

THE DIVINE COMEDY

DANTE ALIGHIERI

ARTICLES TO ACCOMPANY THE READING

DANTE AND THE CHURCH

Seven Centuries of a Continuous and Fruitful Dialogue

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ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

*This article, written by **José María Díaz Puente in November 2026**, traces more than seven centuries of relationship between Dante Alighieri, the* Divine Comedy *and the Church: from the first medieval commentators to the popes of our own time. An analysis of the extraordinary Christian reception of the* Divine Comedy *through reading, art and the popes.*

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INTRODUCTION

Few literary works have exercised within Christian culture an **influence as lasting and fruitful** as the *Divine Comedy*. For more than seven centuries, its images of the consequences of evil and of conversion, of justice and mercy, of freedom, hope and the love of God have been read, commented on, depicted and used to express some of the great questions of faith. For the Church, Dante was not simply a writer admired for the greatness of his poetry: **his work has become part of the language in which generations of Christians have imagined the destiny of humankind and its path towards God**.

That relationship began very early and took extraordinarily diverse forms. The *Comedy* gave rise to commentaries only a few years after its author's death; it was explained in public, studied by theologians and religious, incorporated into teaching and, in time, penetrated deeply into Christian art. Churches, cathedrals and papal spaces welcomed both the figure of Dante and images born of his poem. Long before modern popes began to devote specific documents to him, **centuries of reading, study and artistic creation had already made his profound fruitfulness visible within Christian culture**.



"For seven centuries, the Comedy has been read, commented on and depicted at the heart of Christian culture."

That history was not free of tensions. Certain theses of his work *Monarchia*, especially those concerning the autonomy of temporal power with respect to the pope, gave rise to controversy. But that episode should be kept in proportion: it mainly concerned a political treatise and a very specific question about the relations between the Papacy and the Empire. The *Divine Comedy* never ceased to be read, commented on and admired.

Dante's harsh invectives against certain popes may also seem, at first sight, hard to reconcile with this ecclesial reception. Yet one of the keys to his entire work lies precisely in that apparent paradox. Dante could judge a pope's conduct severely and, at the same time, acknowledge the greatness of the mission entrusted to Peter and his successors. **His criticism does not spring from a rejection of the Church, but from the lofty idea he holds of what the Church is called to be.** Modern popes would return to this question again and again, and would come to interpret that freedom of speech as a form of prophetic criticism.

From the end of the nineteenth century, and with particular intensity during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Dante's long-standing presence in the cultural life of the Church also began to find ever more explicit expression in the words and actions of the popes. Studies, academic chairs, commemorations, speeches, catecheses and papal documents show to what extent the *Divine Comedy* continues to offer an extraordinarily powerful language for speaking about the Christian faith.

The following sections trace some of the most significant moments of this history and show **the extraordinary fruitfulness of Dante within the Church over more than seven centuries**.

I

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN RECEPTION OF DANTE

It did not take long for the *Divine Comedy* to begin to be read, explained and interpreted. **The tradition of commenting on Dante was born practically at the same time as the complete circulation of the poem.** Scarcely had the poet died in 1321 when his verses began to prompt exegetical activity unusual for its earliness and intensity. The difficulty of many of its historical, philosophical, political and theological references, but also the conviction that deeper meanings lay hidden beneath the literal sense, meant that the *Comedy* was very soon treated as a work that had not only to be read but also explained.

As early as **1322**, barely a year after Dante's death, his son **Jacopo Alighieri** had composed a commentary on the *Inferno*. Shortly afterwards, in Bologna, the notary **Graziolo Bambaglioli** produced another commentary on the first canticle, completed around **1324**. Thus began an exegetical tradition that would scarcely stop growing over the following centuries.

The decisive leap came only a few years later. Between **1323 and 1328**, the Bolognese **Jacopo della Lana** composed the first known commentary covering **all three canticles of the *Divine Comedy***, which was also the first written in the vernacular (Brunetti, 2023). Della Lana approached the poem as a complete work and went through it systematically to clarify its historical, philosophical, moral and theological references. His commentary is particularly significant because it bears witness to the early encounter of the *Comedy* with the university culture of Bologna, and shows to what extent, only a few years after Dante's death, the poem was already regarded as a work requiring study, explanation and interpretation.

