Dante and the Franciscan Movement

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CONSIDER WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IF, INSTEAD OF NUCLEAR BOMBS AND POLLUTION, twentieth-century technology had provided us with time machines; affordable, handy appliances to be bought readily and kept in living rooms, perhaps next to the sofa. In order to travel through time, one would only need to sit back comfortably and turn the electronic control panel's time knob in the proper direction; then, push a button when the indicator reaches the year one wants to visit. . .

If such a time machine really existed, many people would probably want to turn its time knob clockwise, to see what the future has in store for mankind. Others, however, would not hesitate to rotate the knob counterclockwise, looking for a date in the distant past, and trying to search for a better understanding of that which today is regarded as history.

Journeying back in time, it would be interesting to set the knob to the beginning of October 1226. We might like to visit the small, beautiful community of Assisi in central Italy, in the region of Umbria. Once there, we could observe a very industrious population: blacksmiths working in the village, merchants selling fabric, farmers vending food in the piazza. We would be able to smell the fragrance of bread just out of the oven, hear children playing, meet women balancing jugs of water on their heads as they return

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1 This paper was delivered at the conference *Dante and the Tradition of Christian Culture* held at Loyola College in Baltimore, Oct. 9–11, 1987. Made possible through generous grants by the Maryland Humanities Council, the Center for the Humanities of Loyola College, the Society for Christian Culture, and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, the conference was planned for a general audience, not for Dante specialists only. There was a wide range of ages, professions, and interests represented among the listeners at the conference, so this paper reflects the intention to address an audience of non-specialists as well as a numerous group of undergraduate students.
home from the well. Around us we would see many poor and ill people in ragged clothes, begging for coins, for food, for other forms of charity. In the town of Assisi poverty was widespread, while wealth was confined to only a few families.

If we could hear what people were talking about 764 years ago in Assisi, we might notice that rich and poor alike were still speaking about a great loss which they had just suffered: Saint Francis had died a few days earlier on October 3rd, 1226. While listening to any one of the many people in the piazza, we would learn more about il poverello di Assisi, the “poor man of Assisi,” as Francis was known.

Standing in the main street of Assisi, we might notice a young woman coming toward us, holding the hand of a child of maybe seven years of age. It is likely that she is returning from the market where she bought fresh vegetables and spices. It is a long walk from the market to her little farm just outside of Assisi, where she helps her husband raise pigs and goats. If we could approach her, she would probably answer a question or two, though she seems to be in a hurry. “We all knew,” she would say, “that he was about to die. Francis had been ill for such a long time . . . what a tremendous loss! He was only 44, and still had a great spiritual influence on us all . . . I saw him several times at that church he restored, Porziuncola . . . ” She shakes her head, in a gesture of helplessness, and walks away. Her child, Marco, heads off with her. He had played quite often at Francis’ church and made friends with other children there. He, too, misses Francis.

If we could remain a little longer in the piazza, we might be able to talk to a wealthy young man, Signor Flaminio, a neighbor of Francis’ parents. Besides sharing some thoughts of his own, Signor Flaminino might summarize for us some of the important events in the life of Francis. Let us listen to him speak: “Sir Pietro Bernardone decided that he wanted a very fancy and fashionable name for his son and decided on Francesco, because it reminded him of France and of the French woolen cloth he was selling in Assisi at that time (Ghilardi 5). As Francis grew older, he became interested in politics and commerce. The son of a very wealthy business man, he did not particularly enjoy school. As a matter of fact, at age 19 he participated with the Assisian cavalry in the battle of Collestrada against the city of Perugia, which was historically the political enemy of Assisi. Francis was then captured and held prisoner for one year. In the meantime, Assisi became a commune, thereby dissolving the rivalry of the two cities, and young Francis was set free. He returned home and worked for his father, Bernardone, in the family’s fashionable and well-known cloth store, selling expensive brocades from the Levant and woolen fabrics from France to the wealthy families of Umbria. The wealthy young Francis was well known as a man who particularly enjoyed organizing parties, banquets, feasts, and dances. So enamored was he of the gay life, that he was active in several societates tripudiantium (party clubs).”

