

Saint Francis and Saint Dominic in the Cantos of the *Paradiso*

Raoul Manselli

“San Francesco e san Domenico nei canti del *Paradiso*”

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Translated by Edward Hagman, O.F.M. Cap.

Since I was asked to commemorate the centenary of Saint Dominic, but in such a way as not to forget that I was speaking from a Franciscan podium, I hope no one will mind or think it out of place that I have chosen as the subject of my talk the two cantos of the *Paradiso* in which Dante honors Saint Francis and Saint Dominic.¹

The reason is given by Dante himself, who perceptively observes:

Where one is, it is right to introduce
the other: side by side, they fought, so may
they share in glory and together gleam (XII, 34-36).^{1a}

¹In offering a series of comments on two of the most important cantos of the *Paradiso* as seen by a historian, we cannot imagine adding a complete bibliography. We can only mention a few works that take similar positions to those suggested here. Among the older commentators, we can mention the well-known *La Divina Commedia nella figurazione artistica*, 3 vols., ed. G. Biagi, G. L. Passerini and E. Rostagno (Turin: 1924-1939); while, in addition to the modern commentaries by Casini-Barbi, Torraca, Sapegno, etc., we should keep in mind especially the *Lecturae Dantis*, all of which have been collected in one volume. We should also take into account, for the part that has been published, the entries in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* (Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana).

In other words, these two saints, whose historical activity was harmonious and shall we say "convergent," are rightly remembered together. They seemed to Dante—and are also to historians today—inseparable in the world of their time. And so what better way to commemorate Saint Dominic from a Franciscan podium than to reconsider and examine the meaning of the eulogy addressed to Saint Dominic himself and to Saint Francis by the greatest and most important poet of the Middle Ages?

That said, we must begin *in medias res* and ask what is the meaning of this eulogy, presented in two cantos, what is its starting point, where does Dante get the idea and sentiment articulated and expressed in the two cantos.

It is clear that the starting point, the idea, comes from reflection on the Church's history, how the story of the Church—the divine come down into the human—has been expressed and is expressed in history. It is a position, we shall see, to which Dante commits himself deeply and personally.

Thus the eulogy of Saint Dominic and Saint Francis comes from reflection on the history of the Church. But how did Dante view this history? We need to explain this, however briefly, for only from this viewpoint will we be able to see clearly the place occupied by Saint Dominic and Saint Francis, according to the poet, in the history of the Church.²

From this viewpoint, we can see Dante's concept of the Church clearly expressed in the last part of the *Purgatorio* where the procession appears; its last part, the chariot, symbolizing the Church. In the Church, in the story of the chariot that symbolizes it, he accurately portrays the basic events that distinguished it and gave it its appearance.³

There is the memory of persecutions, the memory of heresies, the memory of the Donation of Constantine, the voice saying that the Church of God has been poisoned. He ends with the symbolic transformation, the apocalyptic transformation of the chariot into a seven-headed dragon, then

¹The English translation is that of Allen Mandelbaum: *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols. (New York: Bantam Classics, 1982-86) [Trans. note].

²On this point may we refer to R. Manselli, "Dante e 'l'Ecclesia spiritualis,'" *Dante e Roma*, Convegno di Studi su "Dante e Roma". Comitato Nazionale per le celebrazioni del VII Centenario della nascita di Dante (Florence: 1965), 115-135.

³For these last cantos of the *Purgatorio*, which in our opinion have not yet been adequately studied, it will suffice to consult an old (yet not on that account useless) study by Giulio Salvadori, *La mirabile visione*, rpt. in idem and Carlo Calcaterra, *Liriche e saggi*, III, Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Ser. 4: Scienze filologiche, 16 (Milan: 1993), 9-135.

in the appearance of the harlot and the giant. Through this transparent symbolism Dante meant to denounce the Church's spiritual decay, especially its compromising with earthly powers, with political power, the political power of France in particular.

