

# *Dante and the Franciscans*

*Edited by*  
Santa Casciani



BRILL

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DANTE AND THE FRANCISCANS

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# THE MEDIEVAL FRANCISCANS

GENERAL EDITOR

STEVEN J. MCMICHAEL  
*University of St. Thomas*

VOLUME 3

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# DANTE AND THE FRANCISCANS

EDITED BY

SANTA CASCIANI



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## INTRODUCTION

Santa Casciani

The joy of editing this volume comes from my long interest in understanding Dante's *Divine Comedy* in relation to the Franciscan intellectual tradition, an interest which began when I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. My interest in understanding the Franciscan charism dates back to my childhood.

I was born in a small town near L'Aquila and immigrated with my parents to Rochester, New York in 1969. As a young child, growing up and living in a Franciscan convent/boarding school in L'Aquila operated by the Franciscan Sisters of Mercy, I would ask myself why so many Franciscan convents and why so many friars lived in L'Aquila. Moreover, why would they wear sandals during our bitter cold winters? Were they not cold like the rest of us? How could they stand to wear sandals in the winters? I never understood until I was older that "bare feet" was and is part of the humility that Saint Francis instilled in his friars. Still today, I remember all those Sunday afternoons away from the enclosed walls of the all-girl convent where I was studying away from home, only able to leave to attend public school in L'Aquila. Every Sunday with my cousins Luigia and Stefania I would go to the Convent of Saint Bernardino in L'Aquila where Friar Casimiro, with a smile on his face, would always welcome us to the recreation room where we would play ping-pong and eat cookies. These memories would accompany me for years to come in America during the days when I would miss my life in Italy. Friar Casimiro's smile is still embedded in my mind today along with the smell of the cookies he gave us for our afternoon snack. For years I would wonder what it was about the Franciscan Order that made me feel at peace and at home. Perhaps it was the sense of charity that emanated from Friar Casimiro's smile, his sense of humility that freed him from any kind of discrimination, his sense of equality which removed from me that sense of inferiority I felt growing up in a country that showed discrimination among classes. (These were the sixties before Italy moved towards social democracy.)

When it came time to choose a dissertation topic at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I knew that I really wanted to work on the Franciscans of L'Aquila because I wanted to reconnect my work with my own identity. I wanted to understand why all of the doors of the lower part of the city had a sun depicted on them with 12 rays and why the people of L'Aquila would call it the Saint Bernardino's sun. What did the image of the sun have to do with Franciscan spirituality? And how did it relate to Dante's idea of the Pentecostal gift? I discovered an interesting relationship between Dante and Bernardino, and I address it in my own essay in this volume.

However, this collection of essays offers much more than the relationship between Dante and Bernardino. It presents a Franciscan reading of the *Divine Comedy*. In the last decade there has been a growing interest in the study of the history of the Franciscan movement in relation to Dante Alighieri. However, this study is only the second volume dedicated to Dante and the Franciscans.<sup>1</sup> Nine of the ten essays presented here are a clear sign that Dante's *Comedy* and his *Vita Nuova* were very much influenced by Franciscan spirituality. The tenth essay addresses the influence that Dante's *Comedy* had on the preaching of the Franciscan Order. The contributions to the volume are from scholars of literature, philosophy, theology and history and represent a much needed analysis of Franciscan influence on Dante's literary production, and of the influence that Dante had on the preaching of Bernardino of Siena. The result is, I believe, a significant contribution to the study of how Dante understood and employed Franciscan sources in his literary production and how Bernardino of Siena integrate Dante's work into his preaching.

V.S. Benfell III examines Dante's use of the final book of the Bible in *The Divine Comedy* and how that usage may have been influenced by Franciscan understandings of the Apocalypse, especially as interpreted by Olivi. In analyzing Dante's understanding of the Apocalypse and how it compares to the "Franciscan apocalypse," Benfell demonstrates how Dante and Olivi shared many of the same concerns regarding church corruption, and that Dante found in the Franciscan apocalypse a vocabulary and a set of images useful for his articulation of how history was ordered. The essay addresses how the Spiritual Franciscans sought to understand why the purity of their order was

