WHAT DANTE LEARNED FROM ST FRANCIS

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Scholars often work hard to answer specific, tightly focused, questions. Without that sort of meticulous scholarship, it would be impossible to tackle larger concerns and make intelligent and useful generalizations. In this essay, however, relying on a huge body of commentary and scholarship and our own combined seventy-plus years of teaching, we are moving in a somewhat different direction: we are going to address a huge question and then refine it a bit: How do we learn from people different from ourselves? We ask this every time a parent, teacher, or even a friend tries to give us some advice. If we do not find some sort of answer to this question, the logical result is that we can only rely on and trust in ourselves since only we really understand ourselves.

The problem gets bigger as we deal with generational issues—our grandparents are really out of it—and cultural differences. We observe, listen to, and read about people living on the same planet with us today, often people we admire; but we wonder, given the differences between them and us, whether we can apply anything we learn about them to our lives. Here is a simple example. A Catholic visits a monastery and attends mass. She very much admires the monks and believes that they are serious and devout and holy Christians. Still, she wonders whether there is anything beyond some sort of general sense of deep commitment that she can take away from her temporary monastic experience since she works full-time in an office and is a wife and a mother of three who is constantly transporting her kids to soccer games and dance lessons.

If we increase the time and space differences and rely on “advice” in the form of books rather than on personal interaction, the problem sometimes seems to be even greater. Hence all teachers of the humanities face students who tell us that Plato or Shakespeare or

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1 Earlier versions of this essay were given as the E.L. Wiegand Public Lecture at the Santa Catalina School, and also at the University of Rochester.
Mark Twain or Confucius have nothing to teach us because they are so remote temporally and culturally. Sometimes students say something as naïve as, “How can someone who didn’t have a computer (or fill in the blank with any other piece of technology) have anything to teach us?” But there are a lot of variations on this theme; a few years ago, a brouhaha occurred at Stanford with students protesting the study of DWEMs (Dead White European Males). And many traditional college humanities curricula bit the proverbial dust in the late 1960s, succumbing to the charge of irrelevance.

Yet we all have both personal and academic experiences that tell us that quite different people, certainly including the dead, have things to teach us; and we constantly learn that the very greatest writers and thinkers learn from their predecessors. Shakespeare learned from Plutarch, who lived 1500 years before the Bard of Avon. St. Thomas Aquinas made Aristotle’s writings central to the development of his own thought despite the fact that Aristotle was a “pagan,” and that the two lived about 1600 years apart.

Our task here is a case study of this issue. Instead of answering the general question of how any particular figure in the past has something to teach us, we are instead going to consider how and what Dante Alighieri learned from St. Francis of Assisi. At first glance, what we are attempting to do may appear to be easy. After all, Francis of Assisi and Dante both lived in what we call the Middle Ages, the first from 1182 to 1226 and the second from 1265 to 1321.

One all-too-common perception we have found throughout our teaching careers is that, in the mind of the general public, not much happened in the roughly 1000 years we call medieval, let alone in just one century within this larger block. Such a conclusion is based on ignorance of the dynamics of medieval society, combined with our unreflective tendency to telescope time. People today often talk of past centuries as though they were minutes or days. A student once told us that the cause of the fall of the Roman Empire was Rome’s defeat of Carthage in the Second Punic War, an event which occurred fully 700 years before the generally accepted date for the collapse of Roman authority in the West. Another reason it may seem simple to conclude that Dante learned easily and naturally from Francis is that they were both males, both Italians, and both serious Catholic Christians. Consequently, shouldn’t it be obvious that one medieval Italian Catholic guy would really understand another one? They would have spoken the same language, both literally and metaphorically.
Yet, once we look even casually at the lives of Francis and Dante, it is clear that there are some marked differences:

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<th>Francis:</th>
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<tr>
<td>small town</td>
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<td>rich merchant family</td>
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<td>chose extreme poverty</td>
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<td>chose celibacy</td>
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To put it simply, how can a politically involved love poet from Florence learn from a guy from a small town who renounced worldly interests to live in caves and huts? How can a learned poet at home with academic philosophy, theology, history, literature, and science learn from someone who was essentially a B- Latin student and worried a lot about misguided scholars?

From Saint Francis to Dante

Let us begin with a look at the life of Francis. He was born to a wealthy merchant family, perhaps the wealthiest in Assisi. He worked with his father in the family’s cloth business and loved to dress in the finest clothes and to party heartily. Apparently, being a rich kid was not enough because, for a while, Francis sought to “move up” socially by pursuing a career as a mounted soldier that would hopefully lead to knighthood and all of the social and legal privileges that went with it. It would have been the best of both worlds—the wealth of a merchant and the status of a knight.

The wealth and the quest for knighthood ultimately failed to make Francis happy, despite what “the world” told him. He began to travel to secluded caves on Mount Subasio to pray. He took a pilgrimage

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to Rome,\textsuperscript{3} throwing coins through the grate on the tomb of St. Peter and then realizing that this gift to the saint did not give him the satisfaction it should have. Back in Assisi, he developed a specific way of showing his new devotion to God—gathering materials and rebuilding crumbling churches on the city’s outskirts.\textsuperscript{4} His zeal for this got him in trouble because he sold materials belonging to his father in order to support his rebuilding projects. Ultimately, this led to the famous public confrontation between Francis and his father Pietro in the presence of Guido, Bishop of Assisi.\textsuperscript{5} Thanks to an extended and brilliant visual tradition, we can clearly envision Francis taking his last piece of clothing off and handing it to his father, who had demanded back everything that belonged to him.\textsuperscript{6} Several of the early vitae of Francis use this story as the moment of Francis’s conversion from “the world” to the service of God.

Francis himself, in the Testament that he dictated on his deathbed, does not recount this story to explain his conversion, but rather presents it in terms of his meeting with lepers.\textsuperscript{7} One way to think of how Francis was changed by his encounters with lepers is to see them as the focus for a new ability to understand what he had once perceived as bitter to be sweet. Francis also learned that lesson in other ways as well. After he had been living his new life for a while, he realized that a priest had been fixing him special food because of his former status in the world. He took up begging for food, his bowl being filled with various scraps. At first, such slop tasted bitter, but as he more deeply entered into his life following the poor Christ, it became a sweet banquet.\textsuperscript{8} Similarly, Francis learned to sleep in barns and caves, sometimes with a rock as his pillow. To be removed from all that is familiar and expected is a difficult undertaking, but

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{3} When considering events in Francis’s life, we will cite the earliest version of a story in the writings of Thomas of Celano. His Vita Prima is the earliest narrative of the life of Francis and will be cited as I Cel followed by a section number. Celano’s second life, The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul, is cited II Cel. The former is found in Francis of Assisi: The Saint, the second in Francis of Assisi: The Founder. For Francis’ pilgrimage to Rome, see II Cel 8.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{4} The first of these was the church of San Damiano. See II Cel 10.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{5} I Cel 14–15.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{6} Certainly the most famous is the fresco in the Upper Church in Assisi of c.1291, sometimes ascribed to Giotto. The earliest representation of this story is in a section of a panel painting of c.1245 in the Bardi Chapel of Santa Croce, Florence.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{7} Francis of Assisi: The Saint, 124.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{8} II Cel 14.}
Francis had the ability to see difficulty as opportunity. This is a lesson not lost on Dante the exile. We recall Dante’s complaint of the saltiness of others’ bread in Paradiso 17.