I have said elsewhere that Dante's view of the Church is closely linked to the Joachimite concept of the Church as adopted and developed by the spiritual Franciscans. In this view only two people are seen as able to stop—or at least prevent for a time—the Church's gradual slipping into a state of decay, its transformation from an *Ecclesia spiritualis* to an *Ecclesia carnalis*. These two people are Francis and Dominic.⁴

Thus it seems that Dante's eulogy of Saint Francis and Saint Dominic originates in a context of reflection on the history of the Church. These two saints are seen as endowed with a providential mission that each with his own style and in his own special and distinctive way accomplished in history and on a historical level.

How did they act? How did that actually succeed in stopping this decay in the Church? It is essential that we see this point very clearly if we want to understand the meaning of these two cantos and their spiritual significance for Dante and for readers still able to grasp the values implicit in them.

Briefly, we can say that Saint Francis is seen in the context of the Church's history as the one who brought back poverty, which is the one and only true remedy against what the poet considered to be the most profound and radical source of all evil: cupidity. Or as he says even more strongly, in Latin, *cupiditas* or *avaritia*, by which he means an insatiable desire for worldly goods, an insatiable desire to grasp. Recall that for Dante *cupiditas* is the source of every disorder afflicting the human race. In the poet's eyes, the poverty of Francis is the supreme and only remedy against *cupiditas*, which the Donation of Constantine ("Ah, Constantine, what wickedness was born...") introduced into the life of the Church as an incurable wound. *Cupiditas* can be overcome only by *paupertas*.

And Saint Dominic? Saint Dominic is singled out as the one who brings back to the Church the truth of a revitalized faith, discovered through the Gospel and expressed in learning. It is here that we should see what for Dante are the two permanent values that providentially re-emerged in the Church through the two saints and stopped its downward slide toward evil, albeit only for a time.

⁴On these questions, see R. Manselli, "Dante e 'l'Ecclesia spiritualis.'"

The activity of Francis and Dominic is complementary and convergent, different, but mutually harmonious. In other words, within the providential history of the Church, Saint Francis and Saint Dominic appear with a special and distinctive providentiality. Where did this idea come from? Is it Dante's own idea, or should it not be recovered and found in a cultural milieu from which the poet adopted it and made it part of his idea of the Church?

We will say at once that Dante derives this idea of the providentiality of Saint Francis and Saint Dominic from a recovery of the pseudo-Joachimite notion of the Church's growth, its decay, and the remedies to be applied. (This is not my own discovery, although I did help bring it to the attention of Dante scholars who were unaware of it.)

This striking concept of the Church's history is consigned, so to speak, to two works, as uninviting to read and hard to grasp in their inner unity as they are important and full of teachings. They are a commentary on Jeremiah and a commentary on Isaiah that were particularly close to Dante's sentiment, particularly in accord with it. And for that reason the poet made them his own. If we look at these two works and try to find what it is that inspires them, we shall see that what stands out most of all is a sense of strong criticism of the contemporary Churchy, what we would call today the official hierarchical Church.

In this regard I will cite a play on words that became very popular and is also easy to remember. The *cardinales* are regularly called *carpinales* from the word *carpere*, because they are the ones who know all about grasping. The Church is criticized for its support of political tyranny, its involvement in political life in order to try to control it. Most of all, in perfect agreement with what will later be Dante's sentiments, there is criticism of the abuse of the study of canon law (a criticism that also recurs in the poet) in order to impose its own tyranny and justify its own demands for money and power. And, another interesting aspect also taken up by Dante, it is emphasized that the only ones who acted against this decay were Francis and Dominic. The two Orders, like their founders, converge in various ways for the salvation and renewal of the Church.

A stray work has been inserted into the commentary on Jeremiah, the so-called *De provincialibus praesagiis*. It is a kind of geographic plan with prophecies of what is supposed to happen in the various places. At one point it speaks of Assisi as the place from which will come a figure wrapped in poor and humble clothes. Of Saint Dominic it is said that he will be the voice that is able to move the world. The last aspect of these two works we want to consider here is that they are both filled with expectation of something that is to happen, that will happen.