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<sup>1</sup> See Nick Havely, *Dante and the Franciscans: Poverty and the Papacy in the "Commedia"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

being undermined, even—in their view—flagrantly disregarded, and so many turned to the biblical book that for them contained the key to understanding history: the Apocalypse—especially as interpreted by Joachim of Fiore. They began to see the present corruption as playing a part in the providential ordering of history; God would soon intervene in order to issue a new age, a period of history in which the “pure” Franciscans would play a key role. Peter John Olivi was a leading exponent of the spiritualist viewpoint (though far from being the movement’s most radical member), and he wrote an extremely important commentary on the Apocalypse. Benfall argues that although Dante never mentions Olivi by name, we know that he taught in Florence at Santa Croce in the late 1280s and that the similarities between Dante’s own use of the Apocalypse and Olivi’s has led to speculation that Dante must have known Olivi’s work or even Olivi himself, or, at worst, Olivi’s follower at Santa Croce, Ubertino of Casale, a figure Dante does mention in *Paradiso* 12.124–26. Ultimately, though, the differences between their apocalyptic visions are as noteworthy as the similarities; Dante takes what suits him from the Spiritual Franciscans, but the vision of history that he expounds in the *Comedy* is very much his own.

Tonia Bernardi Triggiano revisits the role that Piccarda Donati plays in Dante’s *Comedy*. Originally interpreted as a symbol of inconstancy, Piccarda, according to Triggiano, ought to more fittingly be appreciated as the first in a long line of heavenly interlocutors, one of many to afford the pilgrim intellectual passage toward the divine vision of God. The reader of the *Commedia* becomes acquainted with Piccarda in *Paradiso* 3. There, in the sphere of the moon, the poet assigns Piccarda a pivotal role whereby she not only recalls a specific relationship to the poet’s own contemporary Florentine history but more importantly, serves to introduce the *prima materia* of the canticle—the soul’s enjoyment of the beatific vision in the afterlife as reward for one’s proper use of free will during the earthly life. The economy of the *Paradiso* depends upon a process of question and answer, and Piccarda is instrumental in this first phase of the pilgrim’s educational program. Piccarda clarifies both her own history in her thwarted attempt for sisterhood, and she addresses larger theological truths. Like other figures in the *Commedia*, Piccarda is emblematic. She personifies a specific category of religious women and her representation of the order of St. Clare speaks primarily of integration in the context of a variety of relationships: she, in relation to



her place among the blessed, and in relation to her vocation. Dante's recreation of his kinswoman as a virgin sister who speaks to the tenets of Clarissan spirituality places her into the order of Saint Clare, in this way correcting the violence done to her by her brother, Corso. Dante demonstrates that although Corso was successful in his plan to reroute his sister's physical promise to the cloister, he had no power in diverting her spiritual and intellectual attachment. Indeed, the allegory of *Paradiso* 3 depends upon the notion of promises and the will required in preserving them.

My essay, "Bernardino: Reader of Dante," is the only essay dedicated to Dante's reception in the Franciscan Order. In addressing Dante's influence on the Franciscan Order of fifteenth-century Italy and applying theories of readership, which explicate the complex relationship among authorship, interpretation, and audience, I analyze Bernardino of Siena's preaching. In addressing the faithful, some of Bernardino's sermons use Dante's idealized perspective on Christianity—ideals which for Dante emerge from his understanding of Franciscan spirituality. Specifically, for Bernardino, Dante becomes the voice of morality. In Sermon 23, preached in Piazza del Campo in 1427, the Saint recalls the episode of Guido of Montefeltro who in *Inferno* 27 is punished for betraying the ideals of Francis. This canto of *The Comedy* was particularly important to Bernardino, for he employed it to juxtapose the contemporary world of factions in Siena to the true Franciscan piety and to show the people of Siena the consequences of factionalism. For Bernardino, the *Comedy* recalls Francis' idea that intellectual pursuits should aim toward a living faith and not by rhetorical speculation. In fact, Francis advocated a language obedient to the Word of God and not one that would fall into sophistic rhetoric. In the essay I conclude that Bernardino, using Dante's *Inferno* 27, shows how Dante in this particular canto ironically reveals his intention to create a just world at peace both socially and spiritually.

William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, as they attempt to address the question of what Dante learned from St. Francis, begin with a reflection on the lives of Francis and Dante, lives which show both striking parallels and unexpected differences. The essay tells the story of Francis' life by emphasizing the way in which quintessential Franciscan virtues emerged as Francis came face to face with his own vocation. It then shows how these virtues were necessary to Dante as he came face to face with his own exile. The essay then analyzes key Franciscan moments in the Divine Comedy by placing

them in the larger context of what Dante learned from Francis. Thus the essay attempts to show how a number of important ways of looking at the *Commedia*, including Dante as critic of church wealth, as a crusader, as a peacemaker, and even as a “cosmic poet,” owe an enormous debt to Francis.

