

“Sun”
Guy P. Raffa

Thomas Aquinas and his circle. Cantos 10-11 and 13

The spokesman for the first circle of twelve wise spirits in the solar sphere is Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), who was canonized in 1323 and given the title *Doctor Angelicus* ("Angelic Doctor") by Pope Pius V in 1567. Consistent with the themes of harmony and reconciliation in the cantos of the Sun, Thomas, a Dominican brother, is assigned the task of eulogizing the founder of the Franciscan order, Francis of Assisi (canto 11). This function reflects Church practice in Dante's day of having the feast days of Francis and Dominic celebrated by a member of the other, "rival" order. Thomas also contributes to an important theme in the *Paradiso* by harshly criticizing his own order for its current failings (11.124-39).

Thomas Aquinas was arguably the most important Christian theologian of the late Middle Ages, and his work certainly exerted immense influence on Dante. A master of what came to be known as Scholasticism, he undertook the ambitious task of using the teachings of rational philosophy (primarily Aristotle's works) in the service of religious faith and doctrine. (The widely used modern edition [Blackfriars] of his monumental *Summa theologiae* contains 61 volumes.) Thomas studied under **Albert of Cologne** ("Albert the Great"), another prolific churchman dedicated to reconciling Aristotelian philosophy with Christian thought, and he taught in Paris and Naples (close to his birthplace in southern Italy) in addition to serving as a papal theologian in Rome. Albert, a fellow Dominican, now stands immediately to the right of his more famous pupil (10.97-9). To Thomas' immediate left stands **Siger of Brabant** (the last spirit introduced in the circle: 10.133-8), whose teachings Thomas vehemently opposed when they both taught in Paris. Thomas and Siger, now at peace in paradise, were intellectual enemies in life because Siger adhered to controversial theories attributed to Averroës, such as the notion of an active universal intellect (implying immortality of the human species but not necessarily the individual soul). Thomas pays special homage to two members of his circle: he praises **Solomon**, the biblical king and now the most beautiful of the solar spirits, for his love (as the poet-lover of the Song of Songs) and his wisdom (he was thought to have authored the Book of Wisdom, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) (10.109-14); and he singles out **Boethius**, author of the highly influential *Consolation of Philosophy* whose recognition of virtue and goodness even in the face of "martyrdom and exile" resonates with Dante's own experience (10.121-30).

The other bright lights in Thomas' circle are: **Gratian**, a Benedictine monk

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renowned for his contribution to canon law; **Peter Lombard**, a theologian and bishop who gathered writings of Church authorities into a popular textbook (*Sentences*); **Dionysius the Areopagite**, a biblical convert (Acts 17:34) to whom the Middle Ages mistakenly attributed authorship of influential works of Christian Neoplatonism, including one on angels (*On the Celestial Hierarchy*); the Christian historian **Paulus Orosius**; **Isidore of Seville**, author of a widely consulted encyclopedic work (*Etymologies*); the **Venerable Bede**, who wrote the *Ecclesiastical History of England*; and **Richard of St. Victor**, a twelfth-century mystic known for his biblical commentaries.

Bonaventure and his circle. Canto 12

Bonaventure (c. 1217-74), who joined the Franciscans in 1243 and became the order's minister-general in 1257, wrote a biography of Francis (an important source for Dante's presentation in canto 11) and a mystical account of an ascent to God (*Journey of the Mind to God*) that may have influenced, in a general way, Dante's conception of the *Comedy*. Bonaventure, born Giovanni Fidanza near Orvieto (in central Italy), was canonized in 1482 and later given the title "Seraphic Doctor" by Pope Sixtus V in 1587.

As the second ring of wise spirits surrounds and mirrors the first ring, so Bonaventure performs a role in canto 12 similar to that of Thomas Aquinas in canto 11. Just as Thomas, a Dominican, told the life of Francis, so Bonaventure sings the praises of Dominic. And Thomas' rebuke of the current state of his own order is now matched by Bonaventure's unsparing complaint against his fellow Franciscans (12.112-26): he is particularly critical of those who distort Francis' message and turn it to their own advantage either by not adhering closely enough to the Rule (with its emphasis on poverty) or by imposing too narrow an interpretation of the Rule (an accusation leveled at the so-called "Spirituals"). (Umberto Eco's 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose* and its 1986 film version dramatize a later stage of this medieval debate and include at least one major participant, Ubertino da Casale, indicted in Bonaventure's complaint.) Dante further harmonizes the two solar circles of wise spirits, and he further develops the theme of harmony itself, by staging a heavenly reconciliation between Bonaventure and the abbot **Joachim of Flora**. Appearing right next to Bonaventure and praised now for his "prophetic spirit" (12.139-41), Joachim articulated a Trinitarian theory--an imminent age of spiritual renewal (following the ages of the Father and of the Son)--that held great appeal for the Franciscan Spirituals but was condemned by the Church (1215) and later

