

Father Ondřej's Sin

Father Ondřej was now into his eighteenth year in Purgatory and he still didn't know why. His case had still not reached the stage of final sentence, even though the pressure of souls coming into Purgatory had eased in the last year or two. The majority of souls nowadays just made a temporary halt here and were then led off, amid gnashing of teeth, to Hell. Occasionally, he would pluck up the courage to ask one of the Angel Guards: 'Why are you keeping me here, gentlemen?'

They would shrug their wings and say: 'Your case has still not been decided, Reverend Sir.'

These words always made him feel uneasy as only a soul in Purgatory can feel uneasy, for he was not conscious of having committed any sin. He was a textbook example of the venerable priest. During his time on earth, he had fitted the description in every particular: the long white hair, the quavering old-man's voice, the moral purity, First Class.

And here he was, still held in investigative detention in Purgatory.

Of late, he had enjoyed the company of a certain chaplain, who could look forward to a ten-thousand-year stretch. At the Jubilee Exhibition, the poor devil had spent a quarter of an hour watching the people tobogganing down a chute, and then had had a stroke on the way home.

'Real Brussels lace, Father,' the wretched chaplain would say to Father Ondřej, whose pure soul could not grasp the difference between an ordinary petticoat and a lace one.

And the angels flew quietly around him. They felt sorry for him and sang him lovely songs to words taken from the Holy Fathers. And they said: 'Send in a petition, Father.'

And he submitted a petition in writing:

To the Most Honourable Court of Last Judgment:

The soul undersigned hereby begs to submit his most humble petition for release from Purgatory, advancing as justification for his respectful

request the following grounds:

A. The undersigned can find nothing in his conscience to count against him.

B. He has been thoroughly purified, as can be attested by local magistrate Paluška, at present located in cauldron 253 in the Temperate Purgatorial Zone, where the ventilators are.

C. This same statement, that he is purified and without blemish, can be verified by Police Sergeant Josef Loukota, currently resident, in a state of beatitude, in Heaven, near turnstile No. 5.

D. The undersigned discovered a miraculous spring and dispensed water from it to orphanages and houses of correction, free of charge.

E. He distinguished himself as a student, as will be confirmed by Alexius, the Headmaster of his Grammar School, now attached to the Angel Grammar School Guard Unit in Purgatory.

F. The undersigned has a particularly good grasp of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic.

G. The undersigned has never been troubled by any doubt on any subject.

On the above grounds, he requests his release from Purgatory and undertakes, should his most respectful request be acceded to, to bend his every effort to ensuring that he proves himself worthy of that trust.

This petition was sent back. 'The rubric's missing,' said the angel who brought it. This angel had worked, during his earthly life, as an official in a government department.

So Father Ondřej wrote on the reverse side: 'Soul Father Ondřej requests his release from Purgatory under headings A,B,C,D,E,F, and G.'

On the anniversary of his death - they're usually no quicker in giving their kind attention to a petition on earth, either - he received a reply:

Honoured Sir,

We take the liberty of informing you that the Court of Last Judgment will not be sitting in the foreseeable future. We have accordingly directed your petition to the High Court of Purgatory, with the request that it should receive the most urgent consideration and that you should be brought before the Regular Purgatorial Sessions for the examination of your sin.

On behalf of the Preliminary Examining Committee of the Court of Last Judgment,

(Signed) Gabriel

And the years flowed quietly by, to the accompaniment of the groaning of souls under purification and the touching lullabies of the angels as they rocked the cradles of the unbaptised.

At last, Father Ondřej received a summons to present himself before the Sacred Senate.

The Senate was already assembled in the pergola of the Lower Court of Purgatory, visible only to the Angel Guards who had brought in the accused. The book of Father Ondřej's life hovered in mid-air, the pages turned by an invisible hand.

'Father Ondřej,' said a voice, 'you see here the book of your life. It is clean, except for one page. I charge you now to answer truthfully to this question: did you have a brother in Australia?'

'I did, My Lords of the Senate.'

'We ask you further: did you write to your brother in Australia?'

'Yes, My Lords; to Sydney, in the year 1882.'

The book was closed and a deep voice rang out, a voice that, to all appearances, belonged to the President of the Sacred Senate: 'Have you studied thoroughly all the books written by Saint Augustine, the Teacher of the Church?'

'I have.'

And now, a rustling of wings was heard. The court was retiring to consider its verdict. A renewed rustle of wings, and a voice from above cried out:

'Father Ondřej is sentenced to fifteen thousand years of enforced confinement in Purgatory, inclusive of twenty-two years of investigative detention. The reasons for this decision are as follows:

'In his book *De Retractione, vel Librorum Recensione*, Augustine, the Teacher of the Church, declared belief in the existence of the antipodes to be a heresy (see page 213). Since Australia is part of the antipodes, belief in the existence of Australia constitutes the sin of blasphemy, committed and confirmed by Father Ondřej by the act of sending a letter to his brother in the antipodes, to wit in Sydney, Australia. The purified state of the accused and his full and frank confession constitute extenuating circumstances.'

'Don't cry,' the angels said consolingly to the condemned man. 'You could have had something like that happen to you in any court on earth.'