In her essay Elvira Giosi addresses the problematic phrase of “*cinquecento diece e cinque*” (“*five hundred and Ten and Five*”) uttered by Beatrice in *Purgatorio* 33. In her analysis, she reinterprets the accepted idea of this phrase, which critics have associated with a numerical transposition of the Latin Letters DXV to DUX and which is believed to refer to an Emperor who, according to Dante, would bring an end to the corruption and the political disorder of his times. Specifically, in explicating this mysterious number, Giosi considers the influences of Franciscan Joachimite mysticism, and those of Jewish mysticism on Dante’s poetic creation of the DXV. Namely, she shows how the Florentine poet uses the Jewish numerology along with the late medieval eschatology—as found in the works of Spiritual Franciscans such as Peter Olivi, Ubertino of Casale and Alexander of Brema—in order to create a numerical symbol of Charity, Justice and Rectitude. Furthermore, in analyzing how the *cinquecento diece e cinque* can be connected to the Spiritual Franciscans’ expectations of a new era, she concludes that Dante in the DXV meant to identify Saint Francis as the messianic avenger in his *Comedy*.

Giuseppe Mazzotta, in defining the nature of creative energy found in the Franciscan movement, analyzes the multiple strain of the Franciscan tradition in Dante’s *Comedy*. He first examines how Dante responded to medieval Franciscanism by interpreting the meaning of Guido of Montefeltro in *Inferno* 27. He notes that in this particular character, Dante wishes to raise issues of papal power (and political theology), and most importantly trace the boundaries of the thirteenth-century debate between Franciscan theologians and secular masters. Specifically, the canto evokes the key questions of the thirteenth-century debate on the liberal arts and the Franciscan attack against logic and speculative grammar. He then turns to the cantos in which Dante refers to the Heaven of the Sun (*Paradiso* 10–13) and demonstrates how Dante explores further the sense of the Franciscan intellectual traditions, connecting the *Divine Comedy*’s concern with gifts to the Franciscan theology of spiritual gifts.

In her essay Amanda D. Quantz shows how Dante employs a Franciscan heuristic lens throughout the *Divine Comedy*. It is a perspective

that underpins the framework for his understanding of sin, purgation and salvation. Unlike other scholastic authors, such as Anselm and Aquinas, Dante communicates clearly that it is not wisdom, obedience or virtuosity that determines one's capacity to live out the Reign of God, but rather, the love that moves the sun and other stars. Furthermore, she explores how for Dante, life is a training ground for perfect beatitude, while the *vita apostolica* of the Franciscan variety is the lifestyle that most closely resembles the life lived by Love incarnate. God provides grace in the form of sustenance, consolation and companionship throughout the journey, in order to afford the individual the greatest possible opportunity for the success that the saints enjoy to various degrees. According to Dante, our task on earth is to cooperate with the grace that is continually offered, so that we might live out our potential as creatures made in the image and likeness of God who is love. Indeed, all three books of the *Divine Comedy* make this point for the reader, whether by admonition or example.

Sister Lucia Treanor addresses the importance of the Greek *tau* in Hebrew history (Ezk. 9.4), the significance of which Pope Innocent III recounted at the Fourth Lateran Council, and interprets it as a sign of renewal in the Church. Specifically, the Pope honored it as "the form of the cross," and elevated this allegorical image to the position of sacramental, for the letter *t*, in sound and analogic resemblance, evoked the sacred. Although there is no historical proof that the Franciscans of the thirteenth century knew the pronouncements of the Council, we know for sure that from the very beginning of the Order of Friars Minor, and certainly after the stigmatization of Francis, the cross was central to the spirituality of every Franciscan. The essay identifies Francis of Assisi's "The Canticle of Creatures" as a palindromic structure that was imitated and extended by Dante and Chaucer. It considers the palindrome from the formal point of view of semiotics, and classifies several examples from major works of the classical and medieval periods, locating "The Canticle" within the spectrum of the classification. Although this poem has been studied in its outer beauty, Treanor shows that scholars need to consider its inner graphic design in order to appreciate fully its aporetic characteristic.