A central tenet of the Franciscan charism is its instability. As much as Francis apparently renounced “the world,” he also remained a part of it. Francis and his earliest followers indeed debated whether they should live in hermitages and pursue lives of contemplation. Later, leaders of the Church would try to fit Francis and his brothers into an existing paradigm for religious vocations. However, Francis ultimately rejected a cloistered life by specifically rejecting traditional forms of religion such as the Rule of St. Benedict, proclaiming himself to be “a new fool in the world.” 9 In the Sacrum Commercium, an allegorical reflection on poverty, perhaps written two decades after Francis’s death, the saint is asked where his cloister is; he looks out over the world from a high place and explains that his cloister is the world. 10 To state the obvious, Dante, unwillingly of course, lost all the elements of his life’s routine and made his home, or at least his dwelling, in several places including Verona and Ravenna.

Francis of course is a man of prayer. He wrote a rule for Franciscan hermitages 11 and toward the end of his life spent much of his time in remote places in contemplation. Still, like Christ after the Transfiguration, Francis always “came down from the mountain.” This is true even after the stigmatization; Francis realized that he had to do the same work after he received Christ’s own wounds that he had been doing since the time of his conversion. 12

Francis recognized that his life was a continuing dialogue between the active and contemplative lives, and exactly what that meant for his day-to-day schedule changed over time. To use an image that Benedict had earlier employed and Dante would later borrow, there is constant movement up and down on Jacob’s ladder, stretching between earth and heaven.

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9 This statement first appears in the so-called Assisi Compilation: ch.18. This text, dating from the 1240s or 1250s, is found in Francis of Assisi: The Founder.
10 This work is translated into English with the title The Sacred Exchange Between St. Francis and Lady Poverty. It is found in Francis of Assisi: The Saint; the particular part mentioned here is found on p. 532.
11 The text is found in Francis of Assisi: The Saint, 61–62.
12 This is most clearly stated in Bonaventure’s Legenda Maior, written ca. 1260. A translation is found in Francis of Assisi: The Founder. This work is usually cited as LM plus a chapter and section number. Francis taking up his work following his reception of the wounds of Christ is found at LM XIII, 5 and XIV, 1.
Francis chose radical poverty in imitation of Christ, who chose to be poor. For Francis, this was rather obvious. After all, when God chose to become human, He could have been born anywhere and lived in luxury and comfort. However, God chose to be born in a stable and spend his first night in human form sleeping in an animal feeding trough. Worldly power and splendor were in fact the very temptations that Christ rejected, and he died poor and naked. To put it simply, since that is what God chose for Himself, that is what Francis chose.

It is easy for us to imagine that such a choice was an easy one for Francis. After all, Francis lived “way back then,” as did Jesus, and both lived in a land of olive trees and shepherds. However, it is important to remember how different ancient Palestine and medieval Umbria were. To state the obvious, Jesus lived almost twelve centuries before Francis. It is useful to remember that Francis is closer to being our contemporary than to being Jesus’. The social and economic structures of thirteenth-century central Italian city-states were radically different from either Galilee or Jerusalem. In other words, Francis developed a way of living that was close to what he imagined Jesus would have chosen had he been a poor babe in Assisi rather than in Bethlehem. Clearly, there were multitudes in Francis’s own time and afterward who believed that Francis was successful. Francis’s most important biographer, Bonaventure, drove this point home by showing that Francis’s reception of the stigmata was God’s seal of authenticity of the Christ-like life that he lived.13 Although Dante’s Florence was a much more cosmopolitan place than Francis’s Assisi, clearly he could see Francis as a useful mirror of Christ when he confronted the question of how he could live his life in imitation of Christ.

When we look at Francis’s life of extreme poverty, we are often bemused and confused. Why would he not even allow friars to touch money? Why did he on more than one occasion equate coins with dung? Why did Francis not realize the convenience of money, for example having a few coins to get food or medical care in emergency situations? There are several perspectives that can help us understand Francis’s “obsession” with poverty. First, money itself was rather new during his lifetime, and in fact much more of the economy was

13 LM IV, 11 and XIII, 9.
barter than we sometimes realize. Money became a fundamentally different way of assessing wealth than land, which had been the traditional way of defining it. Money is both portable and liquid. You can take it with you and spend it in dozens of places. You can sit on your bed at night and play with it by running your fingers through your pile of silver (and, by Dante's day, gold) coins.  

The pursuit of these pieces of metal tends to make people mad. One day when Francis was tending his father's shop, a beggar came to ask for money in the name of God. Francis, in the process of learning the life of a merchant, shooed him away; he was bad for business. Only later did Francis realize that if that man had asked for something in the name of some great earthly lord, he would have given it to him—good business practice, after all. But when the beggar asked for help in the name of the Lord, he was tossed out onto the street.  

Francis intuitively realized that in a money economy, everything ultimately becomes defined in terms of its cost. The desire for money can easily trump every other concern. The fourteenth-century Sienese poet Cecco Angiolieri, who sparred poetically with Dante, proclaimed that "Florins are the best of kin." Money trumps family. That same poet also guiltlessly proclaims that money can get him anything—status, power, and even sex!  

In the world of an emerging money economy, avarice thus becomes the characteristic sin. One only has to listen to the folks Dante meets in hell and purgatory to learn the pervasive nature of the sin of avarice in the world of the late medieval Italian city-states. Francis prophetically takes a stand on this issue by withdrawing fully from the money economy. When Dante is forced into what perhaps could be seen as a kind of genteel poverty and forced into a dependence on patrons after his exile, he will need to re-evaluate his own life and to develop a certain detachment from material goods. Who better to guide him

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11 As the title indicates, Lester Little's *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) is a thorough examination of the issue.  

15 The earliest version of this story is found in a text of 1249–51 usually called *The Awakenings of Porgius*. It is translated in *Francis of Assisi: The Founder*, 34–5.  

16 Quoted in Laura Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Knopf, 1929), 79. The most recent study of Cecco's poetry in English is Fabian Alferi, *Comedy and Culture: Cecco Angiolieri's Poetry and Late Medieval Society* (Leeds: Northern Universities Press, 2001).
than Il Poverello, who chose to live without possessions? In one sense, Dante, unlike Francis, has no choice. Poverty, and the powerlessness that poverty entails, is thrust upon him. But in a larger sense, Dante does have the choice of accepting or rejecting the prophetic perspective that poverty will allow him.