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criticized by Bonaventure himself. Dante perhaps shows some support for Joachim's prophesied age of the Holy Spirit when he has a third ring of spirits begin to come into focus just as the travelers leave the Sun and enter Mars (14.70-8).

Also appearing in Bonaventure's circle are two of Francis' earliest disciples (**Illuminato** and **Augustine**) as well as the following wise individuals: **Hugh of St. Victor**, a mystical theologian famous for his encyclopedic *Didascalicon*; a learned churchman renowned for his appetite for books ("**Peter the Eater**"); Pope John XXI, who died in 1277 under a collapsed ceiling only eight months after his election to the papacy and was better known as **Peter of Spain** for his writings on medicine, theology, and philosophy (e.g., the "twelve books" [12.134-5] of his popular treatise on logic); **Nathan**, a biblical prophet, showed wisdom and valor in his actions: he righteously rebuked King David for callously causing the death of Bathsheba's husband and then taking her as his own wife (she was pregnant with David's child) (2 Sam. 11-12), and he made David fulfill his promise of having Solomon, son of David and Bathsheba (and the most beautiful light within Dante's first ring of solar spirits), take the throne as the next king (1 Kings 1); **Anselm**, a Benedictine abbot and later the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote several important theological treatises, including an influential account of the necessity of the incarnation (*Why God Became a Man*); **John Chrysostom**, a leader of the early Greek Church (Archbishop of Constantinople) known for his moral stands (he critiqued Church corruption and abuses of the ruling class) and his accomplished preaching (*Chrysostom* means "golden-mouthed"); the Roman scholar **Donatus** wrote a popular textbook on Latin grammar (the "first art") praised by St. Jerome (who translated the Bible into Latin); **Rabanus Maurus**, a Benedictine abbot and archbishop (Mainz) of the ninth century, was acclaimed as one of his age's most erudite individuals for his encyclopedic and theological works.

Francis of Assisi. Canto 11.37-117

Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican, tells the story of Francis of Assisi, the man who, filled with "seraphic ardor" (*Par.* 11.37) founded the mendicant order that bears his name. Born in 1182 Francis arose, like a sun, from Assisi, an Umbrian town (in central Italy) located across the valley from Perugia on the fertile slope below Mount Subasio between the Topino river and its tributary (the Chiascio), which descends from the hilltop chosen by the blessed Ubaldo (bishop of Gubbio, 1129-60) as the site for his hermitage. Thomas, relating the town's name to *ascesi* ("I arose"), says the place would most accurately be called "Orient"--that is, the East (here indicated by the Ganges

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river in India)--since this is where the physical sun rises (*Par.* 11.43-54). Francis, in fact, authored a famous prayer-poem, "Canticle of Brother Sun" (also known as "Canticle of the Creatures"), in which he praises God for providing humankind with the beauty and beneficent resources of the natural world, which Francis refers to as his siblings (including brother sun, sister moon, brother wind, and sister water). Among the many accounts of Francis's interaction with animals are stories of him preaching a sermon to birds and working out a peace agreement between a wolf and the town of Gubbio (after the wolf had devoured several citizens). In recognition of his special connection to animals, it is not unusual for priests and pastors to bless the pets of their congregants on the feast day of Saint Francis (October 4).