Alessandro Vettori, focusing on the duplicity and specularity of *Paradiso* 11, demonstrates how the figures of speech and the binary quality of this canto aim at communicating a sense of peace and

reconciliation, already present thematically in this canto. He argues that the sense of peace, which in *De Monarchia* Dante regards as a universal human goal, is featured within the innermost poetic folds of *Paradiso* 11 as a representative characteristic of Franciscanism at its inceptive steps. He addresses the double structure of *Paradiso* 11 and 12 (a unique case of twin cantos in the *Divine Comedy*), which are dedicated to the two Mendicant Orders, one to Francis and one to Dominic. Furthermore, he analyzes the sense of unity created by the intertwining of the accounts: Francis's life is told by Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican; Dominic's life is narrated by Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, a Franciscan. He demonstrates that the frequent use of chiasmus and other binary rhetorical structures in the two cantos bear a direct or indirect message of reconciliation and harmony as main qualities of Franciscanism. In emphasizing poverty and humility, Dante portrays Francis as the reformer of the Church from within. The scene of his nude conversion on Piazza San Rufino, his mystical marriage to Lady Poverty, the foundation of the Order, and the final gift of the stigmata are the scattered facts that determine Dante's representation of the Poverello—all within an aura of peacefulness and reconciliation.

Brenda Wirkus examines Dante's *Vita Nuova* with the intent of uncovering its philosophical foundations, specifically those derived from the Franciscan tradition. More specifically still, she focuses on two Franciscan themes: finding traces of God in the world and seeing human relationships as essentially communal. In developing the first theme, she explores Dante's use of the character Beatrice as emblematic of truth and beauty and, thus, of the love of God. The distance that separated Dante from Beatrice, Wirkus argues, made it possible for him to view her as a medium which reveals the goodness of God rather than as a concrete, particular individual making moral demands upon him. In this way, Dante's *The New Life* appears as a call to a "truer" life, one which seeks the higher through the lower. And that call clearly reflects the theme of Saint Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*: that we can find the shadows and vestiges of God in the sensible world, in the movement, order, and beauty of things. In the second part of her essay, she argues that *La Vita Nuova* is not simply an individual chronicle of an individual's relationship with a woman he barely knows; in fact its structure reveals much more. Friends—relatives and neighbors—were an indispensable part of the medieval Italian city. The male protagonist of *La*

*Vita Nuova* refers frequently to his friends and companions. Furthermore, he addresses many of his poems to the reader as a peer and potential friend, to the “courteous man” and to “women with understanding of love.” Dante’s work, according to Wirkus, is self-consciously aware of the relationship between a poet and his public. At the same time this work is a chronicle of a young poet attempting to articulate his unique vision and discover his own poetic voice. His journey, she concludes, can thus also be characterized as a process of individuation from his many communities, including the community of troubadour poets and his first friend Guido Cavalcanti. Readers thus can observe both the poet emerging from those many communities and the man returning, transformed, to those communities, echoing clearly a Franciscan sensibility and perspective.

The most remarkable aspect of this book is the interrelationship between Dante and the Franciscan intellectual tradition. All essays contribute to a wider understanding of this relationship and show how all disciplines can come together to shed light on how the Franciscan intellectual component informs so much of Dante’s writing.

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DANTE, PETER JOHN OLIVI, AND  
THE FRANCISCAN APOCALYPSE

V.S. Benfell III

Dante's poem begins, as do all of our journeys, in the middle of things, and yet it is preoccupied with apocalypse, that is, with the end time. As Frank Kermode has noted, this divided attention to both present and future proves typical of western literature, since human beings "need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems." Thus, as we situate our own lives within a larger narrative that projects forward to a time of closure, we do so in order to make sense of our lives now, since "the End [we] imagine will reflect [our] irreducibly intermediary preoccupations."<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that Apocalypticism flourishes during periods of transition and crisis, partly because these times often strike those living through them as heading toward a historical climax, but predominantly because it is through the imposition of an end that individuals can come to an understanding and acceptance of their present.<sup>2</sup> That is, apocalypse offers a way of perceiving the world to those seeking order and purpose.

This apocalyptic hermeneutic proves to be characteristic both of Dante's poem and of the writings of a group of Franciscans who were convinced that the mainstream of their order had betrayed the ideals of its founder. This faction of rigorists, whom we normally

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Cohn and others have argued that this sense of crisis is primarily what motivates apocalyptic movements. See Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (London: Temple Smith, 1970). I find Bernard McGinn's notion, however—that those who turn to apocalyptic thought do so in order to make sense of the present—more persuasive. See, for example, his introduction to *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 8: "The apocalyptic mentality is a particular form of pre-understanding rather than a mere way of responding. More sensitive to change than the mass of their fellows, apocalypticists are more in need of a religious structure within which to absorb and give meaning to the anxieties that always accompany existence and change."

