

ART AS A GUIDE TO THE SACRED

G . T Y L E R F I S C H E R

While I was returning to the depths, one appeared, in front of my eyes, who seemed hoarse from long silence. When I saw him, in the great emptiness, I cried out to him 'Have pity on me, whoever you are, whether a man, in truth, or a shadow!' He answered me: 'Not a man: but a man I once was, and my parents were Lombards, and both of them, by their native place, Mantuans. (Inferno 1.61-69)¹

As a lover of the poetry of Dante, I remember being perplexed initially with the arrival of Virgil. Virgil was a long dead poet . . . a long dead *pagan* poet. Why does he come to assist the *Christian* Pilgrim Dante toward Heaven and the salvation of his soul? Why not send Beatrice? Why not send St. Paul? Why not send Jesus? Virgil. Really?

Then I found this note from in the Dorothy Sayers' translation of *Inferno* commenting on why Virgil was sent:

Virgil's Mission. Dante is so far gone in sin and error that Divine Grace can no longer move him directly; but there is still something left in him which is capable of responding to the voice of poetry and of human reason; and this, under Grace, may yet be used to lead him back to God. In this profound and beautiful image, Dante places Religion, on the one hand, and the human Art and Philosophy, on the other, in their just relationship.²

Now, to tell the truth, I do not agree with everything in the comment. God's grace is stronger than any hardness of heart that we can muster, but part of Sayers' comment kept echoing in my mind: "... in their just relationship." Dante

is saying that God uses means to bring people to a point of hearing the gospel. Art, Music, Philosophy, etc., are not the gospel, but they can be used by God to prepare people to hear the gospel. I was blown away. What dignity, what power, what glory is inherent in these things.

Now fast-forward a few years, I am sitting in a workshop at the Association of Classical Christian Schools (ACCS) Conference. Chris Schlect from New St. Andrews College was walking us through the results of a survey taken by classical Christian educators who had been working at classical schools for more than five years. The data we were looking at showed the opinions of people who had invested significant time and effort in the resurgence of classical Christian education in America. The first finding came as no surprise. It stated that when it came to subjects like theology, history, and literature classical Christian educators knew why they were teaching what they are teaching. Classical Christian educators are rabidly passionate about what they are teach and will fight anyone who tries to tamper with their curriculum or methods.

The next part of the findings scared me. The findings on math and science were that classical Christian educators did not know why they were teaching math and science but that they felt good about what they are doing because their test scores (SAT, ACT, etc.) were excellent. I hope that this scares you as much as it does me, but the worst was yet to come.

When it came to the fine arts, the findings really knocked me for a loop. Experienced, committed classical Christian educators said that when it came to the fine arts, they did not know why they were doing what they were doing. They didn't know what they should be doing, and if anything needed to be cut, the first cuts would come in the fine arts.

During that moment I froze. I thought about Dante and Virgil. I remembered what Sayers (the patron saint of classical Christian education) had said in her comment on Virgil's mission. If we don't have music, art, drama, poetry, and philosophy, what powerful tools of preparation for the reception of the gospel would be lost? What wonderful venues for growth would be missing? How can we ever win back a culture that is so far down the path into the dark woods of unbelief if we can't tempt them with Beauty?

That moment caused all of us at Veritas Academy in Lancaster, PA, to begin to plan a Fine Arts Symposium that would assemble educational leaders and philosophers who were passionate about the fine arts (in its many forms) and who understood classical and Christian education. The goal was to build a better understanding of the importance of the fine arts in a classical and Christian curriculum.

The result of that meeting was an even deeper commitment to the Fine Arts in the classical Christian curriculum. The Fine Arts are an essential part of