto 2, he expressed doubt at the enormity of the journey and about his fitness for the task—“I am no Aeneas, nor am I Paul.” Virgil responded by telling Dante, “you are plagued by a small-souled cowardice [viltade].” In what ways was this an apt description of Dante’s doubts? How does such cowardice produce the kinds of spirits Dante and Virgil see among the Indifferent (3.22–69)?

4. In his Wyoming Catholic College distance learning course, “Classical Literature and Hope,” Dr. Glenn Arbery comments that “[epic] hope involves divine prompting, even a divine mandate. For the ancient Greeks and Romans, this kind of hope is rare, because the heroes who have it already possess a unique greatness of soul that seems to merit divine attention.” How does Virgil’s explanation of why he went to seek Dante in the dark wood (2.49–120) draw out Dante’s “unique greatness of soul”? How does the explanation place the Comedy in the tradition of the great epics including *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and Virgil’s *Aeneid*?

5. The inscription over the Gates of Hell (Inferno 3.1–9) announce, “DIVINE POWER MADE ME, / HIGHEST WISDOM AND THE FIRST LOVE.” While Dr. Baxter makes it clear that Dante will not fully explain why God created Hell until the pilgrim finds his way to Purgatory and Paradise, Dante is nonetheless comforted by Virgil. How does slaying “all cowardice” (3.12) allow Dante to continue on without an explanation?

6. Dr. Baxter quotes the scholar Guglielmo Gorni who wrote, “Virgil saves Dante from an existence dominated by the contingent, by accidents, by the vanity of things.” Then he explains, “In other words, being lost in the dark wood is not necessarily connected to sinful living or even neglecting your daily duties. It’s a loss of the deep, inspiring memory of why you are doing those things you must do. It’s a forgetfulness of the big dream.” How does this alone make the *Comedy* a book for our era?

## LECTURE 3

### On Castles and Lovers

As Dante enters Hell proper, he hears not the music of the spheres, but the never-ending, raucous, vile, cacophonous din of souls in torment. Even in the relative peace of Limbo, a deep sense of hopelessness hangs over everyone and everything. After visiting with the souls in Limbo, Dante and Virgil begin their descent into what Minos the judge calls “this abode of pain.” As they enter the first circles, they meet those who loved good things, but in distorted and thus evil ways.

•**Getting Started:** When have you felt that something was hopeless? How does hopelessness feel?

•Read: *Inferno*, Canti 6–9

•Listen

•Reflect:

1. In his discussion of the great souls in Limbo, Dr. Baxter cites Alan Bloom, who “said his students’ minds are like the dusty rooms without any moral furniture or imaginative ornament. Dante’s imagination, on the other hand, as we can see, was crowded with the stories and heroes he venerated.” How does Dante the poet show us the love Dante the pilgrim has for the great heroes of antiquity? What value did they have in Dante’s life? What did they teach him?
2. The inscription on the gates of Hell (*Inferno* 3.1–9), Dr. Baxter remarks, is a parody of the church or of a good city. For Dante, he says, “sin is, at its base, a mere twisting of something good, a misuse of something beautiful.” How does the story of Francesca and Paolo (*Inferno* 5.100–142) illustrate this notion of sin?
3. When asked about his affair with his former wife’s adopted daughter, film director Woody Allen responded, “The heart wants what it wants.” How does Woody Allen’s understanding of love—an understanding that is common throughout our culture—mirror Francesca’s? Why is it a dangerous, self-deceptive, and in the final analysis, sinful view of love? How does the punishment (*contrapasso*) of being blown about by the wind fit the crime?
4. In the fourth circle of Hell, the avaricious and the prodigals suffer together (*Inferno* 7.19–65). That, notes Dr. Baxter, seems counterintuitive until we see that their sin is the same. “Both groups,” he says, “committed sins against rest.” How do both misers and squanderers sin against rest? How is it that “Evil spending and evil grasping have taken / the lovely world from them and put them to this scuffle” (7.58–59)?
5. Dr. Baxter comments about the swamp of the wrathful in the fifth circle (*Inferno* 7.100–130; 8.31–66), “The poet creates an infernal landscape which externalizes the interior condition of the wrathful—a small burning wound slowly leaks out anger which pools in the recesses of the heart, dirties the mind, and incapacitates us to think about anything else. Ultimately, it breaks out in expressions of violent rage, but a rage which does not heal but just plunges us back into the foul-smelling mud.” How is that an apt description of wrath? How is wrath like “carrying smoke within the heart” (7.123)?
6. Virgil’s hero, Aeneas, when he visited the underworld, was not permitted to enter the fortress of Dis (*Aeneid* 6.535–627). In a similar way, Virgil, having dealt handily with all obstacles thus far and much to his surprise, gets turned away at the gate of Dis as well. Divine grace in the form of an angel is required in order to open the door to lower Hell so that its depths can be explored (*Inferno* 8.76–9.102). What does this say about the limitations of human reason and virtue and about the need for grace and faith?

## LECTURE 4

### The Graveyard of the Heretics and the Wasteland of the Violent

When Dante and Virgil finally step through the gate into the fortress of Dis and the realms of lower Hell, they discover what the demons guarded so tenaciously: a graveyard. The graveyard marks their entrance into those circles of Hell where the malicious are punished, those who were “willing to hurt fellow human beings (or themselves) to get what they want.” In the graveyard they encounter the heretics chewing on old resentments and then descend to the realm of the violent before descending to the deepest pit of Hell, the circles reserved for traitors.

- **Getting Started:** What characters in literature or film can you identify who became bitter and hateful due to an old resentment they refused to let go of? What effect did their bitterness have on the lives of those around them?

- **Read:** *Inferno*, Canti 10–17

- **Listen**

- **Reflect:**

1. In the graveyard, Dante and Virgil encounter “Epicurus and all his followers: / they held that the soul dies with the body” (*Inferno* 10.14–15). How does this worldview lead easily to the sin of Farinata (idolatry of position and place), Cavalcanti (idolatry of family), and Brunetto Latini (idolatry of fame)?

2. Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti, who believed that the soul dies with the body, is nonetheless suffering in Hell now that his earthly life is over (*Inferno* 10.52–72). “Where is my son?” he begins, “Why is he not with you?” Then, misunderstanding Dante’s response and assuming his son is dead, he falls back into the grave in despair. How does Cavalcanti’s materialistic philosophy and the fact that he is among the heretics explain these seemingly contradictory responses?

3. Rather than being obsessed with family, Farinata degli Uberti, who also believed that the soul dies with the body, lives beyond the grave obsessed with the old political rivalries that occupied his earthly life, but are no longer germane (*Inferno* 10.22–121). “His resentment smolders within him, forever.” Comments Dr. Baxter, “He has, as it were, been given exactly what he wants. He remains committed to his party, with a fanatical, sectarian devotion, forever. Farinata holds one truth, maintains one loyalty.” In what way has Farinata “been given exactly what he wants”? How does his materialism and earthbound focus explain his condition in Hell?

4. Descending deeper into Hell, Dante and Virgil come to the woods of the suicides, where

they meet Pier della Vigne. Pier presents himself as a victim who, Dr. Baxter tells us, wishes to appear innocent. While Dante and, through the poet, we are moved to pity, is Pier truly to be pitied or is he manipulative in his self-pity? How does he still make an idol of his reputation and status?