I do not need to tell you that the entire *Divine Comedy*—from the foreshadowing of the Veltro to that of the condemnation of Babylon—is filled with a sense of expectation of something that is to happen. And so I do not think I am violating the truth of history, forcing Dante to take a position that is not his, if I say that he was definitely influenced by these works, especially in the structure and development of the two cantos of Saint Francis and Saint Dominic.

I would add that within this providential plan, in which Dante is inspired by pseudo-Joachimite and spiritual prophecy, the poet is influenced by another series of leads, ideas, and suggestions that come from the culture of his time, both with regard to Saint Francis—where this element is stronger and more present—and Saint Dominic.

The first time I had the pleasure and honor of speaking from this podium, I referred to the two basic motifs associated with the glorification of Saint Francis in the thirteenth century. I am happy to see that the ideas and suggestions I offered in this regard were recently adopted in a course in Franciscan history at the University of Perugia by Fr. Stanislao da Campagnola.⁵ So then, what are these two forms of glorification of Saint Francis? That Saint Francis is to be identified with the *Angelus ascendens ab ortu solis* (“angel ascending from the rising of the sun”) mentioned in the Apocalypse, and that Saint Francis is the *alter Christus* (“other Christ”).

Dante constructs his canto of Saint Francis (the part that refers to the saint) in perfect symmetry, on the *Angelus ascendens ab ortu solis*, the angel that rises in the East, and on the *alter Christus*. He divides his treatment as follows. First he speaks of the *Angelus ascendens ab ortu solis*, then he speaks of Saint Francis, the *alter Christus*, as the first and only one after Christ to embrace poverty. Finally, there is the seal, the *angelus habens sigillum Dei vivi* (“angel having the seal of the living God”).

Now let us take the canto of Saint Francis for a moment and together re-read a few verses. Recall that in his poetic imagery Dante points to the “fertile slope” that “hangs from a high peak” (XI, 45). This is Subasio where Assisi was situated.

From this hillside, where it abates its rise,
a sun was born into the world, much like
this sun when it is climbing from the Ganges [i.e., from the East].
Therefore let him who names this site not say
Ascesi, which would be to say too little,
but *Orient*, if he would name it rightly (XI, 49-54).

⁵Stanislao da Campagnola, *L'angelo del sesto sigillo e l'alter Christus. Genesi e sviluppo di due temi francescani nei secoli XIII-XIV*, Studi e ricerche, 1 (Rome: 1971).

Here the relationship to the passage from the Apocalypse is simply an explanation. Assisi should no longer be called "Assisi." It is "Orient," because it is there that the sun rises: *Angelus ascendens ab ortu solis*. Then this aspect of the glorification of Saint Francis is interrupted momentarily and we have the glorification of his poverty.

Once again we must recall that Dante, completely faithful in this regard to the spiritual approach to the history of the Church, says clearly that Christ was poor and, after him, only Saint Francis. On this point there is no doubt. He says:

She was bereft of her first husband; scorned,
obscure, for some eleven hundred years (XI, 64-65)

she was forgotten by all. If we count the years, we arrive exactly at the time near the birth of Saint Francis. Before Saint Francis, poverty, in the true sense willed by Christ, did not exist.

Therefore Saint Francis is the *alter Christus*, because it was he who after "some eleven hundred years" brought the poverty of Christ back to the earth.

She was bereft of her first husband; scorned,
obscure, for some eleven hundred years,
until that sun came, she had no suitor (XI, 64-66).