At this point the man speaking to us, Signor Flaminio, pauses for a while, then continues on a more pensive note: “Having grown bored of such
worldly activities, Francis decided to become a knight and pursue the glory of military life. However, he quickly returned to Assisi from Spoleto after having had two strange dreams in which he claimed a voice had talked to him. Francis also revealed (a few years later) that the image of the crucifix in the church of Saint Damian in Assisi had spoken to him, ordering him to repair the walls of the church. Following this, Francis stole some of his father’s goods, sold them in Foligno, and brought back money to start the repairs. As a consequence of the theft, in October 1206, Bernardone had the ecclesiastic court summoned against his son Francis in the piazza of Assisi. Francis, now 25 years old, did not contest his father’s charges of theft; instead, he stripped himself of his clothes, handing them back to his father Bernardone, to whom Francis said they still belonged. Francis lived in the woods and caves around Gubbio for about a year, meditating and performing acts of penitence. Later, he returned to Assisi and founded the Franciscan Order. Together with his first followers, he was able at last to repair the Church of San Damiano and later of Porziuncola.

Our speaker of 764 years ago, Signor Flaminio, must leave us now, but the rest of Francis’ story is well known. Like Christ, Francis started with twelve followers, most of whom belonged to families with wealthy backgrounds. In order to join him, Francis first required of the brethren that they renounce their wealth completely.

When Francis founded his order in the thirteenth century there was strong opposition to the bishops’ feudal behavior. Several confraternities and newborn sects were rebelling against the non-religious and the secular aspects of the ecclesiastic establishment. Pope Innocent III had started a strong movement of political and spiritual reform, but his repressive actions had often proved to be more harmful than the new religious groups themselves. Under these circumstances Innocent III granted an audience to Francis in 1210. The “poor man of Assisi” wanted papal sanction for the Franciscan Order he had just founded. Owing to his strong commitment to poverty and simplicity, Francis left the Pope with a lasting favorable impression of himself. When approval was granted, Francis returned to educate his followers in Assisi and to preach love, poverty and prayer. The guidelines which Francis established for his religious order were strict. Franciscans could have only one tunic and possess no books, nor could the friars accept donated lands for themselves. In his spiritual testament, Francis wrote that the “houses of [our] friars must be built of wood and mud and that even the Church must look poor.” The church of Porziuncola, in which the Franciscans served, was never actually owned by the friars themselves (Ghilardi 35; Bonaventura II: 4).

From a small group of twelve in 1210, the religious order grew to over

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2 Christ had been the first spouse of “Lady Poverty” according to Bonaventura (1221–1274), who wrote Francis’ first biography. After Christ, “Lady Poverty” had been an unwanted widow until Francis remarried her. Because of this, Francis could be considered a second Christ-figure.
3,000 members in just ten years. During this period, Francis went to Rome several times. There are historical accounts of his participation in the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, where he met Saint Dominic.

In the summer of 1219, Francis went to the Holy Land as part of a group of people who responded to Innocent III's urgent appeal for a new crusade. He went unarmed into Saracen camps to preach the gospel, but we know from his own later statement that he was not very successful in converting Muslims to Christianity. Upon his return to Italy, Francis was faced with the fact that during his absence the first rifts among his friars had begun to appear.

Cardinal Ugolino, the future Pope Gregory IX, tried unsuccessfully to reconcile the Franciscan factions. An embittered Francis wrote a new rule stating that his brethren were to "pass through this world as pilgrims and foreigners serving the Lord in poverty and humility and begging for alms with confidence and without shame" (Ghilardi 54). Having finally reconciled the brethren, Francis set up the first living nativity scene, at Fonte Colombo (in Latium, near Rieti) on Christmas of 1223. A year later Francis, tired and emaciated by harsh penitence, retired to solitude and prayer in the same grottoes, caves and woods where he had lived before.

On September 14, 1224, Francis received the *stigmata* (the marks corresponding to the wounds on the crucified body of Christ) while contemplating God atop Mount Alvernia (known today as La Verna) in the solitude of prayer. The *stigmata* confirmed the sanctity of the *poverello*, who returned to *Porziuncola* exhausted and weak. "Brother Body" was coming to its end. Failing the cures administered in Rome by the doctors of Pope Honorius III, Francis was brought back to Assisi. Here he renewed his vows to "Lady Poverty" and to his order while contemplating "Sister Death." As Francis was lying on his death bed, he composed the *Canticle of Creatures*, written not in Latin, but in Italian. The *Cantico delle Creature* is an important literary example of early Italian poetry. With this song, Francesco's life came to an end. Despite the loss of their spiritual leader, the Friars Minor, who already numbered 25,000 at the end of the thirteenth century, continued to grow, reaching 30,000 in 1316 (Ghilardi 75).