5. In his discussion of Dante's meeting with his mentor Brunetto Latini in the fiery desert of the sodomites (*Inferno* 15.19–124), Dr. Baxter points out that for Dante, sodomy "consisted of any use of human sexuality which was not formally open to the procreation of children. . . . Thus, the sin, at its base, seems to be a sin against fruitfulness; the transformation of a fruitful act into a sterile one." In what ways does Dr. Baxter believe that Latini was barren, "a kind of failed father" to Dante, thus deserving the *contrapasso* of eternity in the barren desert of fire?

6. After describing the poetry of Dante and Virgil's flight on Geryon's back, Dr. Baxter leaves us with two questions: "Why compare the form of the message to this strange, hybrid monster, a beast made out of the stuff of ancient mythology, and then a wild ride in which we feel the dizzying twists and turn of the rapid, wind-rushing descent? Why take the old myths, the untethered working of the imagination, and submit them to the service of Christian truth?" How do you answer?

## LECTURE 5

### Dante's White-Collar Criminals and Ulysses's Tongue of Fire

The upper circles of Hell hold the incontinent, those whose loved good thing in wrong ways. Inside the walls of Dis, in lower Hell, the malicious suffer, those who, as Dr. Baxter puts it, were willing to use force against the natural laws or force against neighbor to get what they wanted. These include the fraudulent, those who "misused that most precious gift of humanity: our speech-making, word-crafting, image-producing intellect" to harm their fellow humans in order to have their own way.

• **Getting Started:** Have you or has anyone you know ever been scammed? What did it feel like?

• **Read:** *Inferno*, Canti 18–26

• **Listen**

• **Reflect:**

1. Do you agree with Dr. Baxter that the characters Dante meets in the ditches of Malebolge are "white collar criminals"? Why or why not?

2. "For Dante," Dr. Baxter argues, "it is a sacred act to speak, and obfuscating the vision of

reality by abusing language is a serious sin in his eyes.” How did Jason (*Inferno* 18.82–99), Pope Nicholas III (19.43–123), the false prophets (20), and the hypocrites (23) sin with words?

3. In his second lecture, Dr. Baxter defines *contrapasso* as “the principle that the punishment balances out the crime; it turns the sin inside out, as it were, and in doing so its full horror becomes evidenced for the first time.” How do the punishments in the Malebolge fit the corresponding crimes?

4. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote, “For You have commanded, and so it is, that every inordinate affection should be its own punishment.” How does Vanni Fucci (24.121–25.15) illustrate this principle?

5. Why is it appropriate that in the ditch where Ulysses and the other fraudulent counselors are punished, the souls are, as Dr. Baxter puts it, “wrapped in a fiery light which makes them resemble—on the outside at least—the appearance of souls in Paradise”? How is this another example of *contrapasso*?

6. Dr. Baxter compares Ulysses to Aeneas, noting that unlike the founder of Rome, “Ulysses lacks the willingness to found, defend, and cultivate the city. He lacks allegiance to a particularized human community, and he lacks the willingness to remain bound by those human relationships.” Reread Ulysses’s speech in *Inferno* 26.85–142). How did these characteristics of rootlessness spur Ulysses to set sail and cross the Straits of Gibraltar into forbidden waters, asking his shipmates: “how could you deny yourself the experience / of that land beyond the sun, of the uninhabited world”?

## LECTURE 6

### Icy Hearts and Frozen Souls: The Lowest Portion of Hell

Contrary to the image of Hell as the realm of fire, Dante describes deepest Hell as a frozen sea of ice. “As Dante and Virgil descend to increasingly lower levels of hell,” begins Dr. Baxter, “we feel the thermometer dropping—both in terms of the ice which holds the souls imprisoned, but also in terms of the spiritual coldness of the hearts of the individuals they meet.” Sins such as adultery and wrath are traditionally called “hot” sins. Cold sins include malice, cruelty, and—worst and coldest of all—treachery.

- **Getting Started:** Think of an example of betrayal from literature or history. Why would treachery be known as a “cold” sin?

- **Read:** *Inferno*, Canti 27–34

- Listen

- Reflect:

1. In the last of the Malebolge and in the frozen plain of deep Hell, Dr. Baxter notes, souls do not want to reveal their names. Why do these souls no longer wish to be remembered? What does the refusal to be known say about the isolation and bitterness that accompanies sin? How do we see that in Guido da Montefeltro (27)? In the schismatics (28)? Sinon and Master Adam (29.100–117)?

2. According to Dr. Baxter, “it seems that as the pilgrim nears the bottom of hell, the poet pulls out all the stops in his quest to create the language of breaking glass and finger nails on the chalkboard, in an attempt to summon and harness the full power of language to convey the devastating sense of the brokenness of humanity.” How does the language and imagery of these last canti convey the wickedness and betrayal of sin? How is this illustrated in fitting punishments (*contrapasso*) of the schismatics (28) and the counterfeiter (29)?

3. Beginning in Canto 32, Dr. Baxter states, “the poet, much like the pilgrim, lets all compassion die.” Then he asks, “What on earth is going on? . . . Is the poet of love slipping? Is he becoming the poet of hate? Is this his chance to lash out at the world which had betrayed him?” Given the stories of Bocca degli Abati, Ungolino and Ruggieri, and Fra Alberigo, what is going on?

4. In the deepest part of Hell, at the center of the Earth, Dante and Virgil see Satan (34.1–69). He is three-headed and endlessly chews on the worst of traitors as he weeps and flaps his wings, thus freezing his tears into his own prison. “What has always interested me the most,” comments Dr. Baxter, “is the fascinating observation that, if, somehow, Satan could but momentarily stop the beating of his wings, then perhaps the ice which imprisons him would melt, and he could go free. But here he is left entirely to his own choosing. He is left free to seek what his heart desires, and thus his furious rebellion ensures he will forever remain in captivity. Satan is the slave of his own freedom.” How is that true of every soul we’ve met in the course of reading the *Inferno*?

5. Throughout the *Inferno*, says Dr. Baxter in summing up, “Dante gives us violent visions: souls biting themselves, giving the finger to God, screaming at one another, spitting on one another, mocking each other—it’s a harrowing vision, in an attempt to try to wake us up. Despite our rational ability to know sin’s evil, we are still attracted to it, and so Dante creates a visceral embodiment of it, an x-ray vision, in which we are repulsed by it, made to feel its coldness, made almost to have a sense of nausea at those empty choices.” How has your reading and study of the *Inferno* reached your affections? How has it made sin more repulsive, cold, and empty?

6. In the *Comedy*, notes Dr. Baxter, “Dante takes the invisible world—that is, the world of the heart, of the reality of love, of moral character, of the intellect, of the virtues, as well as of the vices and evil—all those things which, at one level or another, we sense to exist but which we cannot see or hear with the bodily senses, and renders them palpable, tangible.” How does this skill make Dante an effective guide for the spiritual life? What new insights about your own invisible world have become clearer in your reading and study?