The importance of this fact can hardly be overstated. **Barely seven years after Dante's death, the whole of the *Comedy* was already the object of systematic explanation and had come into contact with** a leading academic culture such as that of Bologna.

In that same first generation of commentators there appears a testimony of particular importance for understanding the Christian reception of Dante. **Friar Guido da Pisa, a Carmelite, devoted a *Declaratio* to the *Inferno* and, later, the *Expositiones et glose super Comediam Dantis***, one of the most original commentaries of the early decades of the fourteenth century. His reading is explicitly shaped by a theological and ecclesial perspective: he carefully distinguishes between the literal and the allegorical sense, draws on Scripture, the Fathers and scholastic culture, and even presents poetry as a form of theology.

Particularly revealing is his effort to **safeguard the orthodoxy of the *Comedy***: when some poetic invention seemed to be in tension with Christian doctrine, Guido distinguished between what Dante affirmed as a poet and what was to be held as a truth of faith. For him, a mistaken interpretation of the poem could lead into error, but that did not mean the work itself should be considered heterodox (Terzi, 2004).

This very early activity of the commentators inaugurates one of the most singular features of Dante's fortune. Over the next seven centuries, **reading the *Divine Comedy* and commenting on it would almost always go hand in hand**. Each generation would try to explain anew its characters, its historical references, its moral architecture, its philosophy and its theology.

A fundamental milestone came in **1373**, when this tradition of commentary acquired a public dimension. At the request of Florentine citizens, the city authorities commissioned **Giovanni Boccaccio** to read and explain the *Divine Comedy*. The initiative was civic, not ecclesiastical, but the place chosen is significant: the lectures began on **23 October 1373 in the church of Santo Stefano in Badia**, very close to the house traditionally associated with Dante. There Boccaccio gave some sixty lectures on the *Inferno* before a varied audience of merchants, craftsmen and citizens, but also men of letters and theologians (Boccaccio, 1918). Thus was born the first great **public Lectura Dantis**, a tradition destined to continue for centuries.

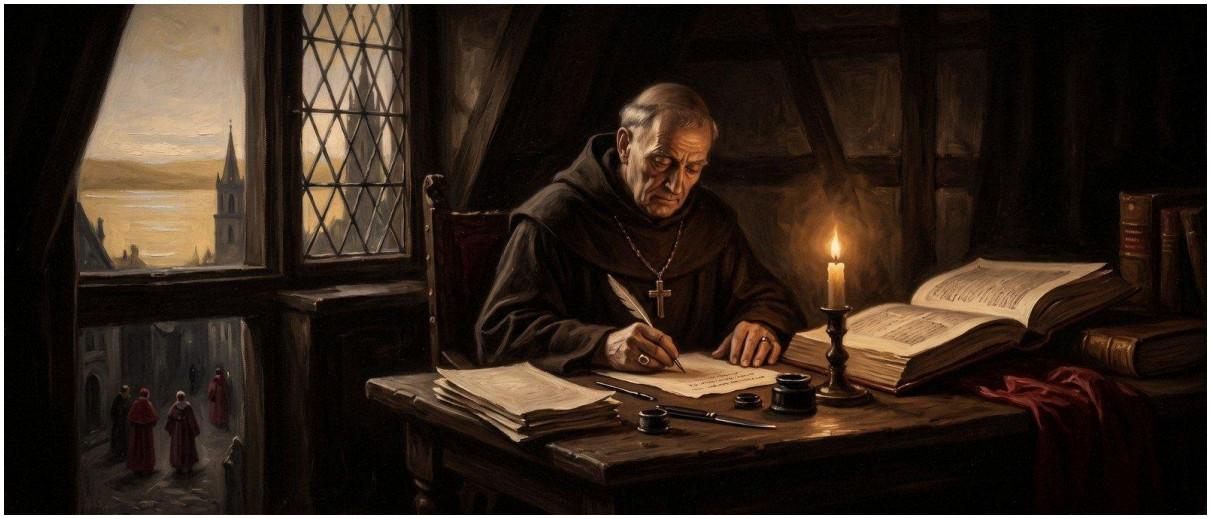


"Artistic recreation: Boccaccio begins the public reading of the Comedy in Santo Stefano in Badia, Florence, 23 October 1373."

