

Art of the Month: November



Purgatory features strongly in Dante's *Inferno* but not so much in religious art. Most paintings of Purgatory present a rather gruesome imagery, focusing mostly on the torment of the souls. Some seem a little odd to modern eyes with some souls popping out of Purgatory while others remain until their time comes. I rather prefer this painting of Saint Teresa of Ávila interceding for Souls in Purgatory and one in particular. It is the work of the Flemish artist, Peter Paul Rubens which he worked on between 1630 to 1633. It is a large altarpiece commissioned for the Church of the Discalced Carmelites in Antwerp. Apparently, a young Spaniard called Bernardino de Mendoza gave land to Saint Teresa for her to build a convent. However, he died before the convent could be built, and Christ appeared to the saint informing her that his soul could not be released from Purgatory until the building was completed.

Purgatory is for those who have died in grace, but are still burdened by venial sins and imperfections. In “Purgatorio” Dante envisages a mountain gradually climbed by the souls of those who did not perfectly obey God’s laws. They are to remain there for a time period that is thirty times longer than the period in which they exhibited stubbornness. However, a soul’s time in Purgatory can be reduced with prayers from Christians, like St Teresa of Ávila who are in good standing with God in the world of the living. In this work of art, Christ is obviously a Divine Figure rising above everyone in the clouds of Heaven. The red garment he wears may remind us of his humanity. It is the colour of human blood. Bernardino appears in Purgatory at the left of the painting, being pulled out of his torment by an angel. The puti or winged-angels always surround Christ and remind that we, too, each one of us, has our own guardian angel. Jesus and the Saint gaze on each other with tremendous love. The left-hand of Jesus and the right-hand of Teresa are on parallel lines pointing to Bernardino. Teresa’s other hand is touching her heart as a sign of her love while the right-hand of Jesus is open and gesturing as if to say, “Let what my daughter asks of me be done. Let him come to me.” Rubens portrays Saint Teresa as an ardent intercessor for souls, caught in the flames of purgatory, as she pleads and willingly suffers for their release. Her prayerful posture highlights the bond that links us with those who have died in Christ. We can teach our pupils to pray often, even daily, for the departed, among whom will be counted our relations and friends. In Purgatory they are cleansed of the last hindrances to their entry into the vision of God. Pupils can easily understand that if they are invited to a party or have the prospect of an exam, they themselves would want to prepare. In the first instance, sartorially and in the second, intellectually! The guest or the candidate knows that something must be done before they are ready for the great occasion. The host or the examiner doesn’t need to tell them. So it is that the soul in Purgatory, with our help, becomes fit for the Divine Presence in Heaven.

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