## LECTURE 7

### Fire and Healing: An Introduction to Medieval Purgatory

After the harrowing trek through Hell, we, like Dante, are relieved and refreshed with the vision of:

Sweet color of oriental sapphire . . .  
Brought delight to my eyes once more  
as soon as I had left behind that dead air. . . .  
The beautiful planet that makes us strong at love,  
Was making all of the east to smile . . . . (Purgatorio 1.13–20)

But for all the beauty, what is this new place? How did Purgatory fit into Dante’s medieval view of the cosmos and of salvation, and how does it fit into ours?

• **Getting Started:** When have you been through a frightening or dangerous experience? How did you feel once it was over? What came to mind as you reflected on your “close call”?

• **Read:** *Purgatorio*, Canti 1–2

• **Listen**

• **Reflect:**

1. “If Hell is a subhuman nightmare,” says Dr. Baxter, “full of darkness and confusion, like living within a Hieronymous Bosch painting, and if Paradise is being drowned in a superhuman exaltation of joy, where souls are steeped in light and rest in a profound peace, then Purgatory is that state between the subhuman and the superhuman. In fact, Dante’s middle section of the poem is the most relatable, it’s the most human part of his great poem: by which I mean, it is the place of transformation, of hope in the midst of bitterness.” Why would Purgatory be “the most relatable”? How does Purgatory form a continuity with this life on earth?

2. Dr. Baxter points out the way Dante “built in a system of allusions to music to make sure we hear the poetry of his canticles differently.” How do “the chaotic broken chords of Hell,” “the sober chant of Purgatory,” and “the complexly woven textures of Paradise” reflect the

character of each place and the mode of living there? What do they say about individuality and community?

3. In the *Purgatorio*, Dr. Baxter argues, “Dante has imaginatively constructed a place which is, you could say, a school of love, where the souls develop the power to be happy.” Why do humans need “a school of love”? How is it that we need to “develop the power to be happy”? What holds us back from love and happiness? How, according to Dr. Baxter’s commentary on Dante, is Purgatory necessary for love and happiness?

4. Dr. Baxter spends quite a bit of his lecture on the development of the doctrine of Purgatory from St. Paul (1 Corinthians 3:9–15) to St. Thomas Aquinas’s view that we find in Dante. How are the holiness, love, and mercy of God related to the suffering and pain of Purgatory? How do the pain and suffering in Purgatory differ from the pain and suffering in Hell? How does the contrast between the arrival of souls at Purgatory (*Purgatorio* 2.13–60) and the souls arriving in Hell (*Inferno* 3.70–126) illustrate that difference?

5. We see that Purgatory is a place of “radical humility,” argues Dr. Baxter, first by the presence of Cato (*Purgatorio* 1.31–90). Cato, Dr. Baxter states, “is then a picture of courage, of justice, of foresight, and of absolute control over his own will, but he brings his human virtues to such a point of perfection that his own life has become a sacrifice for others.” How did this, from Dante’s point of view, make Cato a type of Christ and thus, as Dr. Baxter puts it, “a fitting guardian of this most human realm”? How is he an example of radical humility?

6. We see a second symbol of radical humility, according to Dr. Baxter, as Virgil washes Dante’s face and girds him with a reed belt (*Purgatorio* 1.91–136). How do these two acts illustrate that, as Dr. Baxter puts it, “In Dante, it’s not enough to be a virtuous, stout-hearted hero; you have to seek things even higher than the human, and so you must stoop low in search of the divine grace to do so”?

## LECTURE 8

### Waiting for God, the Broken Human Community, and the Surprise of Mercy

There are four major principles at work in Purgatory, says Dr. Baxter. In his last lecture he covered the first: radical humility. In Ante-Purgatory, the subject of this lecture, the others come into focus. We see God’s surprising and abundant mercy, witness the healing of divisive community, and watch as complacency is overcome by purified desire as Dante encounters those who held the Church in contempt, the late repenters, and the failed kings of Europe.

• **Getting Started:** When has someone shown you undeserved friendship and kindness? What was that experience like?

• **Read:** *Purgatorio*, Canti 3–9

• **Listen:**

• **Reflect:**

1. Dr. Baxter compares asking for God’s mercy to a man dying of thirst asking for a drop of water who receives an ocean of water. How is this visible in the story of Manfred (*Purgatorio* 3.103–145), the excommunicated reprobate whom Dr. Baxter calls “the warmongering son of a heretic” (*Inferno* 10.119)?

2. In Canto V, Dante meets souls who tell him:

We were all died through violence,  
And we were sinners even until the last hour  
when a light from heaven made us see,  
so that, repenting and forgiving,  
we departed from life at peace with God,  
he who haunts our hearts with desire to see Him. (52–57)

Among them is Bounconte da Montefeltro, the son of Guido d Montefeltro (*Purgatorio* 4.85–129) who Dante met in the ditch of the evil counselors in Hell (*Inferno* 27.16–120). Compare the stories of Bounconte and Guido—particularly the conflict over their souls after death. How do we see the surprising and abundant mercy of God at work? What is the part human activity, in this case repentance, plays?

3. Throughout the *Purgatorio*, Dr. Baxter points out, souls ask Dante to help them obtain the prayers of the living. Manfred, for example, tells Dante, “Look now if you can make me happy,/ revealing to my good Constance / the details of how you’ve seen me / and how long I am excluded— / for much can be gained here by those down there” (*Purgatorio* 3.142–145). And the late repenters, realizing Dante is still alive in the body, rush to him to entreat his help (*Purgatorio* 5.37–50). How does Dante use these requests for prayer to show the way Purgatory is the place where divisive community is healed?

4. After denouncing Italy as “a slave, house misery, / ship without a captain, tossed in a tempest, / no mistress over lands, but harlot,” and worse (*Purgatorio* 6.76–151), Sordello points Dante and Virgil to the Valley of the Kings. There they meet a group of princes who were contemporaries, fought each other, and in some cases killed each other (*Purgatorio* 7.64–136). What impression does the juxtaposition of wicked Italy and the self-serving “trust fund” kings create? How does community heal those who were noble by birth, but not in heart?

5. Purgatory is a place where holy desire overcomes complacency. Before meeting Belacqua, the model of complacency, Virgil tells Dante, “This mountain is formed / so that ascending

is harder at the beginning / but the climb becomes less difficult as more makes this way up” (*Purgatorio* 4.88–90). Why would this be the case? How is Belacqua’s complacency (*Purgatorio* 4.127–135) contradicted by the words of the angel guarding the gate to Purgatory proper (*Purgatorio* 9.127–129)? Why is desire so central to the cleansing undergone in Purgatory?

6. Before opening the gate into Purgatory, Dante relates, “Seven P’s in my forehead he traced out / with the point of his sword” (*Purgatorio* 9.112–113). These represent the seven deadly sins from which Dante has yet to be healed. Dr. Baxter comments, “Purgatory is a place of frightening honesty where you can no longer hide what you want to keep within.” How do we see this principle in Dante’s conversations with Manfred, Buonconte da Montefeltro, Sordello, and the kings?

## LECTURE 9

### At the Heart of the World: Love, Freedom, and Community

Canti 16 and 17 are the middle of the *Purgatorio* which, of course, makes the middle of the Comedy as a whole. As Dante and Virgil spend the night half way up the mountain, Virgil expounds on love, the key to both Heaven and Hell. “Love is the seed in you of every virtue,” he tells Dante, “and of every action that merits punishment” (*Purgatorio* 17.103–105). Love, therefore, characterizes Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory. In Heaven, love is pure and perfect. In Hell, love is permanently distorted and perverted. In Purgatory, distorted and perverted love is purified, perfected, and made ready for glory.