What perhaps is more difficult for modern people to grasp than Francis’s rejection of money is the joy he found in his abject poverty. In Nikos Kazantzakis’s twentieth-century novel about Francis, the narrator, Brother Leo, tells the reader that he can imitate Francis’s asceticism physically by using a rock for a pillow or eating slop in a beggar’s bowl. What is really hard for him, he confesses, is to find the joy and consolation of spirit that Francis felt in these activities. Dante will have to learn more than simply how to survive with less—perhaps much less—when he goes into exile. But he will also need to find joy and the possibility for spiritual growth in what looks hard and feels uncomfortable.

The other essential virtue we find exemplified in Francis is humility. Of course, this is the virtue opposed to the vice of vices—pride, the first sin. However, in the Middle Ages, pride was seen as something more than the poster child for sin in general, though it was certainly that. Pride was the vice especially associated with the feudal aristocracy. One finds, for example, on the south porch of Chartres Cathedral, the sin of pride depicted as a knight falling from his horse—pride goes before a fall. Since Francis once sought to be a knight and was raised, as were many sons of merchants in late medieval Italy, on stories of great knights, from the heroes of Arthurian literature to the larger than life and larger than history characters of Charlemagne and Roland, he knew the tradition well. It was among these heroes that Francis wanted to locate himself before his conversion. Hence, Francis’s struggle to live according to the virtue of humility has a specific as well as a general dimension, and his desire to turn from knight to Knight of Christ is inseparable from his focus on the virtue of humility.

This was not an easy task for him, because in his own lifetime he had already become an icon. Especially toward the end of his life, people treated him as a living saint, literally rushing to touch

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18 In the *Assisi Compilation*, found in *Francis of Assisi: The Founder*, 209.
the hem of his garment. He must have been aware of the reverence with which his brothers, ordinary people, and even the pope regarded him, similar to how the more recent Mother Teresa must have been aware of her status as a living saint. Furthermore, Francis had no doubt that he was the recipient of extraordinary gifts from God; not to recognize that fact would have led to the sin of ingratitude. But it is a slippery slope from recognizing one’s great gifts to a sense of superiority stemming from a perception that somehow those gifts are no more than one’s due.

However, Francis countered this temptation. He once stated that, “I can still have sons and daughters,” meaning that he understood that it was still possible that he could break his vow of chastity. In Pauline terms, one not only has to start the race, but to finish it as well. There is a revealing story in which one day a brother asked Francis what he thought of himself. Upon hearing Francis proclaim himself to be the greatest of sinners, the brother responded with incredulity: How could Francis seriously be comparing himself to thieves and murderers? Francis responded that if those sorts of people had all the gifts from God that he had received, they would have been more grateful than he is. In a sense, Francis is saying that goodness cannot be measured by the number of gifts one receives but how one accepts and uses the gifts offered. And this is something that is very hard to measure from the outside. From this point of view, Francis can honestly describe himself as a great sinner because he is in a position to know what the gap is in his life between offer and acceptance. It is likewise clear in reading Dante that he recognizes, as we might say today, how gifted he is; and he tells us in Purgatorio that he will spend a lot of time in the terrace of pride after his death. Dante knew he had to learn the nature of true humility, which was not rooted in denying his giftedness.

The idea that humility begins in obedience is rooted in the monastic tradition, from Cassian and Benedict in particular. Francis, following this tradition, saw the connection, accepting not just that God

\[^{19}^{\text{Il Cb}} 133.\]
\[^{20}^{\text{Cf. Il Tim 4:7.}}\]
\[^{21}^{\text{Il Cb 123.}}\]
\[^{22}^{\text{In the Rule of St. Benedict, humility is called the first step of obedience. See The Rule of St. Benedict in English ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), Chapter 5.}}\]
knew what was better for Francis than Francis knew himself, but that other people did as well. Francis realized that when we claim that we allow God alone to guide us, we often define God's will for us to be what we want to do anyway. After all, God does not usually send us a text or whisper in our ear a precise plan for what we ought to do. On the other hand, people we deal with, especially superiors in the religious life, do make their plans for us perfectly clear, and often they are not quite what we had in mind. Francis sought not only to be obedient directly to God but also to humans. There are numerous stories of his humility before others. His order was "governed" by ministers, not masters, and the very name of the order, Friars Minor, makes a statement about the virtue of humility.

The third quality, after poverty and humility, that we want to stress in Francis is his simplicity. Francis hardly invented the focused life, for it is central to the monastic tradition. But the monks practiced their simplicity inside a cloister and largely in rural areas. Francis and his brothers lived in the world, in an increasingly urban environment. It was a world of international trade and the era of the Crusades. Francis's father often traveled to the fairs in France, and Clare's mother had been a pilgrim to Jerusalem. The world was becoming bigger and more complex. Staying focused on the pearl of great price, that which is most valuable, was getting more and more difficult. As we look at Francis's life, whether we concentrate on his asceticism, his preaching, his love of all God's creatures, or his journey to meet with Sultan Malik al-Kamil, we realize that these are all parts of what, for Francis, was a fully integrated whole. It was God's word that Francis always sought to listen to and obey. There were no diversions. In the journey of his life, he never strayed from the path or took excessive pleasure in the stops along the way. To state the obvious, if life was complex in Francis's Assisi, imagine the Florence of Dante with his political, literary, and family interests and commitments.

One important part of the complexity of Francis's time was the growing academic culture of places such as Paris and Bologna. Peter Abelard was dead forty years before Francis was born, and Thomas Aquinas was born while Francis was still alive. At least indirectly, Francis experienced some of the ways this new culture worked through the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The university-trained theologians and canon lawyers (Pope Innocent III was both) hammered out definitions and regulations. Francis's carefully selected
Cardinal Protector of the Order, Cardinal Ugolino, was a canon lawyer who later became Pope Gregory IX. In Francis’s dealings with the Curia and in his attempt to forge a Rule that both Rome and his friars could live with, he certainly dealt with men trained at the new universities.

Francis accepted the validity of what these theologians and canon lawyers were doing and demanded that the friars all respect them. However frustrated he might have been with the canon lawyers at the Curia, he humbly worked with them, and a Rule was promulgated. But he clearly had his misgivings. He wondered about the value of scholarship and subtle definitions if they did not lead to lives more focused on what really mattered—God. One way of putting Francis’s concern into words is that Francis must have wondered about the value of learning and creating definitions of love if such work did not lead to one becoming a better lover.  

