



Letters from the Park

Letter #2

May 2022

Baltimore: Roland Park Neighborhood

Pentecost

*E come quei che con lena affinata
Uscito fuor del pelago alla riva
Si volge a l'aqua perigliosa e guata*

And as one shipwrecked, with panting breath
Emerges from open sea onto the shore,
Turns to gape at the perilous waters

*Così l'animo mio che ancor'fugiva
Si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
Che non lascio già mai persona viva*

So my soul, still fleeing in terror,
Turns to gaze at the woodland passage
Which leaves no person alive who lingers there.

Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*

Canto 1:22-27

Dear St. Mary's Community,

The Divine Comedy is the story of a soul. Written in the fourteenth century, it touches on themes strangely contemporary. "Contemporary" because they are universal: the ultimate consequences of human actions; how to live in the face of the unpredictability and stresses of human existence; what is our relationship with God, and what should our relationships with one another be like; what constitutes good governance and bad governance in human affairs; what, ultimately, is life all about.

Civilization seemed at a high point when Dante wrote, but it was also plagued by corruption, violence, selfishness, and decadence in its highest circles. The themes of the *Comedy* are not exclusively "spiritual" but are related as well to the real world in which its characters had lived.

Dante and his guide, the Roman poet Virgil, travel together through the *Inferno* (hell), *Purgatorio* (purgatory) and eventually to *Paradiso* (heaven), the three realms beyond life in this world. They meet only people who *had* lived in this world, who have now gone on to eternal rewards and punishments, some for purgation before, but with the assurance of, entering heaven. Dante's voyage begins on Holy Thursday and ends on Wednesday of Easter week. As Easter Season 2022 comes to an end and we return to Ordinary Time the day after Pentecost, things are feeling more normal, as we yearn for more "normal," even as we are reminded that we have not moved completely beyond the perils of our current

times. It seemed appropriate to me to reflect for this second of the revived *Letters from the Park* on this passage, an image of one emerging from catastrophe, looking back on perils escaped, as he moves forward toward new vistas, some dark and fearsome, others offering hope, eventually leading to a final sublime state.

Dante's image is an appropriate point of reflection, I believe, as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2022. Descending upon us so swiftly, it was here before we really knew what was happening; not unlike a shipwreck, beginning with small but ominous signs that something was amiss, then suddenly affecting thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people, many of whom lost their lives. We mourn those who have passed and pray for their loved ones. We seem to have made it through the worst now, but it has not completely gone away. We are emerging like Dante's character still looking back at perilous waters as we move more and more toward safety.

Risks, dangerous risks, remain. But risks there have always been, are, and will always be in this life. In the end, however, our lives are determined not by the dangers but by the courage and determination with which we face them. Not fate but hope is our lodestar. That is at the heart of Dante's message: the serious risks and dangers of life do not have the final word—not for those who have faith, those who trust in the Spirit of God who guides us. Faith and salvation await us, lived in hope even during darkest days, not just spiritually but in the real circumstances of our lives—like a pandemic. And were it only a pandemic! So many other fearsome realities continue to beset us: a war of aggression, thought impossible in our day and time; senseless shootings; continued polarization and political rancor.

The Divine Comedy was written fifty years before the Black Plague wiped out one-third to one-half the population of Europe, a major event that challenged human beings to the extreme. But we endured, emerged from it, regained hope, faith and determination, just as we are doing in the face of the challenges we are having to face today. The pandemic preoccupied us for over two years. We have an opportunity to regain a larger perspective now—not only that there are other terrible challenges in front of us, like war abroad and random violence at home, but also because there is much that is hopeful in front of us, if we only recover our vision for the hopefulness that having a future is. And we do have a future, one that can be better than the past, even if we must continue to endure negative challenges as we pursue positive progress. What will make all the difference, I believe, is that we come to realize and embrace the fact that history and the future are not just things that happen, they are things that people make happen. It is through the quality of how we live our lives and embrace values and initiatives that will make our world and the future better than past events that have darkened our lives that will make the difference, if we commit ourselves to living those values and carrying out those initiatives.

Another favorite author, whose writings are filled with great wisdom, who has offered much hope and given much strength to generations of Christian believers, is St. Augustine of Hippo. Something he said gave me perspective for what I wanted to say in this letter,

which is that however challenging these past years have been, and the present seems to be, through faith we will experience a resilience that we otherwise might not have dreamed we had; an ability to heal from the wounds the past few years have inflicted on us, and shape our present and our future in ways that will allow us to move beyond the challenges toward something stable, satisfying and hopeful; something ultimately sublime. As Augustine says:

“Bad times, hard times, this is what people keep saying; but let us live well, and times shall be good. We are the times: such as we are, such are the times.”

St. Augustine, Sermon 80:8

Fa. (still) J. Brown, pm