- **Getting Started:** Peer pressure. We warn our children about the dangers, but is peer pressure always bad? What are examples of good peer pressure?

- **Read:** *Purgatorio*, Canti 10–17

- **Listen**

- **Reflect:**

1. In placing Virgil’s speech about love at the center of his *Comedy*, says Dr. Baxter, Dante tells us, “At the center of the cosmos is Love, moving out to ask for the generous response of humanity, waiting for human beings to use their freedom to respond to that love. And this is Dante’s vision of the drama of human existence. It is also the base of why Dante thinks that sin is so vicious: because sin entails closing yourself off from this world of love.” How do the punishments of the proud (*Purgatorio* 10–12), the envious (13–14), and the wrathful (15–16) demonstrate the defectiveness of their love? How are their punishments appropriate means to restore them to rightly ordered love?

2. In tandem with Virgil's speech about love is Marco Lombardo's speech about freedom (*Purgatorio* 16.67–129). The two, Dr. Baxter notes, form a diptych at the center of the Comedy. How is Lombardo's description of how freedom develops from innocent to culpable appetites an apt description of the paths sin takes in our lives? Why must our freedom be "rightly nurtured" in order to "conquer all" (78)? In what ways is it true that "if the world goes astray, / in you is the cause and in you let it be sought" (82–83)?

3. The souls being healed of the sin of pride carry heavy rocks (*Purgatorio* 10.100–139), look at images illustrating the good of humility (10.34–96) and others showing the evil of pride (12.16–72). While they "seemed to say: '*Più non posso*,'" "I can no more," they nonetheless struggle on praying the Lord's Prayer (11.1–30). In imagining how the love of prideful souls is reordered toward humility, how has Dante given us a model for breaking our pride and growing in humility in this life? How does his model the way to holiness?

4. Commenting on the ledge of the envious (*Purgatorio* 13–14), Dr. Baxter says, "Here are the envious then: with their eyes sewn shut by metal wire, they are thus forced to lean on one another's shoulders. The neighbors, whose goods they envied on earth, have now become the only way they don't fall down. Without their neighbors, they have no support. In this way, the envious are made to feel radical weakness, and then given one another to help them bear it." How does the story of Sapia (13.103–154) show both the nature of envy and the power of a loving community? How do the charitable prayers of Peter the comb-seller (124–129) and Sapia's request to be remembered to her family (148–150) fit into her healing?

5. How is the gloomy smoke on the third ledge (*Purgatorio* 15–16) a way of healing the wrathful? Why did Dante include singing the Agnus Dei, "there was one word for all, and one mode / so that it seemed full harmony dwelt among them" (16.20–21) in their penance? Among the wrathful, Dante and Virgil meet Marco Lombardo who, as Dr. Baxter points out, "delivers an angry rant at how evil the world has grown." What is Dante telling us about anger by having this delivered by one among the wrathful?

6. On each ledge, Dante included a reference to the Virgin Mary, the epitome of all virtues. How does the example of Mary serve as an antidote to pride (*Purgatorio* 10.34–45), envy (13.28–30), and wrath (15.85–93)?

## LECTURE 10

### Materialism and Depression: How God Rewrites the Soul

The slothful run at full speed. The avaricious stare at the ground unable to move at all. The gluttonous waste away with hunger. Yet for all of them joy—even joy in their suffering—slowly triumphs over the grief of sin and transforms their souls. But that transformation is only in

part due to their physical trials. Change of heart requires the interior work of meditation on God's truth, a practice we see on all the ledges.

- **Getting Started:** How often have you had the experience of desiring something—rest, gadgets, food—only to be disappointed once you had what you wanted? How soon after the disappointment before the cycle began again?

- **Read:** *Purgatorio*, Canti 18–24

- **Listen**

- **Reflect:**

1. “Acedia (or sloth), comments Dr. Baxter, “is more than just laziness (although that is a part of it). It's deeper and more dangerous than that. . . . At its root, acedia is a deep, spiritual sorrow which paralyzes the will, makes you dull to doing good, and makes you incapable of enjoying the good things of life, even when you are surrounded by them. Acedia leads you to assume that everyone around is better off than you, and that no one around you actually cares if you are well.” How is the contrapasso of running in a large group meditating on the zeal of Mary and Julius Caesar along with the sloth of the disobedient Israelites and the Trojans who gave up a fitting way to purge sloth? How would this “Let our zeal for doing good make grace grow green again” (*Purgatorio* 18.88–138)?

2. Dante has described how avarice is punished in Hell by the eternal and breathless activity of rolling huge stones at each other while shouting insults (*Inferno* 7.16–16). In Purgatory, Dante describes the healing of avarice in ways that are completely opposite. The avaricious who, as Dr. Baxter puts it, “spent too much time fixated on earthly wealth in their lives,” lie on the ground bound hand and foot facing the dirt. “Just as our eye was not raised / on high, fixed rather on earthly things / so does justice make them plunge toward the earth” (*Purgatorio* 19.115–126). How is avarice, as Dr. Baxter says, “a kind of materialistic warping of the theological virtue of hope”? Why is Hell's contrapasso appropriate as punishment? Why is Purgatory's for reordering affections?

3. The unrepentant gluttons in Hell lie in fetid mud under a cold rain (*Inferno* 6.7–12). The penitent gluttons in Purgatory undergo what Dr. Baxter refers to as “the purgation of the French bakery.” They go quickly around the terrace wasting away with hunger and thirst despite the sight and smells of beautiful fruit and sweet, clear water (*Purgatorio* 22.128–23.75). Why would Bonagiunta describe the wasting away of the penitents in the equivalent of a French bakery by saying, “I speak of punishment, but should say consolation” (23.72)? How were the pains of Purgatory the “consolation” of the penitents?

4. Dr. Baxter points out that through the *Purgatorio*, but in these canti in particular, penitent

souls engage in spiritual meditation on the pattern of *lectio divina*. He cites Dante and Virgil's encounter with the avaricious Hugh Capet as he meditates aloud on Mary's poverty in the stable of the Nativity, honest Fabricius, and St. Nicholas (*Purgatorio* 20.20–24). How, according to Dante and Dr. Baxter, do meditation and “giving voice to goodness” (20.121) change the hearts of the penitents?

5. Summing up the nature of Purgatory and the healing that takes place there, Dr. Baxter says, “In *Purgatorio*, we have a similar double-angled view: that is, we have these moments—like Virgil's speech on love or Virgil's speech on mirrors—in which we get a glimpse of the joy which awaits the penitent souls, but we also zoom back in, as it were, on the souls' particular suffering. And so it is important to remember throughout that these instances of pain are not meant as punishments, but rather as preparatory exercises for experiencing that glory to come. Indeed, if you have got even a vague sense through my discussion of these passions purged in Purgatory—pride, envy, wrath, acedia, avarice, or gluttony—of how easy it is to slip into them, and then how difficult it is to manage them, then I think you have got Dante's point. We feel helpless, in a way, standing before the inner life of our hearts. It produces in you a kind of groaning, in which you become irritated with your own radical moral limitations.” How has reading *Purgatory* aided you in your understanding of sin and holiness, repentance and grace, virtue and vice?