And then:

But so
that I may not tell my tale too darkly, you
may now take Francis and take Poverty
to be the lovers meant in my recounting.
Their harmony and their glad looks, their love
and wonder and their gentle contemplation,
served others as a source of holy thoughts;
so much so, that the venerable Bernard
went barefoot first; he hurried toward such peace;
and though he ran, he thought his pace too slow.
O wealth unknown! O good that is so fruitful!
Egidius goes barefoot, and Sylvester,
behind the groom—the bride delights them so.
Then Francis—father, master—goes his way
with both his lady and his family,
the lowly cord already round their waists (XI, 73-87).

Then again the biographical details, the desire for martyrdom, and finally the *angelus habens sigillum Dei vivi*:

[T]here, on the naked crag between the Arno
and Tiber, he received the final seal
from Christ; and this his limbs bore for two years (XI, 106-08).

Angelus ascendens ab ortu solis, alter Christus, habens signum Dei vivi:
you can see how these elements are combined by Dante to glorify Saint Francis.

I do not intend to dwell any longer on these brief remarks. I hope it is clear that these motifs, current especially in the spiritual concept of Franciscanism, are adopted by Dante with particular emphasis.

I would like you to be especially aware of Dante's emphasis on the motif of poverty. As I said, it is not, according to Dante, an ordinary form of poverty that Francis brought back in the Church. It is the authentic poverty of Christ, the only form of poverty that is complete and total and thus able to combat cupidity, the downfall of the Church. It is no accident that in the *Monarchia* Dante says that the Church should be totally and radically poor, a standard that makes him one of the most radical upholders of evangelical poverty, placing him even beyond the spiritual Franciscans.

Thus the glorification of the poverty of Saint Francis is in perfect accord with the view of history at Dante's time and with a special emphasis on his concept of the life and history of the Church.

And Saint Dominic? Here too, as for Saint Francis, Dante adopts the motifs common at his time. He takes one motif in particular: glorification of the faith in learning. Modern historians tend to stress evangelical preaching as one of the most significant and important aspects of Saint Dominic, even more than his preaching against heresy. But this is essentially foreign to Dante's position, essentially far from it.⁶ For Dante, Saint Dominic is first and foremost the Church's fighter, as he so unequivocally calls him, neither more nor less unequivocal than he was about the place of poverty in Saint Francis. He is very specific. For him Saint Dominic is

the loving vassal
of Christian faith, the holy athlete, one
kind to his own and harsh to enemies (XII, 55-57).

Thus he is in love with the Christian faith, that is, with the truth of the faith. Dante wishes to tell us that while Saint Francis understood Christianity essentially as Christian life in and through poverty, Christianity is understood by Saint Dominic as love of the faith, a love that leads one to fight for the faith. Just as Saint Francis ran after a lover, poverty, Saint

⁶For Saint Dominic, see the major biography by M.-H. Vicaire, *Histoire de saint Dominique*, 2 vols. (Paris: 1982) and the two useful volumes by the same author, *Saint Dominique. La vie apostolique*, *Chrétiens de tous les temps*, 10 (Paris: 1965) and *Saint Dominique et ses frères. Évangile ou croisade? Chrétiens de tous les temps*, 19 (Paris: 1967).

Dominic is the "vassal" of another aspect of Christian life, the Christian faith understood as something to defend with all one's strength. And in this, I repeat, Dante is linked to the ideas common at his time.

Between the true figure of Saint Dominic as he appears to historians today and the figure of Saint Dominic as he appeared to Dante stands the concrete experience of the Dominican phenomenon, extremely widespread and varied. In Italy and especially in southern France the Dominican phenomenon is seen chiefly in its aspect of polemic against heresy. What lies between the Saint Dominic of history and the image of Saint Dominic created at the end of the thirteenth century, at the time of Dante, is not so much a distorting barrier, but rather the concrete experience of the accomplishment of the Dominican program, which manifests itself chiefly as the fight against heresy.