Francis had rebelled against his father's will in order to marry "Lady Poverty," whom Dante later would describe as an ugly widow (*Paradiso* XI: 58–75 *et passim*). No one had wanted to wed her again after the death of her first spouse, Christ. Dante emphasized the allegorical attributes of Poverty, a neglected and lonely woman, in her new role of companion to Francis, thus also portraying the *poverello di Assisi* in a new light. The Saint's commitment to "Lady Poverty" was a deep and firm pledge, and as such it was reflected in the Franciscan Rule. Many of Francis' contemporaries had difficulty themselves with the strictness of the Franciscan Rule; even Pope Innocent III, for this reason, had given it only oral approval, after telling the Saint "vita vestra videtur nobis nimis dura et aspera" ("your life seems too severe and harsh to us," *Sapegno* III: 147).
After the Saint’s death, Friar Elias was elected to the head of the confraternity (Ghelardi 52 et passim). He was one of the most controversial figures in the history of the early Franciscans. Described by biographers as a man of energetic achievements and success, Friar Elias believed in a strong, central organization of the order. By starting the construction of a pompous basilica in Assisi to honor the memory of the Saint, he in effect disobeyed Francis’ last wishes concerning perpetual humility and poverty. Friar Elias was strongly criticized for such an enterprise. In addition, he later attempted to fulfill another dream of his with much passion and energy; he tried to reconcile the Church with the Empire, for he believed in unity among all Christians. Friar Elias took this cause very much to heart and by acting too impulsively and in a way deemed disrespectful by the Pope, he was eventually excommunicated.

The Church was losing sight of the poverty preached by Christ; the Pope’s greed was corrupting the very core of St. Peter’s seat. Dante’s disappointed anger toward the Church and its clergy was directed against avarice and lust for wealth and power (Davis 60). According to Dante, the Emperor alone should inspire his subjects to seek an honest interaction to achieve civic stability. Dante was convinced that responsible political sympathy for fellow human beings would prevent and cure papal desires for temporal wealth and power. Dante hoped for religious reform in which temporal assets would be condemned by the Pope. Dante was enraged as he described the holy image of St. John, debased to appear on one side of the Florentine coins of his days (Paradiso XVIII: 118–36). Desire for power and money would lead to spiritual or temporal tyranny. Only Christian charity could foster justice. Thus, the goal to be achieved by the Veltrò was not only one of civic justice, but of moral importance as well; peace and justice could be achieved only when imperial power was supplemented by ecclesiastical poverty and spiritual simplicity.

The Franciscan friars represented for Dante what monastic life was supposed to be: beggars humbly asking not for themselves, but for their fellow brothers and sisters. Since, according to their Rule, Franciscans could use gifts but never become owners of any kind of property, monks and clerics would then act as intermediaries of donations meant for the poor. Dante felt that a papal reform should begin within Rome itself. After all, it was not the Emperor who had married “Lady Poverty,” it was the Pope. Francis was considered to be a praiseworthy religious leader by Dante for the Saint, like Christ, lived in poverty and encouraged his values upon his followers; a good pater familias will require of his sons and daughters the same discipline he expects of himself.

Even though the Franciscan friars were hoping for a change in the attitude

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1 Dante wrote that a saviour, a Veltrò (literally, a “greyhound”), would come to save Italy, a politically fractioned and spiritually disoriented country in the fourteenth century (Inferno I: 101). The idealized Veltrò would be a dependable and courageous political leader who could redeem Italy with dignity.
of the Church in Rome, it is doubtful that they shared Dante's same belief that a strong Emperor, who could unite Italy, would ultimately end the corruption of the Church. (Purgatorio XVI: 127–129). Dante was expecting that an outside leader, a Veliero, would save "poor Italy". This secular leader had to be capable of both taking away the illicit temporal power granted to the Pope centuries earlier, and uniting Italy under his new rule. Henry VII of Luxembourg had been Dante's idealized figure until the Emperor's unexpected death in August of 1313.

By the time Dante started to draft the Paradiso, he was in search of another capable leader who could fulfill his political dreams, a new DXV. However, it should be noted that while the Franciscans were hoping for a new, different age, Dante longed for a renovatio, a return to an imagined, idealized old age (Davis 68).