## LECTURE 11

### Returning to Man's First Home: The Pilgrim in the Garden of Eden

In Genesis, after Adam and Eve's sin, God “drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24). Dante, the poet, places the Garden at the top of Mount Purgatory. Gone is the angel guardian with his flaming sword. Instead, the terrace where fire burns away lust surrounds the Garden as the last barrier to entrance. Once the pilgrim passes that trial, he can return to his first home, the place longed for by the poets of the past.

- **Getting Started:** How often do you read poetry? What about poetry do you like? What keeps you from reading more?

- **Read:** *Purgatorio*, Canti 25–28

- **Listen**

- **Reflect:**

1. After commenting on Dante's passion for poetry and how our age that does not value poetry finds him strange, Dr. Baxter comments, “Dante would find us as strange as we find him. He wouldn't be able to understand that we couldn't understand him. I would say that in this

respect, it is our age which is a bit out of step with history. . . . For this reason, it's valuable to spend time with someone like Dante, isn't it? Someone who is as strange to us as we would be to him." Why is it valuable? How does interacting with Dante and his poetry teach us about the era in which we live? About our lives in twentieth-century Western culture?

2. Dr. Baxter quotes Alan Bloom who observed in his 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind* that college students beginning in the late-1960s had no books "to which they look for counsel, inspiration, or joy," leading to no heroes, leading to "no idea of evil; they doubt its existence." Dante, by contrast, was a man of books whose authors became his heroes (see *Inferno* 4.79–146). And, of course, Dante had a strong sense of good and evil. How does interacting with authors through reading—authors who, like Dante's ancient heroes, are not like us or even strange to us—open us up to having heroes and understanding good and evil? How has Dante encouraged you in these areas?

3. At the end of *Purgatorio* 10, Dante is terrified when he "felt the mountain tremble as though it might collapse." Then he heard voices shouting "Gloria in excelsis Deo" (124–138). In the next canto, Statius explains that the mountain trembled and the voices shouted to celebrate that he, a pagan poet, was ready to move from Purgatory to Heaven. How does Dr. Baxter connect the salvation of this pagan poet with Dante's debt to the poets and poetry of ancient Greece and Rome? How did Dante illustrate this when he wrote, "[Virgil and Statius] were moving along in front, and solitary I / behind, and I was listening to their discourse, / which gave me rich understanding of the poet's craft" (*Purgatorio* 12.127–129)?

4. Commenting on Canto 15 and Statius's description of souls and bodies, Dr. Baxter concludes, "Thus, in Dante's formulation, the ability to speak and receive communicative sensations is so essential to the nature of the human that the soul immediately shapes that air around it to form the bodily medium through which it can communicate. It is so essential that the soul cannot be without it even for a moment. You could say then that the human being for Dante is a poetry-using animal, a creature with the constant desire to express on the outside that which it experiences within." While the mechanism Statius described is fanciful, how is this view of the human person fundamentally Christian? (See Genesis 1:3–28)

5. Dante's discourse on the nature of poetry continues into the fiery terrace where lust is purged. There he meets other poet heroes, including the love poets Guido Guinizelli and Arnaut Daniel. Unlike the ancients, these once fashionable vernacular poets were, by Dante's time, hopelessly out of date and their dedication to disordered, earthly romantic love was being burned away and replaced with divine love. Upon discovering that Dante is still alive, Guido tells him, "Blessed you! Who.../ to die a better death, take on board this experience" (*Purgatorio* 26.74–75). What knowledge did Guido have in mind? How could Dante take it on board?

6. Given the answers to question 5, why would Dante, who had already walked through Hell, hesitate in fear before the flames of the terrace of lust (*Purgatorio* 27.10–33)? Virgil finally encourages him into the flames, saying, “this wall stands between Beatrice and you” (36). Why does the thought of Beatrice motivate Dante to walk into the flames? How has Purgatory purified his desires so that, on the other side of the flames on the border of Eden, Virgil can say, “Your will is free, upright, and healed; / it would be folly not do what is in your heart: / for this I crown and miter you lord over yourself” (27.140–142)?

## LECTURE 12

### “As the Heavens are Higher than the Earth”: Dante’s Apocalyptic Vision

We could imagine Dante’s *Purgatorio* ending with Canto 28 as Virgil proclaims Dante his own king and pope: “Over yourself I crown and miter you” (142). But the story goes on and in a very unexpected direction. With flashes of light and color, the idyll of canto 28 becomes the apocalyptic vision of canti 29 to 33 in which the pilgrim, shaken from his reverie, meets his beloved Beatrice who excoriates him for his sins before his purgation finally comes to an end.

- **Getting Started:** How would you describe holiness? What connotations do you associate with holiness?

- **Read:** *Purgatorio*, canti 29–33

- **Listen**

- **Reflect:**

1. Adam and Eve inhabited Eden, the earthly paradise now atop Mount Purgatory. But Dante, having been made pure in heart, is not destined for the delights of Eden, but the joy of Heaven. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” said Jesus, “for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). How is the pilgrim’s experience in canti 29–33 preparation to move from the earthly paradise to the heavenly paradise and the presence of God?

2. Dr. Baxter cites theologian Rudolph Otto who in his book *The Idea of the Holy* wrote that the numinous (the holy) is a mystery, possesses majesty, is tremendous, contains an “urgent energy,” and attracts. “It inspires,” says Dr. Baxter, “a feeling of radical creaturehood.” In what ways does Dante, the pilgrim, experience the holy and his own “radical creaturehood”?

3. Throughout the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* Dante the poet portrayed Virgil as an omniscient guide. With the exception the Gates of Dis (*Inferno* 8.103–120), Virgil facilitated and explained all that Dante the pilgrim required. Yet observing the beginnings of the brilliant biblical procession that would introduce Beatrice, Dante said, “Stupefied, I turned to good Virgil / and he responded with a look / with no less charged astonishment” (*Purgatorio* 29.55–57). Why would Virgil have been equally amazed? How has Virgil reached the end of his ability to

understand and guide? What is Dante communicating about the limits of reason and the classical poetry? Why does he need a new guide from this point forward?

4. When Beatrice finally arrives, she and Dante do not have a romantic and joyful reunion. Instead, says Dr. Baxter, “she is brutally personal. She attacks the pilgrim, trying to sting him and elicit his shame. At times, she is even sarcastic. When the disoriented pilgrim turns for help to his faithful guide and friend, Virgil, to find he is not there, Beatrice says, ‘do not weep, do not weep yet— / there is another sword to make you weep’ (30.56–57).” Looking at canti 30.100–145 and 31.22–63, how was Dante unfaithful to Beatrice, to love, and to beauty?

5. Dante makes two confessions to Beatrice and the assembled crowd. The first was a simple “yes—but one had need of eyes to hear it” (*Purgatorio* 31.14–15). In the second, he admitted, “Those things that stood in front of me, / with their false pleasure, turned back my steps / the moment that your face was hidden” (31.34–36). This, as Dr. Baxter puts it, “constitutes that rare moment in which a human being sees the ‘false images of the world’ for what they are in the light of eternity” Why was such a moment of self-realization and shame needed before Dante bathed in the Lethe, thus receiving absolution and losing the memory of sin?