The importance of the event does not lie only in the fact that Dante was being commented on, since, as we have seen, that practice already had half a century of history. The novelty was that the explanation of the Comedy left the sphere of manuscripts and learned study to become public teaching. And the fact that those first lectures took place in a church clearly reflects the cultural world in which the poem was being received. Dante's journey could be explained before a

Christian audience because its great questions —sin and responsibility, divine justice, purification, grace, the virtues or the eternal destiny of humankind— were fully recognisable within that religious culture.

The ecclesial reception very soon took even more explicit forms. During the **Council of Constance (1414-1418)**, one of the great events of the medieval Church, the Franciscan **Giovanni da Serravalle**, bishop of Fermo, **produced a Latin translation of and an extensive commentary on the Divine Comedy** (Giovanni da Serravalle, 1891). The fact is especially significant: while taking part in a council convened to face some of the gravest problems of Christendom, a bishop devoted part of his work to making Dante's poem accessible to those who did not know Italian. The intention, according to the tradition surrounding his work, was that the Comedy might reach, through the common Latin of ecclesiastical culture, the various Christian nations represented at the council.



"Artistic recreation: Giovanni da Serravalle, bishop of Fermo, translates and comments on the Comedy during the Council of Constance (1414–1418)."

Florence offers another particularly eloquent example. From **1439**, the Dominican **Friar Girolamo di Giovanni**, master of theology and religious of Santa Maria Novella, **was charged with explaining Dante in public**. His readings, given for years in **Santa Maria del Fiore**, enjoyed notable popular success: his convent's own necrology would recall that he had explained Dante for many years and that those lectures had been extraordinarily appreciated by the Florentines. The Lectura Dantis had now become part of the activity of a Dominican theologian and took place inside the city's cathedral.

In **1469**, another Dominican of Santa Maria Novella, **Domenico da Corella**, prior of the convent and professor of theology, was commissioned by the Florentine Studio to teach publicly both theology and the work of Dante. The documentation of the period is revealing because it shows a development in the academic standing of the Comedy: while its commentary had initially been

closer to rhetoric and moral teaching, during the fifteenth century it drew ever closer to the field of **theology**. **Dante was beginning to be read not only as a great poet, but also as an author whose work made it possible to reflect on the great questions of the Christian faith.**



"Artistic recreation: from 1439 the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella publicly explained the Divine Comedy in the cathedral of Florence."

Dante's presence among the Dominicans was not confined to the classroom and to the *Lecturae Dantis*. During the fifteenth century, **his verses also began to enter preaching**. Blessed **Giovanni Dominici**, one of the great Dominican reformers of the early Quattrocento, was already speaking of **"Dantes noster" —"our Dante"—** and counted him among those poets who, beneath the veil of their fictions, had expressed sentiments deeply bound up with the Christian religion. Later, the celebrated preacher **Gabriele Barletta** would repeatedly draw on the *Comedy* in his sermons and call the poet **"noster vates Dantes"**, "our poet Dante". Other testimonies show how far such use could go: an anonymous preacher of Santa Maria Novella used verses of the *Comedy* extensively to develop his teaching on avarice and predestination, even quoting long passages from the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* (Venchi, 1970).

The fact is particularly significant because it shows a new phase in the Christian reception of the poem. **Dante was no longer only someone who had to be explained: his verses could also serve to explain faith and the moral life to others.** This familiarity is likewise reflected in convent libraries. The **1489 inventory of Santa Maria Novella** records three codices of the *Comedy*, three more with commentaries, an annotated copy and a printed commentary; the Dominican convent of Sant'Eustorgio in Milan also owned, at the end of the fifteenth century, manuscripts of the poem and its commentaries (Venchi, 1970). Dante's presence in preaching, teaching and libraries shows that his reception among religious was not episodic, but had penetrated deeply into their intellectual culture.