De Monarchia is the title of a book written by Dante which dealt with the relationship between the State and the Church, between the papacy and the empire. Though the date of composition of this long series of Latin essays is still open for debate, it seems likely that Dante might have written it between 1313 (right after the death of the head of the Holy Roman Empire, Henry VII) and 1318. By using biblical imagery of celestial bodies, Dante explained that the Pope was comparable to the greatest light in the sky, the sun, while the Emperor was seen as the moon. And as the moon receives light from the sun, so should the Emperor receive spiritual guidance from the Pope. The seat of Peter should inspire correct civic leadership in the Emperor, who in turn could work more efficiently with the temporal power which he had been granted by God. Dante's conclusions were that the two capacities, temporal and spiritual, must be entirely separate. The author once again observed that the Donatio Constantini extended beyond the limits of the power of the Emperor and was thus to be considered an unlawful gift. Owing to their ideals of poverty, the Church and the Pope are not qualified to receive such a gift. However, Dante was mostly concerned with the indivisibility of the Empire than with the property of the Church (De Monarchia III, 10).

It was true that the Emperor could grant properties to the Church, which may accept estates and other riches merely as a beneficiary. The Church should receive these gifts not as a possessor, but with the understanding of distributing the revenues from this wealth among the poor and the needy, for that is what the Apostles had done. The Emperor's power was to be dependent upon the Pope's, as long as the Pope did not interfere with the temporal matters. The Pope was in charge of the beatitudo vitae eternae (eternal spiritual happiness), for his duty was to indicate to leaders and the populace the direction towards eternal happiness in accordance with divine revelation. The Emperor, on the other hand, was responsible for the beatitudo huius vitae (fulfillment in earthly life), for he was the leader responsible for temporal satisfaction of men, which was to be obtained in accordance with the teachings of philosophy. The Pope would rule spiritually as the Vicar of Christ. Dante did not wish the Church and the State to perpetuate their roles
as enemies; he hoped for a reconciliation between them. This would bring about strong civic bonds among human beings.

Dante also distinguished between the papacy and Pope himself, between the office and the man. For example, Dante abhorred the offensive action by Guillaume de Nogaret, who imprisoned the Pope in Anagni, as described in *Purgatory* XX, 86–9. Dante viewed this as equivalent to challenging Christ himself. Yet Dante placed Boniface VIII in Hell. Dante had great respect for the throne of Peter but raged against unworthy occupants of the seat. The independence of the empire from the Church, which Dante hoped for, was yet to come. Each head would have to work within the limits set for him by God in an effort to reach harmony and conscientiousness among citizens.

Even though more than half a century separated Dante from Francis, the influence of the Saint and of his religious movement upon Dante's philosophy is clear. According to late fourteenth century glosses on the *Divine Comedy*, Dante had attended the Franciscan School in Santa Croce as a young boy and later became a Tertiary (that is, a lay person involved in the religious movement; Roddewig 132). The Franciscans were very active in Florence in the middle of the thirteenth century, and several literary works and commentaries of the time, available in Florence and with which Dante was very likely familiar, emphasized the parallels between the life of St. Francis and Christ’s vows of poverty.

In Santa Croce, the Church of the Friars Minor, daily exhortations were made to the people against the potential dangers of worldly estates owned by the Church and against temporal power granted to the clergy. In Florence, Dante also experienced the ugly controversial discussions between Franciscans and Dominicans, the dissidence with the Franciscan movement itself, and its ultimate decadence and dispersion. Nevertheless, Dante’s faith in the moral strength advocated by Francis persisted and is still reflected in that splendid literary portrait of Francis which Dante wrote in the *Divine Comedy*.

Our imaginary trip through history must come to an end. However, having gone back in time 764 years to the beginning of October 1226, we are now able to understand the sadness and loss experienced by the people in Assisi after Saint Francis’ death. After closing our eyes and following Dante during the last years of his life spent in exile, we can appreciate in depth the inner strength which the words of Francis offered the Florentine poet, and we understand the reason why, when Dante died in Ravenna in 1321, he expressed and was granted the wish to be buried in the grounds of the Franciscan church, wearing the cowl of the Friars Minor (Roddewig 132).

**WORKS CITED**

Bonaventura. *Legenda maior*.