6. *Purgatorio* ends, notes Dr. Baxter, with enigmatic words. “Indeed,” he says, “Beatrice suggest that the very darkness of her words was intentionally planned in order that the pilgrim recognize by how much heavenly realities exceed earthly ones, recognize how poorly equipped he is to understand opaque celestial truths with earthly rational instruments.” How does Dante the poet use these enigmatic words, the last spoken on earth, to prepare Dante the pilgrim and us as readers “to rise up to the stars” (33.145)?

## LECTURE 13

### “Great Fires Come from Tiny Sparks”: St. Paul and Orpheus Go To Heaven

The sad, despairing pilgrim we met in the “savage, dense, and harsh” wood having explored the depths of Hell’s just punishments and Purgatory’s painful remedies stands on the threshold of Heaven. There, guided by Beatrice, he will see what cannot be seen and return to describe the indescribable, “The glory of Him who moves all things” (*Paradiso* 1.1).

• **Getting Started:** Think of something that is beautiful to behold. How would you go about describing that beautiful thing to someone who had never seen it? How would you communicate the beauty you can see using words?

• **Read:** *Paradiso*, Canti 1–2

• **Listen**

• **Reflect:**

1. *Paradiso* begins with a warning. “Dante says that he only wants a few readers, and those most desirous,” Dr. Baxter observes, “those who, like baby birds, ‘have stretched forth your heads up . . . / To reach for the bread of angels, which gives us life on earth, / Yet never leaves us satisfied’ (*Paradiso* 2.10–12). . . . If you don’t have fire in your heart, Dante says, there will be no point in reading on.” Why would he offer such a warning? Why has he placed it in juxtaposition to his plea to Apollo (1.13–36) and the assurance to his readers “Minerva blows, Apollo guides, / Nine Muses point me toward the Bear” (2.13–15)?

2. Dr. Baxter says, “According to medieval understandings of the experience of beauty, Dante’s work achieves such an intensity of power because all of the ingredients, though blended together, all retain such high contrast. The fact that Hell is so deep, and dark, the fact that Dante tries to use the language of broken glass and fingernails on the chalkboard, the fact that by the end of the journey we are almost spiritually broken, prepares us for an equally overwhelming experience of Heaven. The depths of Hell prepare us for the abyss of Heaven.” How is this true in your reading of Dante? How is it true in a Christian’s walk with God? How is Dante a spiritual guide as well as a poet?

3. Describing Heaven stretches the bounds of language, and Dante, according to Dr. Baxter, engages the mystical tradition of “negative theology.” God is beyond our ability to describe Him and Heaven is similarly “ineffable.” Words fail. At the same time, “Dante is convinced,” argues Dr. Baxter, “that given the extraordinary nature of the treasure of this kingdom—the joy experienced through looking at and being seen by God—that if Dante could get just a flicker of it, one single tiny spark, and if he could somehow get it back home to earth and get that into his poem, the whole world would be consumed with the flame of love, or as he says, ‘*Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda*,’ (1.34), ‘great fire comes from the smallest spark.’” How do you understand Dante’s conundrum that while language is inadequate to describe divine things, all we have is language to describe divine things?

4. Commenting on *Paradiso* 1.53–60, Dr. Baxter notes, “Looking at the sun, then, is the perfect image for Dante’s journey into heaven.” This adds the problem of seeing to the problem of telling. How does growth in love and desire—beginning with his love and desire for Beatrice— as expressed in 1.58–84 increase the ability to see?

5. More than once Dr. Baxter quotes *Paradiso* 1.34, “*Poca favilla gran fiamma seconda*,” “Great fire comes from the smallest spark.” What is Dante saying about the power of beauty and language? How could even a glimpse of Heaven set the world on fire?

## LECTURE 14

### “In His Will is Our Peace”: Heaven, Cosmic Order, and Tranquility

“The heavens are telling the glory of God,” says Psalm 19:1, “and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” While modern men and women have a sense of that, those in the ancient and

medieval worlds had a view of the heavens telling God's glory that was qualitatively different, untouched as it was by our scientific reductionism. Dante, guided by Beatrice, now ascends into this reflection of God's glory and its blinding light.

• **Getting Started:** When was the last time you went stargazing? What feelings come over you as you gaze at the heavens?

• **Read:** *Paradiso*, Canti 2–5

• **Listen**

• **Reflect:**

1. Introducing his lecture, Dr. Baxter states, “I don't just want to relate some of their ideas about the cosmos; rather, I want to try to recreate the medieval experience of looking at the nighttime sky; that is, I want to conduct a kind of phenomenology of the medieval cosmos, talking about not just what it looked like and how it worked, but what it felt like.” How is such an understanding of the heavens different from our idea of scientific knowledge about the universe? How does it nourish our imaginations?

2. Dr. Baxter begins by talking about how Dante and his peers saw the universe as ordered, harmonious, and therefore comforting. Why would experiencing that order and harmony light in Dante “a desire to understand their cause / more sharp than any felt before” (*Paradiso* 1.83–84)? What kind of knowledge of their cause was Dante seeking? How does that knowledge fit into the themes of the Comedy?

3. In the first line of the *Paradiso* (1.1), Dante calls God “Him who moves all things” and in the last line (33.145), “The Love that moves the sun and all the other stars.” For medieval thinkers such as Dante and Boethius, the love of God holds all things together and directs all things and, as Dr. Baxter notes, “each creature, by being itself, seeks out God. By craving to remain in existence, each thing imitates that God who is always eternally present.” How are these ideas expressed by Beatrice in canto 1.103–117?

4. Remembering that there was no artificial light in Dante's day, reflect on the experience of light in the sun, moon, planets, stars, gems, and water that would have inspired medieval thinkers. In his discussion of the importance they attributed to light, Dr. Baxter says, “even though it is the case that all creatures seek out God by a kind of internal movement, some can imbibe more of his light than others.” How would that be true for animals, plants, and inanimate objects? How is it true with people? According to Dr. Baxter, how does human freedom figure into this analysis?

5. The moon, which Dr. Baxter calls “the basement of heaven,” is home of those who neglected their vows. There Dante and Beatrice meet Piccarda Donati who was a nun until one of her

brothers kidnapped her from the monastery and married her off for his gain. Dante, in all too human form, asks her whether she wishes to have a higher place in Heaven. Piccarda answers that she is content with God's will (*Paradiso* 3.67–87). How does that contentment reflect Dr. Baxter's discussion of the order and harmony, the love, and the light that characterized the universe for Dante?

6. In the *Inferno*, there was no harmony or community. Dante saw only conflict and isolation. Climbing Mount Purgatory, there was regimented community as souls were in a sense forced to give up their natural conflict and isolation. In Heaven, says Dr. Baxter, "the human community is now moving with that natural effortless which regulates the cosmos." How does the story of Piccarda illustrate this new harmony?