The son of a wealthy cloth merchant, Pietro Bernardone (*Par.* 11.89), Francis enjoyed a privileged, carefree youth. At age twenty or so he fought with his countrymen in a military campaign against neighboring Perugia; following Assisi's defeat, he spent time as a prisoner of war. Francis later decided against pursuing either a military career (by becoming a knight) or the life of a merchant (as heir to his father's business). Instead, he believed he was called by God to repair and rebuild churches: accordingly, in the presence of his father and the bishop of Assisi, Francis stripped naked and returned his clothes to his father (with whom he never reconciled), thereby renouncing any claim to his inheritance and choosing instead to enter into a symbolic marriage with poverty. In the eleven hundred years from the death of Jesus (her "first husband") to her union with Francis, this figurative woman had been abandoned and scorned--despite the fact that she was known to have emboldened Amyclas, a fisherman whose destitution made him unafraid even of the powerful Julius Caesar (Lucan, *Pharsalia* 5.515-31), and to have suffered faithfully with Jesus on the cross (*Par.* 11.58-75).

Other young men in and around Assisi, such as Bernard, Egidius, and Sylvester, soon joined Francis in his new life of work, prayer, and poverty (*Par.* 11.76-84). In 1209 or 1210, supported by the bishop of Assisi, Francis and a group of brothers traveled to Rome, where Francis met Pope Innocent III and received approval to live in poverty and to preach penance (*Par.* 11.91-93). Modeled on the way Christ and the apostles were thought to have lived, the mendicant order, known as the Friars Minor, grew rapidly. Clare of Assisi, the first woman to join Francis and his brothers, became the head of a female branch of the movement, the Poor Clares, and eventually a third order was established for lay people who wished to live according to Franciscan ideals. Commentators who believe Dante himself may have belonged to this order typically identify the cord that the character Dante

wore in Hell (Inf. 16.106) with the simple cord worn by Francis and his followers (*Par.* 11.87) as both a symbol of humility and a reminder of the need to restrain the body. [Guido da Montefeltro was also one who wore the cord (Inf. 27.67), though Francis was unable to save Guido's soul because of his unrepented sin (Inf. 27.112-20).] To help resolve the complications arising from a larger, increasingly diverse movement, Pope Honorius III approved a longer, more formal rule in 1223 (*Par.* 11.97-99).

Filled with missionary zeal and seeking martyrdom, in 1219 Francis traveled to the Holy Land (there he predicted the failure of the fifth crusade) to preach to the sultan of Egypt (*Par.* 11.100-105). Despite his inability to convert the sultan to Christianity, Francis earned the sovereign's respect. Back in Italy, Francis experienced a miracle in 1224 when, praying on Mount La Verna in southern Tuscany (between the Arno and the Tiber), he received the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ, as the "final seal" of his spiritual devotion (*Par.* 11.106-8). Francis died two years later near Assisi at his favorite church, the Portiuncula, or Saint Mary of the Angels, namesake of the Californian city of Los Angeles (Franciscan Friars gave this church's name to the mission they founded there in the eighteenth century). Pope Gregory IX officially proclaimed Francis's sainthood in 1228.

It may not be true that Dante was ever a third-order Franciscan, but he was most likely educated at the Franciscan church of Santa Croce in Florence and there is no doubt that he venerated Francis and strongly endorsed the saint's spiritual values. For this reason, it seems fitting that when the poet died in Ravenna in 1321 he was buried in the basilica of Saint Francis, where the Friars have diligently safeguarded his mortal remains ever since.

Dominic. Canto 12.31-111

Bonaventure, a Franciscan, complements Thomas Aquinas's biography of Francis of Assisi by narrating the life of the founder of Thomas's order, Dominic, whom Thomas earlier praised as a "splendor of cherubic light" on account of his wisdom (*Par.* 11.38-39). Dominic was born Domingo de Guzmán (c. 1170) in Caleruega (part of Old Castile in what is now northern Spain), an area designated by Bonaventure as the western border of Europe (*Par.* 12.46-57). Dominic's mother, during her pregnancy, had a vision foretelling his mission in the world (*Par.* 12.58-60). She imagined giving birth to a dog that, holding a torch in its mouth, leapt from her womb and set the world on fire. The dog was taken to signify Dominic's future role as a preacher capable of rousing his audience by "barking" sacred truths, while the torch represented his success in kindling the Lord's fire in many hearts.

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The dog, through a play on words, eventually came to symbolize the Dominicans: they were the "dogs of God" (*domini canes*) charged with protecting the sheep (the church) against wolves (heresy). Bonaventure doesn't report these details but he relates another common interpretation of Dominic's name: *Dominicus*, as the possessive adjective of *Dominus* (Lord), means "of the Lord," a perfect correspondence between his name and who he was (*Par.* 12.67-70; see Constance).