Although not really part of the university culture, Dante was nothing if not well educated and widely read. However, that does not mean that he always understood the purpose and goals of his own intellectual capacities and achievements. During the course of his life, he was continually reevaluating his own work, up to and including the fact that he abandoned the Convivio, leaving unfinished the work which was his most systematic attempt to disseminate his wide learning. Seen from the vantage point of the Commedia, the Convivio looks suspiciously like learning divorced from the love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Although the names of the protagonists change between Francis’s and Dante’s lifetimes, what did not change was the violence and factional disputes that took place in and among the Italian city-states. There are numerous stories of Francis bringing peace where there was civic strife. The most famous of Francis’s peacemaking efforts is probably the colorful story of his driving the demons (of faction) from Arezzo, in part because it is depicted in the fresco cycle of Francis’s life in the Upper Church in Assisi. However, Francis also healed civic divisions, according to the sources, in Siena, Bologna, and Assisi.  

The Assisi story is particularly important. Francis lay ill while the bishop and the podestà were at each other’s throats. Since he could

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23 See LM XI, 1.
not go to these two men in person, he wrote a song, now incorporated into the “Canticle of the Creatures,” for one of the brothers to sing to the two combatants. When the two men heard the words that called for forgiveness and reconciliation, they put aside their differences and made peace.\textsuperscript{25} Francis was a successful peacemaker because he was a creative peacemaker. Sometimes peacemaking requires more than simply having one more negotiating session or issuing one more ultimatum. It is clear from even the most cursory reading of the \textit{Inferno} that Dante struggled both in the events in his life and intellectually with similar problems of faction and violence. The \textit{Commedia} details how he had to learn that taking revenge for wrongs done, a formula he followed in the years immediately following his exile from Florence, is not a strategy for peace and security.

If we define the mystic’s quest as the search for union with God, then certainly Francis was a mystic. The stigmatization becomes the ultimate evidence for Francis’s union with Christ. Certainly Bonaventure sees the reception of the stigmata in that way as it becomes the centerpiece for his \textit{Itinerarium Mentis}, a detailed exposition of the mystical ascent written while he was staying at La Verna in imitation of Francis.\textsuperscript{26} However, Francis is quite unlike many of the well-known mystics of the past, especially those in the monastic tradition. Francis lived in the world and was a preacher. He was neither hermit nor cenobite. He was first and foremost an itinerant preacher and, hence, a talker. Nevertheless, the reception of the stigmata was not an isolated event in Francis’s life. Rather his whole life made up the quest that culminated at La Verna. As Thomas of Celano aptly put it, “Francis was always on his cross.”\textsuperscript{27} One does not unite with God in isolation from the way one leads one’s life.

In an important essay, Evert Cousins gets at the heart of this connection in describing an aspect of Francis’s mysticism, what he terms the “mysticism of the historical event.”\textsuperscript{28} This kind of experience of the divine, as Cousins describes it, is open to ordinary people, not

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\textsuperscript{25} This part of the “Canticle of the Creatures,” also called the “Canticle of Brother Sun,” can be found in \textit{Francis of Assisi: The Saint}, 114, verses 10–11.


\textsuperscript{27} I Cel 115.

just ascetics. When Francis brought an ox and an ass and a manger to the Christmas Eve mass at Greccio, he was using material things as a means for those in attendance to go beyond commemorating Christ’s birth to experiencing it through the use of these props that helped people to “be there.” Thomas of Celano understands this when he switches to the present tense when narrating the events at Greccio and by proclaiming that, “Greccio is made a new Bethlehem.”

By providing props for ordinary people to share in the experience of God, Francis is, to use a modern word, “democratizing” the mystical quest. Of course, he is building on ideas especially central to the Cistercian writers of the twelfth century; one thinks immediately of works such as Aelred of Rievaulx’s *A Rule of Life for a Recluse.* However, Francis is removing and adapting this mystical way from the cloister and from those who read Latin to a lay and vernacular world. Although Dante was a reader of Bernard of Clairvaux and other great Christian mystics, he was of course a layperson, active in the world of politics and a husband and father. As he comes to understand that ultimately what he seeks is experience of and union with God, he will look not only to the Abbot of Clairvaux but to Francis as a mentor and guide on that path to the eternal.

**From Dante to Saint Francis**

Thirty-nine years after Francis died naked on the ground outside the Portiuncula, a tiny church just beyond the walls of Assisi, Dante Alighieri was born in the large and bustling city of Florence. Everyone knows that he wrote the monumental epic poem which has come to be called the *Divine Comedy,* in which a pilgrim (also named Dante) takes a trip to the three parts of the Christian afterlife; to hell, purgatory, and to heaven. We can begin our discussion of this poem by concentrating on one particular aspect of that poem that will be especially useful in our discussion of what Dante learned from Francis. When we teach the poem to our own students, we often begin by asking the following question: “What do you need to be a card-carrying member of Dante's afterlife?” The answer to this question is

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29 I Cel 85.
obvious, but it is also instructive. First of all, you need to be dead. And second, you need to be dead by the year 1300, which follows from the fact that 1300 is the year in which the poet Dante sets the poem. Viewed this way, the entire poem can be seen, and seen accurately, as Dante's attempt to answer the question that we set out in our opening paragraph: "How do we learn from people different from ourselves?" For Dante, the pilgrim meets, speaks to, and learns from an astonishing variety of people from all places and times. He meets with people who lived during his own lifetime and who are a part of his own culture. He meets people from different cultures who lived long before he did. In fact, the poem includes, as "characters," Adam and Eve (one cannot get further back than that); it includes the local town drunk from Dante's own "town," the city of Florence; and it includes an amazingly wide variety of people who lived in between, both real and fictional. (One of the daring moves of the Comedy is the way in which it fails to distinguish between what we would call real and fictional characters, as though somehow Shakespeare and Hamlet could occupy the same plane of reality.)

So the next question is, once you have your membership card for Dante's afterlife, what determines in which part you show up? In other words, what are the differences among the folks he meets in hell, the folks he meets in purgatory, and the folks he meets in heaven? When we ask this question of our students, the answer we often get is only half right: "In hell we meet sinners." Right, we say. But then we quickly add, to the confusion of our students, that in Purgatory and in Paradise we meet sinners as well—many every bit as bad as those we have met in hell. Sinning turns out not to be a fundamental distinction at all. Rather, the distinction on which much of the structure of the Comedy hinges is that, in hell, we meet sinners who have not repented. In Purgatory and in Heaven, we meet sinners who have. This is such an important distinction because it speaks not only to what Dante can learn from the characters that he meets in his journey through the afterlife but how he learns as well. A post-1950 example might help to make the point. A contemporary ethicist speaking about his own education during the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's has memorably said that when he learned how lethal racial hatred was, "I did not learn it so much from the sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr. as from the video clips of Bull Connor." (Bull Connor, as some younger readers may not know, was the grimly racist sheriff in Birmingham during the civil
rights movement.) But then he goes on to say “But King had seen Connor first, and it was his sermons which cued us to look at what we had previously ignored.” Dante encounters figures in Hell so that he (and we) can see the Bull Connors of history. He encounters figures in Purgatory and in Heaven so that he can see the Martin Luther Kings (certainly a sinner himself) of history. The passage goes on to say, again drawing on the dramatic history of the civil rights movement, “I learned that it was lethal when I heard of the four youngsters killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombings in Birmingham: not from looking at the mangled bodies of the four children who died there, but from imagining the mangled selves of the adults whose readiness to destroy others whom they resented had backfired upon themselves and deadened them.”

