

Dante - *Inferno* -- Canto XIX
Simoniacs, Pope Nicholas III

O Simon Magus! O miserable lot Who take the things of God that ought to be Wedded to goodness and in your greediness	40	Coming to the fourth causeway, we then turned And, bearing to the left, still descended Down to the strait and perforated bottom.
5 Adulterate them into gold and silver! Now the trumpet blast must sound for you Since you are stashed here into the third pocket.	45	And my kind master did not put me down From his side till he'd brought me to the hole Of the sinner who shed tears with his shanks.
We had arrived at the next graveyard By climbing to that section of the ridgetop Which juts right over the middle of the ditch.		"O whatever you are, sorrowful soul, Planted like a stake with your top downward," I started out, "say something, if you can."
10 O highest Wisdom, how great is the art You show in heaven, earth, and this bad world! And how just is the power of your judgment!	50	I stood there like a friar hearing confession From a foul assassin who, once fixed in place, To delay execution calls him back again.
15 I saw along the sides and on the bottom The livid rockface all pocked full of holes, Each one alike in size and rounded shape.		And he cried, "Are you already standing there, Are you already standing there, Boniface? By several years the record lied to me!"
No smaller or no larger they seemed to me Than are those booths for the baptismal fonts Built in my beautiful San Giovanni —	55	"Are you so quickly glutted with the wealth Which did not make you fear to take by guile The lovely lady and then lay her waste?"
20 And one of those, not many years ago, I broke up to save someone drowning in it: And let my word here disabuse men's minds —	60	I acted like a person who's left standing — Not comprehending what's been said to him — Half-mocked and at a loss to make an answer.
Up from the mouth of each hole there stuck out A sinner's feet and legs up to the calf, The rest of him remained stuffed down inside.		Then Virgil spoke up, "Tell him right away, 'I am not he, I'm not the one you think!' " And I replied as I had been instructed.
25 The soles of both feet blazed all on fire; The leg-joints wriggled uncontrollably: They would have snapped any rope or tether.	65	At this the spirit twisted both feet wildly; Then, sighing deeply, with a voice in tears, He asked, "What, then, do you demand of me?"
30 Just as a flame on anything that's oily Spreads only on the object's outer surface, So did this fire move from heel to toe.		"If to know who I am has so compelled you That you continued down this bank, then know Once I was vested in the papal mantle,
"Who is that sinner, master, who suffers so, Writhing more than any of his comrades," I asked, "the one the redder flame licks dry?"	70	"And truly I was a son of the she-bear, So avid to advance my cubs that up there I pocketed the money and here, myself.
35 And he: "If you want to be lifted down Onto that sloping lower bank, then from him You'll learn about himself and his wrongdoings."	75	"Under my head have been dragged the others Who went, by way of simony, before me, Squashed flat in the fissures of the stone.
And I: "My pleasure is what pleases you. You are my lord, and you know I won't swerve From your will: You know what is left unspoken."		"I shall plunge down there, in my turn, when The one I took you for — while thrusting at you That question so abruptly — will arrive here.

80 "But a longer time now have I baked my feet
And stood like this upside-down than he
Will stay planted with his red-hot feet up!

"For after him will come one fouler in deeds,
A lawless shepherd from the westward land,
One fit to cover up both him and me.

85 "He'll be a new Jason, like him we read of
In Maccabees; just as Jason's king was kind,
So shall the king of France be kind to him."

I do not know if now I grew too brash,
But I replied to him in the same measure,
90 "Well, then, tell me: how costly was the treasure

"That our Lord demanded of Saint Peter
Before he gave the keys into his keeping?
Surely he said only 'Follow me.'

95 "Nor did Peter or the rest take gold
Or silver from Matthias when they chose him
By lot to take the place the traitor lost.

"Stay put, therefore, since you are justly punished,
And guard with care the ill-acquired money
That made you so high-handed against Charles.

100 "And were it not that I as yet feel bound
By my deep reverence for the mighty keys
Which you once held in the lighthearted life,

"I would here utter words still far more bitter,
Because your avarice afflicts the world,
105 Trampling good men and vaulting evildoers.

"You are the shepherds the evangelist meant
When he saw 'she who sits upon the waters'
Fornicating with the kings of earth.

110 "She is the one born with the seven heads
Who from her ten horns begot all her strength
So long as virtue was her bridegroom's pleasure.

"A god of gold and silver you have fashioned!
How do you differ from idolators
Except they worship one god — you a hundred?

115 "Ah, Constantine, how much foul harm was fostered,
Not by your conversion but by the dowry
Which the first wealthy father took from you?"

120 And while I chanted him these notes — whether
Bitten by his anger or his conscience —
He gave a vicious kick with his two feet.

I honestly believe my guide was pleased,
So contented was his look while he kept listening
To the sound of these true-spoken words.

125 At that he took me within both his arms
And, when he held me wholly to his breast,
Climbed up the path that he had once come down.

Nor did he weary of clasping me to himself,
But carried me to the crest of the arch
That crosses from the fourth to the fifth causeway.

130 Here he gently set down his heavy load,
Gently because of the steep and craggy ridge
Which even goats would have found hard to pass.

From there another valley opened before me.

Notes:

1 Simon Magus attempted to buy the miraculous power of the apostles (Acts 8:9-24) and is invoked here as the father of the simoniacs of the third bolgia.

18 This is the baptismal font where Dante himself was baptized. Dante is relating an incident when he saved a child who had fallen into the font.

53 Boniface VIII (d. 1303) is destined for this spot in hell because of his misuse of the papacy and "the lovely lady," the church (l. 57). The speaker is Nicholas III, himself pope from 1277 to 1280, who as a member of the Orsini ("she-bear," l. 70) family handed out benefices to his relatives.

82 Nicholas predicts that a pope after Boniface, Clement V (d. 1314) shall meet the same end, comparing him to the Jason (l. 85) who bribed Antiochus of Syria to appoint him high priest. Clement moved the papal see from Rome to Avignon.

94 Matthias replaced Judas Iscariot as the twelfth apostle (Acts 1:23-26).

98 Nicholas plotted against Charles d'Anjou, king of Naples and Sicily.

106 John the Evangelist describes the woman upon the waters in Revelation 17. Dante interprets her as the corrupted Roman Church: the seven heads are the sacraments and the ten horns the commandments.

115 Constantine, emperor of Rome (306-337), supposedly transferred to Pope Sylvester the political rule of Rome when he moved his own capital to Constantinople in 330. The "Donation of Constantine," the document that legalized the transfer, was proven to be a forgery in the fifteenth century.