The tradition of commentary reached a new stage with the arrival of printing. In **1481**, Florence published one of the most important editions in the whole early history of the *Comedy*, accompanied by the extensive commentary of the humanist **Cristoforo Landino**. It was not the first printed

edition of the poem —the *Comedy* had reached the press in Foligno in 1472— but it did represent a decisive moment in its Renaissance reception. Landino gathered much of the earlier exegetical tradition and developed a strongly allegorical reading of the poem, convinced that philosophical, moral and spiritual meanings lay hidden beneath Dante's poetic fiction. His commentary achieved extraordinary circulation: it was reprinted again and again over the following decades and became one of the main routes by which generations of Renaissance readers (among them Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Bramante and Vasari) approached Dante (Gilson, 2018).

The edition also had a novel visual ambition. It was conceived with a series of engravings linked to **Sandro Botticelli**, although their execution is usually attributed to Baccio Baldini and the exact extent of the painter's involvement is still being studied. The project was never completed as planned, but it inaugurated a fruitful relationship between the printed text of the *Comedy* and the image, which Botticelli would later develop in his famous cycle of Dante drawings. The episode is also significant for another reason: **the long tradition of explaining Dante, begun just after his death, was now entering the age of print and could reach an incomparably wider public**. Commentary no longer depended solely on manuscripts, classrooms and public readings; it could physically accompany the poem in its editions and travel with it across Europe.

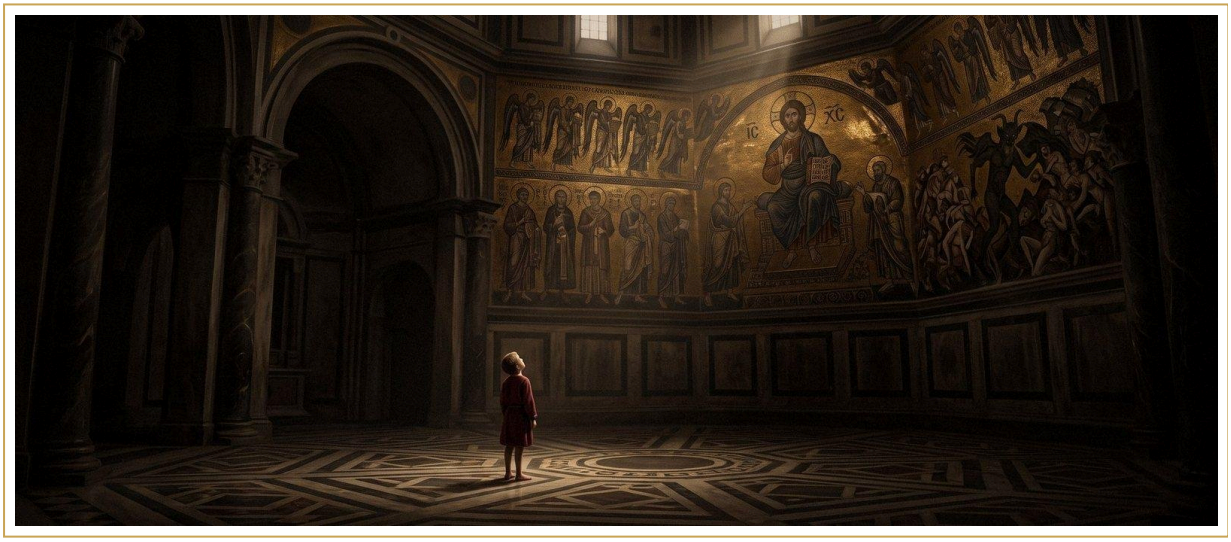
Thus, from the years immediately following Dante's death, a constant emerges that would accompany the *Divine Comedy* for the next seven hundred years: its capacity to rise above the particular controversies of each age and to become a **privileged instrument for thinking about, teaching and imagining the Christian experience**. Very soon this fruitfulness would also overflow commentaries, classrooms and public readings, **and the images born of the *Comedy* would begin to penetrate another of the great languages of Christian culture: art.**

II

DANTE IN CHRISTIAN ART

The fruitfulness of the Divine Comedy within the Church was not shown only in commentaries, readings and teaching. Very soon it also reached art. And in this field a particularly suggestive dialogue took place: **Dante had formed his imagination by contemplating the Christian art of his time, and the images created by his poem would, generations later, return to churches, cathedrals and papal palaces**.