## LECTURE 15

### "Here is One Who Will Increase Our Love": Dante's Love Lyric Goes to Heaven

Inscribed on the Gates of Hell, Dante read "DIVINE POWER MADE ME, / HIGH WISDOM AND THE FIRST LOVE" (*Inferno* 3.5–6). In Purgatorio, as Dr. Baxter put it, Dante climbed through "a school of love, where the souls develop the power to be happy." Finally, as the pilgrim ascends into the depths of Heaven, he meets those who, perfected in love, long only to love more.

•**Getting Started:** What feelings and thoughts do we typically associate with "falling in love"? Are they good things or bad things?

•**Read:** *Paradiso*, canti 5–9

•**Listen**

•**Reflect:**

1. In canto 4, Beatrice explains that rather than being on the various planets, the souls in Heaven are all in the highest Heaven beholding God, but condescend to show themselves on the planets so that Dante—and we—can better understand these mysteries. "It is necessary," Beatrice says, "to speak to your mind in this way, / Since they know only by grasping with the senses / That which they shape and form for the intellect" (*Paradiso* 4.40–42). What is it about humans that requires such condescension? How does what Dr. Baxter calls Dante's poetic "non-false error" enhance our understanding of spiritual things?

2. "Although readers often mistakenly see the third canticle as dull," Dr. Baxter comments, "Dante intended it to be radiant and dazzling on account of an excess of light: he intended it to be an exploration of a world of fulminating joy!" Thus far in your reading of the *Paradiso*, what strikes you as dull? What strikes you as a "world of fulminating joy"? How can Dante's

intent increase your appreciation for this canticle?

3. Dr. Baxter discusses the notion of love celebrated by the lyric poets, including Guido Guinizelli (*Purgatorio* 26) and Dante in his younger years. Then, he points out, Dante put Guinizelli's word in the mouth of Francesca suffering in Hell for her adultery (*Inferno* 5). He then comments "'Our eyes met,' and there was the problem. But it comes as a great surprise when we hear all this language of sparks and fires, radiant eyes and burning hearts, everywhere in *Paradiso*!" Does it come as a surprise to you that the same passions that landed Francesca and Paolo in Hell are celebrated in Heaven? How is romantic love for another person the same as love for God? Love for our fellow Christians? How is it different? What distinguishes sinful love from holy love?

4. Dr. Baxter quotes St. Thomas Aquinas who said that "the lover is not satisfied with a superficial apprehension of the beloved, but strives to gain an intimate knowledge of everything pertaining to the beloved, so as to penetrate into his very soul." How did Dante the poet demonstrate that as he described the blazing joy of Justinian (*Paradiso* 5.124–139) and of Charles Martel (8.40–48) when Dante asked them who they were?

5. While we think of Hell as hot and the heavens as cold, dark, and silent, "For Dante," Dr. Baxter notes, "Paradiso is not only the place of the more intricate music of polyphony, as opposed to the broken songs and warped instruments of hell; it is not only full of more smiles and laughter; but it is also hotter and more radiant." Why are the adjectives "cold," "dark," and "silent" more appropriate for Hell than for Heaven? How is "hot" an appropriate adjective for Heaven?

6. Despite his fiery love, the Emperor Justinian delivers a fiery speech about the Roman Empire and the evils of the Guelphs and Ghibellines (*Paradiso* 6.1–142). How are his words and other words of condemnation in Heaven compatible with the love we've been discussing? How are they, in fact, a result of that love and of the perspective of looking down from Heaven?

## LECTURE 16

### Diversity, Unity, and the Greatest Gift from Heaven

We tend to like and thus to gravitate toward people who are just like us. Our neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and social groups may talk a great deal about diversity, but that diversity is typically either superficial or a mask for slipping off and forming very homogeneous sub-groups. It was as true in Dante's day as it is in ours. Rather than accept it, however, Dante describes an alternative. In Heaven, he saw the possibility of real diversity in the heart of real unity.

• **Getting Started:** What is the most diverse group you have ever worked with? What were the strengths of that diversity? What were the weaknesses?

• **Read:** *Paradiso*, Canti 10–20

• **Listen**

• **Reflect:**

1. Near the end of his lecture, Dr. Baxter says that Dante “provides us a vision of heaven which startles, overwhelms, and breaks the small boxes and categories we would like to fit it in.” How did Dante do this through his treatment of the two great rivals of the Middle Ages, the Franciscans and the Dominicans (*Paradiso* 11–12)?

2. While St. Francis and St. Dominic were very different men with very different approaches, Dr. Baxter notes that, “these saints were both supremely prudent: they had the power to concretely realize a vision of the good in the particulars of their lives.” How does prudence and an understanding of “prudential judgments” encourage unity and love in the face of diversity?

3. At the end of canto 13, St. Thomas warns against hasty judgments which are contrary to wisdom.

Since that man is a fool, and low among them,  
who, without making distinctions, affirms and denies  
in one case yes, but in the other nothing,  
since it often happens that an opinion, made in haste,  
turns in the wrong direction, but then  
affection for it binds the mind. (*Paradiso* 13.15–20)

How, according to Thomas’s words, do hasty judgments contribute to disunity? How, by contrast, would wisdom contribute to greater unity even in the face of diversity?

4. After ascending to Jupiter, Dante witnesses thousands of souls, bright as stars forming the words, “*Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram*,” “Love justice, you who judge the earth” (Wisdom 1:1) after which more souls arrive and arrange themselves so that the final “M” changes into the Eagle of Justice. If, like Dante, all these souls have been told “Your will is free, upright, and healthy. / It would be folly not to act according to your heart: / for this I crown and miter you lord over yourself” (*Purgatorio* 27.140–142), how is it that they arrange themselves so perfectly and work so closely together that they form a single being with whom Dante can converse?

5. As the Eagle reveals the great kings of Earth, Dante is shocked to find among them Ripeus, the Trojan who lived centuries before Christ. “Now he knows much the world cannot discern,” says the Eagle, “of heavenly grace, given that his sight / cannot make it down to the depths of the sea” (*Paradiso* 20.70–72). What is Dante telling us about divine grace? How does

grace deeper than the sea add to his theme of unity and diversity?

6. In the sphere of the Moon, Piccarda told Dante, “Brother, our will is brought to rest / by the power of love, that makes us want / only that which we have, and it makes us thirst for nothing else” (*Paradiso* 3.70–72, see 70–87) How is this kind of humility and contentment on display in the subsequent spheres of Paradise? How is it a necessary precondition for heavenly life?

## LECTURE 17

### Intellectual Fasting and the Test of Love

As Dante and Beatrice climb higher and higher into the heavens, the air, in a sense, becomes more rarified. They are beyond the loud and eager crowd they met on Venus, beyond the Eagle of Justice on Jupiter as they enter the apparently silent Heaven of Saturn and beyond that the Stars and Crystalline Sphere. Things of earth—even things resembling earth—grow strangely dim in the light as they approach the face of God.

• **Getting Started:** What experience do you have of spiritual contemplation or meditation? Is it an active or a passive activity? How so?

• **Read:** *Paradiso*, Canti 21–29

• **Listen**

• **Reflect:**

1. Before looking at Saturn, the sphere of the contemplatives, Dr. Baxter addresses the angelic hierarchy as they contemplate God imparting movement to the entire universe by their love. “From this, it may be seen, the fundamental principle:” Beatrice tells Dante, “beatitude is found in the act of seeing, / not in that act of loving, which follows after” (*Paradiso* 28.109–111). How is the act of seeing (contemplation) necessarily prior to the act of love? How does this idea fit into the discussion of romantic love in lecture fifteen?