In the pilgrim’s extended tour of Hell, some of the most stark and effective scenes in all of literature, Dante “imagines” the mangled selves whose evil, throughout history, has backfired and deadened them. In this imagined Hell, Dante the pilgrim learns the quintessentially Christian lesson that the primary victim of real, radical, hardcore evil is always its perpetrator. Learning that lesson—though it is a lesson he learns only very slowly—is what allows Dante the pilgrim to make a conversion. By the time he gets to Heaven, he has learned what to avoid and why. Only now is he able to learn what to emulate.

It is helpful to consider one other issue in thinking about the imaginative sweep of Dante’s cast of characters. Between Adam and the year 1300, there are an awful lot of dead people. Even in a poem as vast and ambitious as the Commedia, choices had to be made because the pilgrim could only meet, talk to, and respond to a very small fraction of that huge “set.” How did he decide on the “subset,” how did he decide whom to include and whom to leave out? He wants to give a sense of covering all the bases, that is, of looking at sin and virtue systematically in his vast poem. By creating elaborate divisions and subdivisions in all the realms of the afterlife, Dante the poet does a masterful job of selecting the right person for the right subdivision: Francesca da Rimini, People Magazine headliner for 1287 as his poster girl for lust, Judas the betrayer of Christ as a representative for treachery, and so on down a very long list. But something else

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is at work as well. These folks not only work on the level of typical, representative embodiments of sin, helping Dante to draw for his readers a kind of universal picture of the nature of evil. They are also sinners who have the most to teach the pilgrim as a unique character with his own history and his own biography. What are the sins that are most likely to trip him up? For all that Dante the poet is able to conjure towards the illusion of covering everything, of presenting a kind of summa peccatorum, and later in the poem a summa virtutum, the closer one looks, the more one sees in these examples “Ghosts of Christmas Future” for the Pilgrim—what his life might have become without the conversion that the poem narrates. And, when we get to Paradise: What are the virtues he most needs to emulate? It is this question especially that which brings us back to Francis of Assisi.

There are many ways to find the influence of Francis on Dante and his great poem. Biographical information should not be dismissed out of hand. Dante is buried in a Franciscan church and his daughter became a Franciscan sister. There is even evidence that Dante himself might have been a lay or Third Order Franciscan. And we can find traces of Francis and his order throughout the Commedia. Nick Havely, in his recent book Dante and the Franciscans, opens out a great many previously unsuspected Franciscan moments in the poem, and in the process does readers of the poem the ambiguous service of showing us how we are still a long way from fully connecting to all of them. But we can certainly mention a few of the more obvious ones. Francis himself shows up for a cameo appearance in the Inferno, in a story of the struggle for the soul of the wicked and self-serving Franciscan, Guido da Montefeltrio, who winds up with the fraudulent in the eighth circle. Guido’s pride and arrogance can be seen in much sharper relief when viewed against the backdrop of Franciscan concerns that subtly permeate the canto. Franciscan moments likewise abound in Purgatory, especially in Dante’s discussion of the virtue of humility on the terrace of the proud. Dante’s paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer in Canto 11 on this

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terrace combines a Franciscan moment—for Francis himself had written a paraphrase of the Lord’s prayer—\(^{31}\) with a strong Franciscan echo: Dante’s paraphrase of the Lord’s prayer includes a clear echo of Francis’s most famous poem, the “Canticle of the Creatures.” And Francis himself is given a particularly exalted place in heaven toward the end of the Paradiso, where he is placed just above St. Benedict and just below St. John the Baptist, in a section reserved for the great founders of religious orders.

But the most fruitful place to understand and evaluate what Dante learned from Francis is to see what Dante actually says about Francis when he speaks about him at length. Though the pilgrim does not talk directly to Francis in Paradiso, he listens as another important character in the poem—no less a figure than Thomas Aquinas—recounts his life in the 11th canto. In this biographical sketch from Paradiso, he tells Francis’s story in seventy-five lines; from the point of view of the poem, that is a lot of ink: in fact, it is the longest purely biographical sketch in a poem which is over 14,000 lines long. But Dante, like all medieval—and all modern—biographers of Francis, had hundreds of stories to choose from in deciding what to include about Francis and his extraordinary life. As his principle of selection, he recounted those stories from which the pilgrim is able to draw special significance, stories which spoke to him and his situation. These also turn out to be stories which speak to his readers, then and now. Thus, even though every story Dante used in putting together his picture of Francis was already well known, his account of Francis’s life is unique, a kind of testament of what he learned from Francis that transcended the mundane and temporary. Another way of putting this is to ask two questions: First, why are the virtues of Francis important for Dante? And second, why are the virtues of Francis important for us, the readers of Dante? These questions can provide an implicit guide for the reading of Dante’s Francis.

Dante hears the life of Francis in the Circle of the Sun, among the great practitioners of the virtue of wisdom. This is totally appropriate for at least two reasons. First, Francis is himself described as a son by Thomas Aquinas (who in turn takes this imagery directly from Dante’s chief source for his account of Francis’s life, Bonaventure’s Legenda Maior):

\(^{31}\) Translated in Francis of Assisi: The Saint, 150–60.
Di questa costa, là dov’ ella frange
più sua rattezza, nacque al mondo un sole,
come fa questo talvolta il Gange.33 (Paradiso 11.49–51)

(From this slope where most it breaks its steepness a sun arose on the
world, even as this is wont to rise from the Ganges.)

The passage makes the connection between the two suns explicit—
between Francis and the Sun of the fourth heaven, the sun that pro-
vides heat and light to the universe—by his use of the word “questo,”
reminding the reader of precisely where we are in the journey—we
are speaking of one sun while we are “physically” in the other. Just
as one sun provides the cosmos with heat and light, so does the other:

Non era ancor molto lontan da’ l’orto,
ch’el cominciò a far sentir la terra
de la sua gran virtute alcun conforto. (Paradiso 11.55–57).

(He was not yet very far from his rising when he began to make the
carth feel, from his great virtue, a certain strengthening.)

Just as the sun of the heavens provides Dante and his readers the
vantage point to contemplate the cosmos and to move from the cre-
ated cosmos to its creator, seeing God as an artist and the cosmos
as his great work of art, we are asked to see Francis, sealed by God
with the miniature sun-like imprints of the stigmata, as another apt
example of God’s artistry, and we are asked as well to contemplate
and to learn from Francis as we learn from contemplating the heav-
en. Both the overture to the Circle of the Sun in Canto 10 and
the description of the stigmatization of Francis in Canto 11 show
God imprinting himself on his creation.

