

## PART I: DANTE

1. You describe Dante's Divine Comedy—the subject of your current book project—as a self-help book, in fact “the most astonishing self-help book ever written.” What do you mean by that?

2. I came to the Divine Comedy by

of his powers as a city leader. And then everything was taken away from him. He had to figure out how to live and how to affirm the goodness of life in the middle of that.

What happened to me was not remotely as serious as what happened to Dante, but I drew so much inspiration from the work. When I read a letter that he wrote to his patron explaining the *Commedia* to him, he said that “the purpose of my book is to bring people from a state of misery to a state of happiness.” I said, “Of course it is.”

What he did was give me a framework for understanding what happened to me. In particular, for making sense of the fact that I knew my parents loved me, I knew my sister loved me; but why did they act this way? Why couldn't we see eye to eye?

Dante explains that sin is a matter not of hatred, necessarily, but of twisted love—suddenly that was a key for me. In the *Purgatorio*, he meets Marco the Lombard who tells him, “Brother, the world is blind and you're blind too, but you have the power of free will. You don't have to accept it. You know, we all have to live with it, but you don't have to let it conquer you.”

That was a tremendously important turning point for me. The therapist I was seeing at the time said the same thing. “You cannot change your family, but you have power to change your reaction to it.” So oddly enough, what I was being told by my therapist was the same thing I was reading in the *Commedia*. But I could take it from the *Commedia*, because unlike my attitude towards therapy, I wasn't snarky and defensive.

The only reason I went to see a therapist was my wife and my doctor said I had to do it. I was cynical, but it turned out to be great. I had to humble myself. That's what Dante says too in *Purgatorio*: the only way you're going to get out of this dark wood you're in is to humble your-

self, accept help and accept grace. That's what Dante taught me to do.

So in that sense, it's a self-help book. The book I'm writing is called *How Dante Can Save Your Life*, because he really did give me a new life, I believe. Nothing has changed in my daily life back in Louisiana, but everything changed inside. He gave me strength. I think he can really help a lot of people.

**Q** : What is it about Dante's words that spoke to you in a way that your therapist's alone didn't?

**A** : It's his artistry. It's fantastic the way he works. In the *Purgatorio*,

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**“I used to think all of life was in *T, E G, E, E*, parts one and two. No, it's all in the *C, E, E*.”**

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the dispositions we have toward sin get straightened out when he starts to go through the terraces on the mountain of purgatory. The method Dante uses—or the method in the *Commedia* that God uses—to straighten people out is you initially are confronted. Dante the pilgrim is confronted with hand carvings in the mountain done by the finger of God of different scenes from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, illustrating the virtue that he's trying to teach the penitent. Dante is trying to show us, his readers, that if you're overcome with beauty and wonder, you prepare the imagination for moral instruction. I found out that's what happened to me.

Early in life I had decided that religion was empty until I wandered into the Chartres Cathedral at age seventeen and was so knocked out my feet by the

beauty and the complexity of it. I didn't know if God existed, but I said, I want to be part of the religious imagination that can build something so beautiful and complex. Taking up Dante, this time at forty-six, was a Chartres Cathedral experience for me. It was the beauty that prepared my imagination—the beauty of Dante's verse that prepared my imagination for the moral instruction.

**Q** : You say you had to learn how to make your family and home the proper type of goods—not idols. How did you do that?

**A** : I had been raised to think of family and place—this little town in south Louisiana—as being primary goods, because I do come from a good family and a good place. But they got confused in my mind. My father is such an embodiment of family and place. That was what he loves more than anything, what my sister loved more than anything.

Without quite realizing what had happened, reading Dante unmasked this for me. I had rejected their idolization of family and place in my mind, because I left there—I moved away—but in my heart, I really hadn't.

I only realized when I got deeply into Dante, and deeply into this contemplative prayer rule that my priest had given me, that this was why I didn't think God loved me. I thought I had to keep working to get God's approval, because I saw God, the Father, as being like my earthly father.

I knew that my dad loved me, but also that he didn't approve of me. He didn't approve of my choices. He couldn't affirm me. Armchair psychologists could have figured this out, but I couldn't see it myself. I was in the middle of it. Despite my theological sophistication, in my heart of hearts, I had confused my earthly father with God the Father.

After this realization, I was able to separate them and to throw down the idols of family and place. Then everything

began to open up within me, and I was able to see family and place as goods but not the ultimate good. And insofar as they are good, they are good because they conform to the will of God. For me,

I watched the South Tower fall, and I had to deal with an immense amount of anger at Islam because of that. But

founded the Benedictine Order, which, over centuries, became the means by which Europe found its way out of chaos, and they preserved the heritage of the classical world as well as the Christian faith through the so-called Dark Ages.