2. “The angels closest to God,” observes Dr. Baxter, “have the most immediate vision of him, a vision which they transmit to successively lower orders; and this enthusiasm of vision ultimately spills over outside of the tiered hierarchy of angels into the motion of the greatest wheel of heaven. And then, as we have said, this great wheel turns all the others. . . . Far from the worthless activity it is sometimes called, then, contemplation for Dante moves all other activities in the cosmos: love literally moves the universe.” How have you seen love, borne of contemplation, move the universe in the Scriptures? In Church history? In your and your family’s life?

3. On Saturn among the contemplatives, Dante sees a vision of a great ladder “soaring to such a height / my vision could not rise to its top.” On it, he saw bright souls ascending and

descending, coming and going as if on assigned tasks (*Paradiso* 21.29–42). Given the allusions to Scripture (Genesis 28:12–15; John 1:51), how is the image of a ladder appropriate for the sphere of the contemplatives?

4. Beatrice (*Paradiso* 21.4–12) and Peter Damian (21.61–63) admit to Dante that he has been shielded from the full force of Heaven and heavenly beauty that would turn his mortal body to ashes. What is Dante communicating about the nature of holiness and love? See also 22.1–12.

5. Dante compared contemplation with the spiritual discipline of fasting. Dr. Baxter talks about “the slow, patient reading and re-reading which leads to greater hunger, to an intellectual leanness, to an alert mind, to that kind of reading needed to absorb and slowly chew on a book like Dante’s.” He compares that kind of reading to the consumerist reading most of us engage in too often. How do the canti about contemplation set the stage for Dante’s encounter with the apostles Peter, James, and John, who quiz him about the depth of his faith, hope, and love?

6. Dr. Baxter only discusses Dante’s examination by St. Peter. “Now it has been well treated: / the money’s weight and composition,” Peter responds to a theologically correct answer, “but tell me if you have it in your purse” (*Paradiso* 24.83–85). As Dr. Baxter says, “Peter doesn’t want a definition of faith, he wants an act of faith.” With this in mind, review Dante’s meetings with St. James on hope (canto 25) and St. John on love (canto 26). How in each case does Dante prove not only his intellectual knowledge, but that he has the coin in his purse?

## LECTURE 18

### The Canti of Surprise: The Garden, the Book, and the Rose

In his speech “The Weight of Glory,” C. S. Lewis famously said, “It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us . . .” In these last three canti—poetry that C. S. Lewis may have had in mind—Dante offers us a glimpse of the Infinite Joy at the center of the universe. It was not what he expected. It is not what we expect. It comes as a grand surprise.

- **Getting Started:** Most people think that there is a heaven and that they will probably be there one day. In your experience, how do they conceive of that heaven?

- **Read:** *Paradiso*, Canti 30–33

- **Listen**

- **Reflect:**

1. “This, the tenth heaven,” Dr. Baxter says, “for the medieval scholar was a realm which is really no place at all; it is a place of paradox and mystery which is both at the outermost recesses of the universe but also most interior to the cosmos.” How does the poetry in these last canti reflect the

paradox? How is this, the farthest heaven, also the center of all things?

2. “We have issues,” Beatrice tells Dante, “from the largest body to the heaven made up of pure light, / intellectual light, full of love, / love of true good, full of happiness, / happiness that transcends all sweetness” (*Paradiso* 30.38–40). At the same time, as Dr. Baxter observes, “Heaven gets more and more social. Human beings become more and more important for realizing a vision of God.” How are Beatrice’s words and Dr. Baxter’s connected? Why is the fullness of light, love, and joy in the Christian vision necessarily more and more social?

3. Virgil served as Dante’s guide until, in the Garden of Eden, Dante reached the place where reason found its limit. Remember how, just before returning to his place in Limbo, Virgil was astounded at the apocalyptic pageant (*Purgatorio* 29.55–57). Here, Beatrice, who has served as Dante’s guide, is also suddenly replaced, returning to her throne in the Celestial Rose, replaced by St. Bernard (*Paradiso* 31.55–69). As Dante prepares to see God, what limit has been reached such that he needs a new guide? Why Bernard, a contemplative, whom Dr. Baxter calls “the theologian of love, par excellence”?

4. As he gazed into the pure light of God, Dante saw first a book (*Paradiso* 31.84–87), then three circles (116–120), and finally a human face (127–132). How is this three-stage seeing a summary and culmination of all Dante and Dr. Baxter have said about contemplation as the way to know God?

5. In the final canticle, argues Dr. Baxter, Dante the lover and love poet becomes the beloved: “Dante the love poet has to stop writing about and for Beatrice, stop being the lover, and now become the beloved himself. It’s a gigantic role reversal, and it happens all at once. Dante spent his whole life seeking, striving, working, laboring, pursuing: and what he discovers in the end is that he is the beloved, who has been wooed by the divine lover who now emerges out of his darkness to seek him in embrace.” How is this realization at the climax of the *Comedy* the climax of the spiritual life for every Christian?

6. Why did Bernard prepare Dante to see the face of God by encouraging him to gaze at the saints in the Rose and at Mary, “the face most like Christ’s” (*Paradiso* 32.1–78)? What role did Dante see other humans playing as we journey together to God?

7. In his second lecture, Dr. Baxter commented, “It’s fascinating, isn’t it, how the more you get into Dante’s poetry, the more you realize there is to know about it. Dante’s poem is like a journey whose horizons continually recede, even as you approach them. Even as we dive into it, we recognize that it was deeper than it appeared from the shore.” How might you continue to pursue the poetry, thought, and wisdom of Dante Alighieri?



## Lectures

1. Lover, Poet, Exile: An Introduction to Dante's *Comedy*
2. The Hero and the Coward in the Dark Wood
3. On Castles and Lovers
4. The Graveyard of the Heretics and the Wasteland of the Violent
5. Dante's White-Collar Criminals and Ulysses's Tongue of Fire
6. Icy Hearts and Frozen Souls: The Lowest Portion of Hell
7. Fire and Healing: An Introduction to Medieval Purgatory
8. Waiting for God, the Broken Human Community, and the Surprise of Mercy
9. At the Heart of the World: Love, Freedom, and Community
10. Materialism and Depression: How God Rewrites the Soul
11. Returning to Man's First Home: The Pilgrim in the Garden of Eden
12. "As the Heavens are Higher than the Earth": Dante's Apocalyptic Vision
13. "Great Fires Come from Tiny Sparks": St. Paul and Orpheus Go To Heaven
14. In His Will is Our Peace": Heaven, Cosmic Order, and Tranquility
15. "Here is One Who Will Increase Our Love": Dante's Love Lyric Goes to Heaven
16. Diversity, Unity, and the Greatest Gift from Heaven
17. Intellectual Fasting and the Test of Love
18. The Canti of Surprise: The Garden, the Book, and the Rose

## Course Instructor



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In 2018, two books by Dr. Baxter were published: *A Beginner's Guide to Dante's Divine Comedy*, published by Brazos Press, and *Falling Inward: The Humanities in the Age of Technology*, from Cluny Media Press.