Leva dunque, lettor, a l’alte rote
meco la vista, dritto a quella parte
dove l’un moto e l’altro si percuote;
è li comincia a vagheggiar ne l’arte
dì quel maestro che dentro a sé l’ama,
tanto che mai da lei l’occhio non parte. (Paradiso 10.7–12)

(Lift then your sight with me, reader, to the lofty wheels, straight to
that part where the one motion strikes the other; and amorously there
begin to gaze upon that Master’s art who within himself so loves it
that His eye never turns from it.)

33 Text and translation of the Commedia are from the edition of Charles S. Singleton
nel crudo sasso intra Tevero e Arno
da Cristo prese l’ultimo sigillo,
che le sue membra due anno portarono. (Paradiso 11.106-18)

(then on the harsh rock between Tiber and Arno he received from
Christ the last seal, which his limbs bore for two years.)

Second, Francis’s most important work, itself one of the masterpieces of
Italian poetry, “The Canticle of the Creatures,” is also known as the
“The Canticle of the Sun,” or the “Canticle of Brother Sun.” And
for good reason. As Alessandro Vettori puts it in his recent study of
the poem:

Significantly, the comments pertaining to the sun occupy more poetic
space than those of other creatures. The sun is the first creature in
the list. The mention of the sun at the beginning of the poem, “messer
lo frate sole,” matches God’s first utterance, “Let there be light,” on
the first day of creation (Gen. 1:3). The sun rightfully deserves a privi-
teged position, since it mirrors the role of God; the sun’s function in
nature resembles that of God in creation, as origin and sustenance of
all creatures.36

As the beginning of Canto 10, quoted above, demonstrates, the sun
has exactly the same position in Dante’s poem: it “mirrors the role
of God.” And it is here through the vantage point provided by the
Circle of the Sun that we are presented with one of the poem’s most
extended discourses on the nature of the Trinitarian God. The cos-
mos, as an intricate interrelationship of parts to the whole consisting
of both sameness and difference, is meant to lead to the
contemplation of God, understood in Christian Trinitarian terms
both as sameness in difference and as an intricate loving relation-
ship of parts to the whole. Thus it would not be wrong to see the
Circle of the Sun as Dante’s re-writing of the Canticle of the Sun,
another homage to the Francis who is presented so prominently
there. If this seems like a bit of a stretch to the modern reader, it
may in part be because it is harder for us than for Dante and his
original audience to see the sophisticated cosmological implications
of the “Canticle of the Creatures,” a poem that is frequently seen
as charming and even forceful, but like the caricature version of its
author, somewhat unsophisticated and naive. But as Vettori has

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36 Poets of Divine Love: Franciscan Mystical Poetry of the Thirteenth Century (New York:
Fordham University Press, 2004), 81.
demonstrated, the sophistication of the Canticle is due in no small part to the way the poem fleshes out an important Franciscan theme: "The recovery of the harmony governing the universe at creation, which the Book of Genesis identifies with the specific locus of the earthly paradise, represents one of the most significant goals for Franciscanism in its beginning stages." His description of the way the "Canticle of Brother Sun" achieves this harmony through music sounds as though it could just as easily be a gloss to the *Commedia*:

Francis's passion for music naturally overflows into his poetic production. "The Canticle of Brother Sun" is a song that embraces all three types of Boethian music. It exalts the beauty of cosmic harmony as a chief quality of Franciscan theology; it displays the poet's internal equilibrium of body and soul, which Francis strove to achieve from the beginning of his spiritual ascent... and, finally, it features a musical quality with an internal rhythm and a refrain.

Boethius is of course one of the sages especially singled out in Thomas Aquinas's description of the theologians who are part of his "wheel" in Canto 10 in the Circle of the Sun, and Boethian ideas of harmony permeate the *Commedia*.

And music itself is one of the important themes in the Circle of the Sun, from Canto 10 with its powerful description of the Song of the Bride of God (139–148) to Canto 13 with the Song of the Trinity (25–27).

One of the stories that Dante chooses to dramatize in his life of Francis in the *Paradiso* is his meeting with the sultan, described as follows in the *Commedia*:

E poi che, per la sete del martiro,
Ne la presenza del Soldan superba
predeco Cristo e li altri che'l seguiro,
e per trovare a conversione acerba
troppo la gente e per non stare indarno,

(And when, in thirst for martyrdom, he in the proud presence of the Sultan, had preached Christ and them that followed him, and, finding the people too unripe for conversion and in order not to stay in vain, had returned to harvest of the Italian fields.)

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79 Another extremely important Boethian moment in the poem is the structure of the Circle of Mars: the discussion of contingency at the beginning of *Paradiso* 17 is especially dependent on Boethius.
This is an interesting story about Francis, one that does not appear in all the sources, although it appears frequently in the visual tradition. (It is found in both narratives of Francis’s life in the Bardi chapel and in the Assisi frescoes, to choose three important examples.)  

Francis was looking for martyrdom, the sources tell us, and this seemed as good a way as any to find it. But he failed to find it at the hands of the Sultan because God had something more interesting in mind for him, a unique kind of spiritual martyrdom. In another scene from the life of Francis (one also described very vividly by Dante in this section of the Paradiso), Francis achieves a unique kind of martyrdom by receiving on his body the very wounds of Christ, the stigmata, which, as Dante puts it, was a seal which he wore for the final two years of his life. Francis’s own attempt at martyrdom failed. God’s succeeded. Francis comes back from this failed attempt at martyrdom—which was also a failed attempt at converting the Sultan—to continue his defining task: to preach penance and Christ crucified to those closer to home, to embody in his life the virtues of poverty and humility and simplicity which created an example for all of Europe to follow. He returned, in Dante’s words, to reap a crop in the Italian fields. This story becomes especially relevant to Dante (and to us) if we keep in mind that the background for this encounter between Francis and the Sultan, between Christianity and Islam, is the Crusades. Indeed, it is in the midst of the fifth crusade that Francis makes his journey.

After the Circle of the Sun, Dante’s next step in his journey through Paradiso is, not coincidentally, to visit his great, great-grandfather Cacciaguida, in the Circle of Mars; for his great, great-grandfather, as it turns out, was a crusader. What Dante the pilgrim learns from this noble ancestor, who in fact, at least within the fiction of the poem, died as a martyr in the holy land—who “succeeded” in other words where Francis “failed”—is that his own mission is to be a crusader. But it is to be a crusader understood in a metaphorical way, a way which makes a good deal more sense if we keep in mind

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90 For the panel painting in the Bardi Chapel and the fresco in Assisi, see William R. Cook, Images of St Francis of Assisi in Painting, Stone and Glass from the Earliest Images to ca. 1320 (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1999), #68 and #25. For the Giotto frescoes in the Bardi Chapel, see William R. Cook, “Giotto and the Figure of St. Francis” in The Cambridge Companion to Giotto ed. Anne Derbes and Mark Sondors (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 142–56.
the model of Francis: Dante is to become a crusader through the word rather than through the sword. Dante, like Francis, will suffer a spiritual martyrdom, in his case not the stigmata but the martyrdom of his own exile. And Dante, in learning to turn the martyrdom of this bitter exile into a true pilgrimage, must preach the vision he has learned in his visit to the afterlife. No less than Francis, he must return from his journey to preach, in order “to reap a crop in the Italian field.” He will reap his crop by sowing the seeds of the Commedia itself.