Not coincidentally, Dante underscores and highlights this aspect of Saint Dominic's anti-heretical polemic. He adopts, in a kind of way, a classic expression of his time that also made use of a play on words: *Domini canes*. Saint Dominic's friars are the "Lord's dogs" because they fight the *vulpeculae quae vastant vineam Domini* ("wolves that lay waste the Lord's vineyard"), that is, the Church. In the magnificent Spanish chapel at Santa Maria Novella in Florence there is a centerpiece depicting the triumph of the Dominican Order in which the friars are actually portrayed as black-and-white spotted dogs.

But if we pay attention, we will notice that Dante places Saint Dominic where he feels he belongs, making him, I would say, even more clearly and definitely a part of his favorite concept of the Church. Let us re-read a very sensitive passage. What did Saint Dominic do?

Not for the world, for which men now travail
 along Taddeo's way or Ostian's,
 but through his love of the true manna, he
 became, in a brief time, so great a teacher
 that he began to oversee the vineyard
 that withers when neglected by its keeper.
 And from the seat that once was kinder to
 the righteous poor (and now has gone astray,
 not in itself, but in its occupant),
 he did not ask to offer two or three
 for six, nor for a vacant benefice,
 nor *decimas, quae sunt pauperum Dei*—
 but pleaded for the right to fight against
 the erring world, to serve the seed from which
 there grew the four-and-twenty plants that ring you.

Then he, with both his learning and his zeal,
and with his apostolic office, like
a torrent hurtled from a mountain source,
coursed, and his impetus, with greatest force,
struck where the thickets of the heretics
offered the most resistance (XII, 82-102).

Let us see what these verses mean. We have already stressed (and we do not think we have betrayed Dante's thought) that, according to the poet, what is important above all in Saint Francis is the practice of the Christian life expressed as poverty. In Saint Dominic it is love for the faith understood as truth to be grasped with the intellect. But Dante really feels that these two saints are providentially convergent. Thus he cannot imagine a Saint Dominic who would be a person of pure intellect, pure theological knowledge. Holiness is not a matter of intelligence alone; Saint Dominic, he says, "coursed with both his learning and his zeal."

In fact Dante reminds us that Saint Dominic did not ask the Apostolic See to obtain tithes, to have benefices, to use knowledge of law to his own advantage, a legal knowledge that would make him and his Order rich and powerful. He asked only to be able to fight for the faith "against the erring world," a world that was straying from the faith of Christ. Not riches, not power, not worldly glory, but fighting for the faith of Christ in humility and detachment from earthly goods.

The word "poverty" does not appear. We do not wish to speak in a spirit of controversy, but from observation of the facts. Certainly what does appear—it is obvious—is the rejection of riches, power, earthly goods.⁷

Taking these two cantos as a whole, I think the convergence I have mentioned several times stands out clearly and is situated precisely in Dante's concept of the Church. The poverty of Francis and the teaching of Saint Dominic, opposed as these are to the decay of the Church, stand next to each other. They are in accord with Dante's feeling and awareness of the Church itself, seeing that he considered true poverty and true doctrine to be the only remedies against this downward slide from the *Ecclesia spiritualis* to the *Ecclesia carnalis*.

That said, I do not think I am being anachronistic or forcing Dante, Saint Francis, and Saint Dominic to take positions that were not theirs—or gently urging them to do so for use today—when I note that Dante's observations about Saint Francis and Saint Dominic have a value that goes beyond these two figures and the time in which they and Dante lived. We

⁷For Dominican poverty, see C. H. Lambermond, *Der Armutsgedanke des hl. Dominikus und seines Ordens* (Zwolle, Holland: 1926).

are all convinced that even today in the Church questions of true poverty and true doctrine are entirely and profoundly relevant.

Beyond the lawful process of historical knowledge, which is different, only in a context like this is it worth remembering Saint Francis or Saint Dominic, if the observance of a centenary has any meaning, if this centenary still speaks to our hearts. It is meaningful to commemorate the centenary of Saint Dominic, as we have already done for Saint Francis, if we reconsider these centenaries and relate them to our own time. For only then will it make sense to try to understand the spirit that inspired Saint Francis and Saint Dominic eight centuries ago.