Bonaventure describes Dominic's entrance into the Christian community at baptism as a marriage between him and faith, and he tells how the infant's godmother had a vision of the "wonderful fruit" he would bear (*Par.* 12.61-66). This accords with the story that the woman, at Dominic's baptism, saw a star appear on his forehead as a sign of the light by which he would lead others. Elaborating on accounts of the infant Dominic leaving the comfort of his bed to lie on the ground, Bonaventure further emphasizes Dominic's precocious devotion to God by having him convey a thought--"to this I have come" (*Par.* 12.78)--that echoes the words of Jesus (Mark 1:38; "to this purpose am I come"). Truly, Bonaventure exclaims, did Dominic's parents embody their names: *Felice*, his father's name, means "happy," and, according to Dante's sources, *Giovanna*, his mother's name, signifies "the grace of the Lord" in its Hebrew equivalent (*Par.* 12.79-81).

A transformative moment in Dominic's life occurred when, passing through Montpellier, he took to combating heresy by preaching orthodox views to a group of Cathars (also called Albigenses, for the French city of Albi). This sect, which flourished in southern France and northern Italy at the time, promulgated a dualistic understanding of the universe as a struggle between the good world of spirit and the evil world of matter; in its most radical forms, Cathar belief denied the divinity of Christ, considered Satan as equal in power to God, advocated rigorous asceticism, and rejected church sacraments and the priesthood. A legend reports that Dominic and his adversaries cast their books into a fire to test the truth of their respective doctrines. While the Cathar writings were immediately consumed by the flames, Dominic's text not only survived intact but leapt far from the flames each time it was thrown back into the fire. Dominic and a small band of followers vowed to continue the battle against heresy, making the city of Toulouse, with the support of Bishop Folco (see Venus), their center of operations. Dominic became a great teacher, Bonaventure explains, not to achieve intellectual prominence among specialists, such as that ascribed to Enrico Bartolomei, cardinal-bishop of Ostia, who wrote an important commentary on canon law, and to Taddeo d'Alderotti, a famous teacher at Bologna's celebrated medical school and the author of commentaries on the

works of Hippocrates and Galen; his motive, rather, was to serve the church and reach the broader community by preaching true spiritual knowledge (*Par.* 12.82-87).

In 1215 Dominic participated in the Fourth Lateran Council in Rome, where he also sought the pope's approval of his order. Innocent III granted provisional approval (though the Dominicans had to adopt the rule of an existing order), and his successor, Honorius III, granted official approval in 1216 and confirmed the name Order of Preachers in 1217. A first order for friars and a second order for nuns were followed later by a lay order (the Order of Penance), which, though it did not receive official approval until 1405, had a large number of adherents in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, including several notable female mystics (e.g., Saint Catherine of Siena). Consistent with their emphasis on education as a basis for the preaching required to combat heretical beliefs and diffuse orthodox teachings, the Dominicans made Paris and Bologna, two of Europe's great university cities, the order's twin poles. Bologna hosted the first general chapter meeting in 1220, with subsequent meetings alternating between the two cities. Dante likely attended lectures at the school (*studium*) of the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence.

Parallel with his effort to uproot heresy, Dominic took to heart Christ's "first instruction" (*Par.* 12.73-75)--most likely his counsel to a wealthy young man to sell his property and give the proceeds to the poor (Matthew 19:21)--by requiring his followers to live as mendicants, without a fixed income or material possessions. Dominic himself was reported to have sold all his belongings (even his books) on behalf of the poor during a famine, and, on another occasion, to have offered to sell himself as ransom for a prisoner. Highlighting Dominic's pure motives, Bonaventure notes that his petition for papal approval sought neither to direct money intended for the poor to himself (or to promote his own agenda) nor to obtain the first available benefice, a church office endowed with funds or property (*Par.* 12.91-93).

In 1221 Dominic fell gravely ill in the vicinity of Bologna; at the moment of death, according to legend, he was seen being lifted up to Heaven on a golden ladder. His shrine in Bologna became a popular pilgrimage destination. Dominic was canonized by Pope Gregory IX in 1234. Given Dominic's commitment to fighting heresies (*Par.* 12.94-105), it is not surprising that Dominicans took leading roles in the Inquisition soon after it was created in 1231.