I think MacIntyre's right. I've found as a religious believer that I worry about whether my children are going to keep the faith, because we live in a world of so much moral chaos. If they don't see the faith being lived out, how are they going to hold on to it? To me, that's the most important thing. I don't care if they're rich or poor or whatever. I want them to still be Christian—in the fullest sense of the word, not just nominally holding on to the faith, but being transformed in Christ and being open to their neighbors and being faithful and all the things that you associate with Christianity. So I began to wonder, how can we do this? What would a new St. Benedict look like—someone who figured out a way to live out the tradition of our faith in a time of chaos? I don't know what the answer is, but I know we have to try to find it.

One thing I really noticed about going back to my hometown—I'm from a little town of about 1,700 people on the Mississippi

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munity. I imagine what I have in mind is similar to what you experienced in your hometown.

**John**: You've hit on it right there.

This is a tension within me and within my thinking, and something I will have to explore when I begin the book on the Benedict Option. I am not someone who does well in community, because I come from a very tight-knit community. I was bullied in high school, and the kids who were the bullies were from the leading families, in many cases. It's an old story. And the system turned a blind eye to it.

You see this over and over in the Catholic church. I remember talking to people in south Louisiana about the 1980s abuse scandal, about the Diocese of Lafayette. Catholics who raised their voice about that were hounded, not by the clergy—although there was that—but by their fellow parishioners that didn't want to hear it. I can't stand that. And so I would probably be the first one in the Benedict Option community to say: "hang on, wait a minute." But you can't live that way. You can't have a community of free individuals. The tensions will pull you apart.

So I don't know the answer to that. But it's something I'm willing to explore. I feel that we can't let the "perfect" become the enemy of the "good enough." I think we who are religious need to think about what part of our autonomy we are willing to give up for the comforts and the benefits of community. I don't think there's a formulaic answer. There's no utopia; we have to get rid of that idea. But simply saying you can never have utopia does not settle the question of what the ideal way to live is. It is an old, old political question—pre-Christian, going back to the Greeks, at least: How do we live

together in a community that is both free and united? (2) 9 (01) 5.9 (e t) 7. 7. (e) h) 7. (e) -5 (i) 7. 7. 2 (mN W) 9 (o(v) (e) ) 7. (e) h) -10. (a) 9. (v) 10. (a) 15. (a) -13 (r) -13

But at the same time, if Pope Francis and the Catholic Church lose those who are most dedicated to the faith—who are holding on even though they may be in parishes where the faith is not taught or the traditional Catholicism is run down—if they alienate them, who's going to be left?

In France today, it's over-generalizing to say the only people going to mass are the traditionalist Catholics, but it's not a great over-generalization. If you try so hard to reach out—to use the language of marketing—you could dilute your brand, and you can lose your most faithful customers and not gain any more. I hate to speak of the Church in those terms, but that's what I'm getting at.

So it's something that concerns me. I think that no Christian—Protestant or Eastern Orthodox, as I am—can look at what's happening in the Catholic church with indifference. Metropolitan Hilarion of the Moscow Patriarchate in the Russian Orthodox Church has done a lot of ecumenical work in Europe and he has said that orthodox Catholics and Protestants have to stick together now, because the world has changed. We don't have the luxury of fighting among ourselves—we've got to figure out how we can work together. I think that's true.

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I don't believe Rome is going to do anything either, until they start taking some of these bishops down. Will that happen? No, probably not. But I don't believe that the Catholic Church will even begin to repair its credibility until some of these princes of the Church are made to suffer for what they allowed.

**John Ortberg**: That sounds very problematic if the future of western civilization relies on the health of the Church.

**John Ortberg**: You see why I'm so worried? I remember back when the scandal broke in 2002, Jody Bottum at First Things was just distraught. He had been working to get the Catholic bishops on the same page to fight cloning and fight for the dignity of human life and against genetic experimentation—hugely important issues. They were just about to come out with something, I believe. And then this happened, and it destroyed their credibility on any topic.

I remember Jody being so upset by that. I completely understood why, because things like genetic experimentation and cloning concern the nature of what it means to be human. This is a really big thing, and is going to be an even bigger thing over the course of this century. The church—the Catholic Church, all churches—need to have a credible voice on these issues. But these Catholic bishops, because they were protecting their own and protecting the image of the Church, threw away all their moral authority. Now nobody will listen to them on anything. If a Catholic bishop told me that it was raining outside, I'd have to go stick my hand out the window to be sure, because I saw how many times they lied and how they would lie with ice in their veins to protect the Church—anything to protect the image of the Church.

**John Ortberg**: Is there something Catholic institutions like Boston College—and also Catholic individuals—can do on this topic?

**John Ortberg**: I think that Catholic institutions like Boston College—