Had Francis received his martyrdom at the hands of the sultan, Dante implies, his work as preacher of the word would have been cut short. But because this work allowed Francis to do what he had been called upon early in his life to do, to rebuild God’s church, Francis’s mission becomes a model for Dante’s mission as preacher of the word through his *poema sacro*, just as Francis’s virtues are a model for what Dante needs in order to carry out that mission. Francis endures the spiritual but no less real martyrdom of the stigmata. Dante learns from Cacciaguida that he will suffer the spiritual martyrdom of exile, but also that his mission can only be accomplished by embracing his martyrdom rather than fleeing from it. Only in this way will he be able to turn exile into pilgrimage. Cacciaguida is nothing if not forthright about the bitterness of exile as he opens the book of the pilgrim’s future. But this bitterness is precisely what will give Dante’s words the authenticity of lived experience.

The story of Francis and the sultan is not simply the story of a quest for martyrdom. It is the story of a gesture of reconciliation as well, a gesture that provides a real alternative to the violence of the Crusades, and was understood this way in early Franciscan documents. In the earliest surviving rule for the order that Francis founded (1221), we are told that those “Going among the ‘Saracens and other Non Believers’ . . . can live spiritually among the Saracens and non-believers in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments and disputes but to be subject to every creature for God’s sake . . .”11 No wonder Francis was not able to win a martyr’s palm. He came not to dispute, let alone to fight, but to speak—and to listen. Francis fashions himself into a new kind of crusader, an anti-crusader, who went among the Sultan as a peacemaker and as a reconciler, and

11 *In Francis of Assisi: The Saint*, 74.
the rule of 1221 suggests that this is an appropriate model for the brothers who are to follow him. President Bush’s unfortunate use of the word “Crusade” in the wake of the tragedy of 9/11 suggests that the collective attention span of the Christian West is a lot shorter than that of the Islamic East. The Islamic world remembers all too well what the word “Crusade” originally meant. The fact that a Franciscan alternative to the crusade mentality existed, and that this alternative was in some way sensed by Dante, who learns from Francis that the sword inevitably hurts the one who wields it, can perhaps be seen even today as a sign of hope, a sign that there are other places to seek solutions besides the sword. In any case, it is in this section of the poem that Dante learns that the sword is the problem, not the solution, because in this section of the poem he explicitly renounces the partisan politics which can only be sustained by the sword, and learns that his weapon is the pen.\textsuperscript{42}

The central image in the life of Francis is the cross. It is the cross which speaks to him at the beginning of his life and it is the wounds of the cross which are incorporated into his body toward the end. From beginning to end, his life is best understood, as Bonaventure makes clear, through a series of appearances of the cross, and these appearances represent a deeper and deeper assimilation of the meaning of the cross in his life, so that finally Francis cannot be understood apart from putting on the cross of Christ. In the movement of the \textit{Paradiso} from the Circle of the Sun to the Circle of Mars, Dante pays homage to this aspect of Francis’s life and connects the two circles by having a cross speak to the pilgrim as well. Francis’s life may be presented in the Circle of the Sun, but it is surely not left behind in the Circle of Mars. For Caccia-guida speaks to Dante from within the cross that bisects the planet Mars and that is a mosaic of the souls who are present there. Thus it would not be wrong to suggest that Caccia-guida, speaking out of the cross of Mars,

\textsuperscript{42} Michael F. Cusato has recently proposed that there are profound connections between Francis’ encounter with the Sultan and his reception of the stigmata on Mount La Verna. Those connections are certainly not without implications for Dante and the way that the stigmatization of Francis is incorporated into the \textit{Commedia}. See Michael F. Cusato, “Of Snakes and Angels: The Mystical Experience Behind the Stigmatization Narrative of 1 Celano,” in Jacques Dalarun, Michael F. Cusato, Carla Salvati, \textit{The Stigmata of Francis of Assisi: New Studies, New Perspectives} (St. Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute Publication, 2006), 29–74. For a bibliography of recent work on the account of Francis’ meeting with the Sultan, see p. 61, n. 89.
does for Dante the pilgrim what the cross at the church of San Damiano did for Francis at the beginning of his conversion: Caccia-
guida presents Dante with his mission. It is interesting in this con-
text to note that in the third fresco of the life of Francis in the upper 
church of the Basilica in Assisi, Francis sees crusader crosses in a 
dream when he is a youth and thinks that his goal will be to become 
a knight, a crusader. Only gradually does he learn that his mission is 
to turn from a knight of the world to a knight of Christ. Something 
like that same pattern can be discerned in the Commedia, as Dante 
learns the limitations of violence, and learns to pick up his own cross.
Dante shows us in Inferno 10 what happens when people focus on 
differences and refuse to consider any commonality. Farinata and 
Cavalcante, despite commonalities of citizenship and even of kinship, 
take partisanship to its ultimate extreme by refusing to recognize 
each other’s existence. As eternal tomb-mates, they embody the absur-
dity of Guelf-Ghibelline quarrels by showing how they lead to an 
inevitable solipsistic conclusion. Communities by definition involve 
living with each other. Hell, at least in Dante’s manifestation, is all 
about what happens when one refuses to acknowledge “otherness.” 
One way that Dante learned from Francis, not overlooking all of 
their differences in lifestyle, circumstances, and education, was to 
figure out what he did have in common with Francis, and how to 
use this commonality to continue a tradition, a trajectory which 
Francis uniquely embodied. Dante and Francis fundamentally shared 
“creature-hood” (recall Francis’s “Canticle of the Creatures”), human-
ity, Christianity. Francis and Dante were heirs of much common tra-
dition and culture, coming from classical, biblical, and earlier Christian 
roots and coming from the land and tongue of Italy. It means a 
great deal that they prayed the same prayers, visited the same shrines, 
and ate the same Eucharistic banquet. But what, finally, does Dante 
learn from Francis? Granting all that they shared, the question then 
becomes “How did Dante take the quintessential Franciscan virtues 
and apply them to his own life, recognizing the necessary transposi-
tion he needed to apply them to his changed circumstances?” Dante 
did not put on a rough habit and sandals and preach in the towns of 
Central Italy, retiring to caves from time to time for periods of 
extreme asceticism and prayer. He did not found a religious order.