refer to as Spiritual Franciscans,<sup>3</sup> came under persecution for their vocal and determined resistance to what they saw as the increasing materialism of their order. They turned to the Apocalypse as a way of understanding the growing laxity of other Franciscans and the importance of their own adherence to the ideal of evangelical poverty in the face of opposition. The most influential Spiritual Franciscan exegete of the Bible's final book was Peter John Olivi, whose views of the end time (and hence of the moment in which he wrote) proved so dangerously influential that they were condemned posthumously by Pope John XXII in 1326. There is evidence that Dante knew of and to some degree sympathized with the Spirituels, and it also seems clear that the Spirituels' apocalyptic views had some influence over Dante. In this essay, I will explore both Dante's use of the final book of the Bible and how that usage may have been influenced by Franciscan understandings of the Apocalypse. First, though, we must review the evidence of Dante's knowledge of and sympathy for Peter John Olivi and the Spirituels.

### *The Spiritual Franciscans and Dante*

Even before Saint Francis died in 1226, the tensions that would lead to the split in the Franciscan order and the rise of a group of Spirituels were already visible. Francis had envisioned a group of minor friars who would be characterized by their embrace of poverty and extreme humility. As the order grew, however, the difficulties of translating that ideal into an institutional context became increasingly apparent.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Burr writes in his recent history of the movement, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), that prior to 1320, the word "spiritual" was not used frequently in reference to this faction of the order; in the early fourteenth century, for example, they were more often referred to by the name of their leader at the time, Ubertino da Casale, as "Ubertino and his associates from the province of Provence" or simply "Ubertino and his associates" (viii). As we will see, this is how Dante refers to the faction as well. For the sake of convenience, however, I will use the slightly anachronistic designation of "Spiritual Franciscans" or "Spirituels" to refer to Olivi, Ubertino, and their associates throughout this essay.

<sup>4</sup> See David Burr, "The Franciscan Dilemma," in *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 1–10. Much of my summary of the Spirituels derives from this and other works of Burr, as well as the work of Raoul Manselli. See, in particular, *Da Gioacchino da Fiore a Cristoforo Colombo: Studi sul Francescanesimo spirituale, sull'ecclesiologia e sull'escatologismo basomedievali* (Rome: Istituto storico Italiano per il medio evo, 1997). An earlier history

Francis eventually resigned from the leadership of the order in late 1220, though he continued to influence its direction by writing the order's rule and by dictating his Testament, which he intended to serve as a guide to the rule, near the time of his death. But within a few years, the order had become a powerful and influential movement within the Church, and its members were wanted for prominent ecclesiastical positions, government service, and teachers of theology, all of which seemed, to many, to contradict the ideals of the order's founder.<sup>5</sup>

There is little evidence of any coordinated Spiritualist movement prior to 1274. At that time, more public controversies began to surface within the order that paved the way for the later conflict. Perhaps the most important surrounded the question of the Franciscan vow of poverty and *usus pauper*, and it revolved around the figure of Petrus Iohannis Olivi, a friar from the south of France.<sup>6</sup> As the order grew, it became apparent to most friars that Francis's early ideal of absolute poverty would not work for a prominent order involved in the government of the Church. Early on, therefore, a compromise was reached in the papal bull *Quo elongati*, issued by Pope Gregory IX on September 28, 1230, in which Gregory made the important distinction between use and ownership.<sup>7</sup> The friars could not actually own property, which was clearly prohibited by the vow that the friars made upon joining the order, but they needed to have the necessities of life; the bull allowed the Franciscans use of these things as long as they were owned by someone else, such as the pope or the cardinal protector of the order. Some forty years later or so, a controversy arose regarding the definition of use. Some friars, such as Olivi, felt that the Franciscan vow, while it allowed for use even

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of the movement is Decima L. Douie, *The Nature and the Effect of the Heresy of the Fraticelli* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1932).

<sup>5</sup> In terms of ecclesiastical positions, for example, Burr notes that the "first Franciscan cardinal dates from 1273; the first inquisitors from the 1250s; the first bishops, from even earlier" (348, n. 11). The first Franciscan pope was Nicholas IV (Jerome of Ascoli), elected in 1288. For a standard account of the history of the Franciscan order, see John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From Its Origins to the Year 1517* (1968. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> This seems to be the correct form of Olivi's name, which means Peter [son] of John Olivi, with Iohannis serving as a patronymic. I follow, however, the standard English form of his name: Peter John Olivi. The standard biography of Olivi is David Burr, *The Persecution of Peter Olivi*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 66, part 5 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Moorman, *History*, 90; Burr, *Spiritual Franciscans*, 15.



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