



September 18, 2024

# MESSENGER

## QUOTE FOR TODAY

"Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul."

3 John verse 2

## INFO

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## Telling Tall Tales

*The Decameron* is the title of a current series being shown on Netflix TV. Judging by the bad reviews it's gotten from critics,<sup>1</sup> you'd never guess that the original work of that title, by Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio, is considered a classic of early Renaissance literature. The setting is during *The Black Death*, a terrible outbreak of the plague which killed nearly 50% of the population of Europe between 1346 and 1353 AD. To avoid exposure to the disease, ten privileged young adults, seven women and three men, decide to self-quarantine at a country villa belonging to one of their affluent families. To pass the boring hours, they agree to tell interesting stories on a rotating basis, one story each per day, over ten days --- that's ten times ten, or 100 stories. For some reason, the writers of the modern TV series decided to make up episodes about intrigues and liaisons between the ten young people, rather than retelling some of the timeless stories Boccaccio put in the ten friends' mouths. They missed a lot of gems.

**Boccaccio's two opening stories** seem to set the tone.<sup>2</sup> The first is about Cepparello, a crooked government official who became rich by taking bribes and stealing public funds. As he realizes he is suffering from a terminal disease, he makes sure to provide for a magnificent funeral celebration, where paid "admirers" will tell stories about imagined charitable deeds and acts of religious devotion. As a result, the Church canonizes him as a saint and builds a shrine in his honor. Over time, many people come to personal faith through the witness and ministry in memory of the Saint --- who was, in reality, a total scoundrel. The question is, can their faith be acceptable to God when it comes through the lie of the inspiring life of this "saint"? Boccaccio's story-teller's answer is, **Yes! God sees the genuineness of their heart in spite of the phoniness of the legendary Saint.**

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## September 18, 2024

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The second story is about Abraham, a Jewish merchant in Paris. He's become successful because of his skillful business practices, but he's still not accepted by others in his social class because he's not a baptized Christian. He tells his friend Giannotto that he will consider accepting Christ, but only after he makes a trip to Rome to see how the Pope and cardinals act in their leadership positions. While there, he's horrified to find them absolutely corrupt and flagrantly hypocritical. He returns and reports his findings to Giannotto, but he adds the surprising good news that he has been baptized as a Christian anyway. His explanation is that, ***if Christianity is spreading rapidly while its leaders are so corrupt, it must be the truth.***

Both of these stories show Boccaccio's disillusionment with the Church of his day. Many of his other stories are also based on the failures of priests, monks, and nuns to reflect either the teachings of Jesus or the power of the Gospel to transform lives. And yet, personal faith in God as a day-to-day friend and supporter to those in need is an assumption that characters in his stories seem to be able to experience. Somehow ***God's saving message has gotten through the clouds created by the Church's compromise with the world.***

This should be an encouragement to us in the twenty-first century, as we watch church after church having to deal with confusing teaching fads, embarrassing scandals and fallen leaders. If God could speak through the ***calcified Church in Europe during the Middle Ages***, he can speak through the ***culticized Church in America today***. If the light of the Gospel

could shine through the Medieval fog of ignorance, it can also penetrate the confusing plethora of modern false teachings.

Actually, you can't help but have the suspicion that **God planned it this way**, designing the Church on earth to be unmistakably fallible so that it would always be clear that he alone is the source of hope and salvation. As the Apostle Paul put it:

*It is the God who said, "Light will shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*

(2 Corinthians 4:6-7)

Pastor George Van Alstine

<sup>1</sup> For example, read <https://www.rogerebert.com/streaming/the-decameron-TV-review>

<sup>2</sup> Synopses of all 100 stories can be found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summary\\_of\\_Decameron\\_tales](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summary_of_Decameron_tales) or in the YouTube video series beginning with <https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=decameron%20reviews&mid=C583A98F4CA5AD4CE6F7C583A98F4CA5AD4CE6F7&ajaxhist=0>