6 See Cook, Early Images, #25.
He did not receive the wounds of the stigmata. But he took what was central to Francis and made it his own in some powerful ways.

We have already suggested that the virtues that Francis preaches are precisely the virtues that Dante needs. He needs humility because pride is his besetting sin, his great temptation, the great temptation for all people of great talent, but especially for a man who cannot help but know how good he really is, and for a man who temperamentally seems almost eager to scorn those who have been given lesser gifts. The Francis who welcomes sister death is Dante’s great teacher, because for Francis humility springs from a recognition that our common humanity reduces differences of accomplishment to incidentals. If Dante needs Francis to teach him the virtue of humility because of nature, he needs Francis to teach him the virtue of poverty because of nurture, which is to say the circumstances of his life. Dante, the poet of exile, must learn to do without. Franciscan poverty teaches Dante that it is possible to face the circumstances of his exile by embracing them, as Francis literally embraces his “lady poverty,” whom he marries in Dante’s daring version of the story when he, Francis, strips himself naked in front of his father.

It might be worthwhile to track these virtues in Dante and their relation to the poem in a bit more detail. Some readers of the poem accept Dante’s fiction at face value and have no particular problem with the fact that he assigns real people, many of whom were known to him personally, to all the realms of the afterlife. There are others though, who are troubled, indeed in some cases deeply troubled, by the fact that Dante gets to play God. What gives him the right to judge, and to pretend that his judgments and God’s are the same? How, after all, can he or anyone really know that Boniface VIII will be down with the Simoniae or that Guido da Montefeltro is in the company of the False Counselors? If we look at it in this way, one needs to search for some sign of humility to rescue a poem which might otherwise be seen as an act of terminal pride. In Dante’s afterlife, there are many sinners who exhibit just the kind of pride to which Dante himself stands in danger of succumbing. Perhaps the best example is Ulysses, whose journey to physical and moral destruction is also the journey of the pride of unfettered intellect. Without humility, Dante’s journey in constructing the Comedy and Ulysses’ journey into unknown territory are the same. The poet knows this and builds it into the fabric of the poem, so that Dante’s journey is Ulysses’ journey rewritten in the spirit. How does he accomplish this?
Without suggesting that these are in any way exclusive, let us suggest two answers to the question. First, unlike Ulysses, who goes out on his own, Dante puts himself under the yoke of those who have come before him, as seen in his three guides and what they represent. He is not allowed to chart his own course, but must respond to the directions which have been made available to him by his own patient study. It will not do to say that in constructing these guides Dante was simply enabling himself to say what he wanted to say in any case. The Dante who wrote the poem is the Dante who is unmatched in his ability to mine the traditions that he draws from, and the more carefully one reads the intertextual resonances of the poem that constitute the play among these traditions, the more one is astonished at just how careful a student and a scholar Dante was, submitting himself to their discipline before he engages them in debate. They represent the limits that Dante builds into his journey.

Second, in presenting the poem as the conversion story of Dante the pilgrim, he shows himself to be guilty of the very sins for which he judges others, opening his worst self up for our scrutiny, and proclaiming by the chain of intercessors that comes to his rescue that it is grace that will allow him to overcome these sins, not personal accomplishment. Like the Francis who says that if great sinners had been given the same graces that he had, they would have responded to them better than he did, Dante asserts that his very salvation is more an act of mercy than of merit, and without that mercy he would be with the likes of Farinata, Pier delle Vigne, and Ulysses. Like Augustine’s *Confessions*, the poem calls attention to the sinfulness of its protagonist, and presents itself as an extended attempt at a self-scrutiny impossible without the virtue of humility.

The virtue of poverty has a very important place in Dante’s conversion, as we have already suggested. Though the condition of poverty was not voluntary for Dante as it was for Francis, his acceptance of that condition is, and is tied to his mission as a poet of exile. Dante did not ask to follow the hard path of exile, coming to know “how salty is the taste of another’s bread and how hard the path to descend and mount by another man’s stairs” (*Paradiso* 17.58–60). But this is the condition that will enable him to see things as they are, the condition that provides him with the vantage point that will enable him to write the poem. The poverty of exile is a lens for Dante to see reality more clearly. It also provides an important credential for Dante. The *Commedia* presents a sustained critique of
the practices of the institutional Church. In a fairly radical way, that 
critique is tied to the wealth of the Church, a wealth that keeps the 
Church from focusing on its spiritual mission, a wealth that puts the 
Church where it does not belong—in the midst of deadly and pro-
longed power struggles—a wealth, finally, that forces the Church to 
ignore its origins and its destiny. Whether in the scathing indictment 
of papal greed and nepotism in *Inferno* 19 and papal power in *Inferno* 
27, the apocalyptic reflections on the evils of the Donation of 
Constantine in *Inferno* 19 and *Purgatorio* 32, or the denunciation of 
Simony in Beatrice’s final speech in *Paradiso* 30, the poem implies 
that a new commitment to poverty is the communal as well as indi-
vidual starting point for Church reform. Just as in a general way 
Dante cannot play the part of the prophet without purifying his own 
life—his conversion is the precondition for his prophetic denuncia-
tions of the evils of his own time—in specific terms Dante cannot 
authentically and convincingly indict the Church for its wealth with-
out his own embrace of poverty. In this, Francis is his teacher, and 
he has learned well from him.

Clearly a number of the important ways of looking at the *Commedia*
and its creator come into sharper focus when seen in relation to 
their Franciscan roots. To see Dante as a peacemaker, to see Dante 
as a “cosmic poet,” to see Dante as a crusader, is to see that his 
life and his great work owe an enormous amount to Francis. And 
while it would be wrong to suggest that Dante’s very vocation as a 
vernacular poet is uniquely Franciscan, it is hard to resist the ana-
logy that Francis is to the vernacularization of piety (and of poetry) 
as Dante is to the vernacularization of poetry (and of piety, claim-
ing as he does for his work the title of “poema sacro”).

To state the obvious, these virtues are no less necessary now as 
well. Students need the humility to see that they can learn from 
their teachers. Children need to have the humility to see that they 
can learn from their parents. But teachers, if they are to be good 
teachers, must not only learn from their students, but they need the 
humility to know that they have to learn from their students. And 
parents, if they are to be good parents, must have the humility to 
know that the most important lessons they will ever be taught will 
be from their children. Francis went to the poor not only for what 
he could do for them, but also for what they could do for him. If 
we expand this notion to our own role as students of Francis and 
of Dante, we can see from Francis and from Dante’s appropriation
of Francis that we too can learn from the most unlikely sources. We, too, as teachers and merchants and plumbers and rocket scientists, as married or single people, as Christians or non-Christians, can live lives of the 21st century that are in certain ways guided by and in imitation of these bookends of the 13th century: Francis and Dante. If we heed them, we discover that they rank with the great teachers and examples of human history.