The case of Florence shows this two-way movement especially well. From childhood Dante knew the great mosaics of the **Baptistery of San Giovanni**, where he was baptised. Its gigantic Last Judgement, with Christ the judge, the blessed, the damned, demons and a monstrous Lucifer, is one of the visual sources that helped to shape his imagination of the afterlife. Centuries later the reverse process would occur: **it would be the Divine Comedy itself that supplied images and structures to some of the great Christian representations of the Last Judgement.** The Opera del Duomo of Florence expressly points out this reciprocal relationship between the figurative world of the cathedral complex and Dante's imagination (Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, 2024b).



"Dante, baptised in San Giovanni, grew up beneath the great Last Judgement of its mosaics, one of the sources of his imagination of the afterlife."

The reverse process began surprisingly early. Between **1332 and 1337**, barely a decade after Dante's death, the **Cappella della Maddalena in the Palazzo del Podestà in Florence —today's Bargello—** was decorated with a large mural cycle traditionally attributed to Giotto and executed, according to studies arising from its restoration, by various artists of his workshop. The **Inferno and Paradise** were depicted on the shorter walls, while the remaining scenes were devoted to Mary Magdalene and Saint John the Baptist. Among the throng of the **elect in Paradise appears the face of Dante**, in one of the oldest surviving visual testimonies, and one of the closest to the poet's lifetime (Opificio delle Pietre Dure, n.d.).

The context makes his presence especially significant. The chapel belonged to the palace where Florentine justice was administered and, in those years, it was also used by **those condemned to death while they awaited execution**. Its pictorial programme therefore had a clearly meditative purpose, built around sin, judgement, damnation and salvation. That Dante should appear among the elect in that Paradise, only a few years after his death, shows how early his figure had begun to be integrated into the religious imagination of his city. The circumstance also carries a powerful historical irony: this was the same Palazzo del Podestà, associated with the Florentine justice that had condemned Dante himself to exile.



Dante among the elect in Paradise, Cappella della Maddalena, Bargello, Florence (1332–1337), cycle traditionally attributed to Giotto and his workshop.

Another great testimony to this reception is found in the **cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore** itself. In 1465, on the occasion of the second centenary of Dante's birth, **Domenico di Michelino**, following a design by Alesso Baldovinetti, painted the great depiction of the poet that is still preserved in the Duomo today. Dante appears crowned with laurel and holding the Comedy open; on one side the Inferno unfolds, behind him rises the mountain of Purgatory with the heavens of Paradise above it, while on the other side Florence appears, dominated by Brunelleschi's dome. The documentation preserved by the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore confirms that the work was commissioned in 1465 expressly to commemorate the poet (Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, n.d.).



Domenico di Michelino, Dante and the Three Kingdoms (1465), Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence. Image: Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

The significance of its location is especially eloquent. **Dante and the three kingdoms of his poem were permanently represented in the cathedral of Florence.** The Comedy did not appear there as a literary curiosity, but as a work capable of entering into visual dialogue with one of the principal spaces devoted to Christian worship.

An even more explicit step was taken at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the **chapel of San Brizio in Orvieto Cathedral**. The great cycle on the Last Things had been begun by **Fra Angelico in 1447** and was completed by **Luca Signorelli between 1499 and 1504**, with huge scenes devoted to the Antichrist, the end of the world, the resurrection of the dead, the judgement and the destiny of the blessed and the damned. But in the lower band of the walls Signorelli also directly incorporated **Dante and the *Divine Comedy*** into that eschatological programme (Opera del Duomo di Orvieto, n.d.).

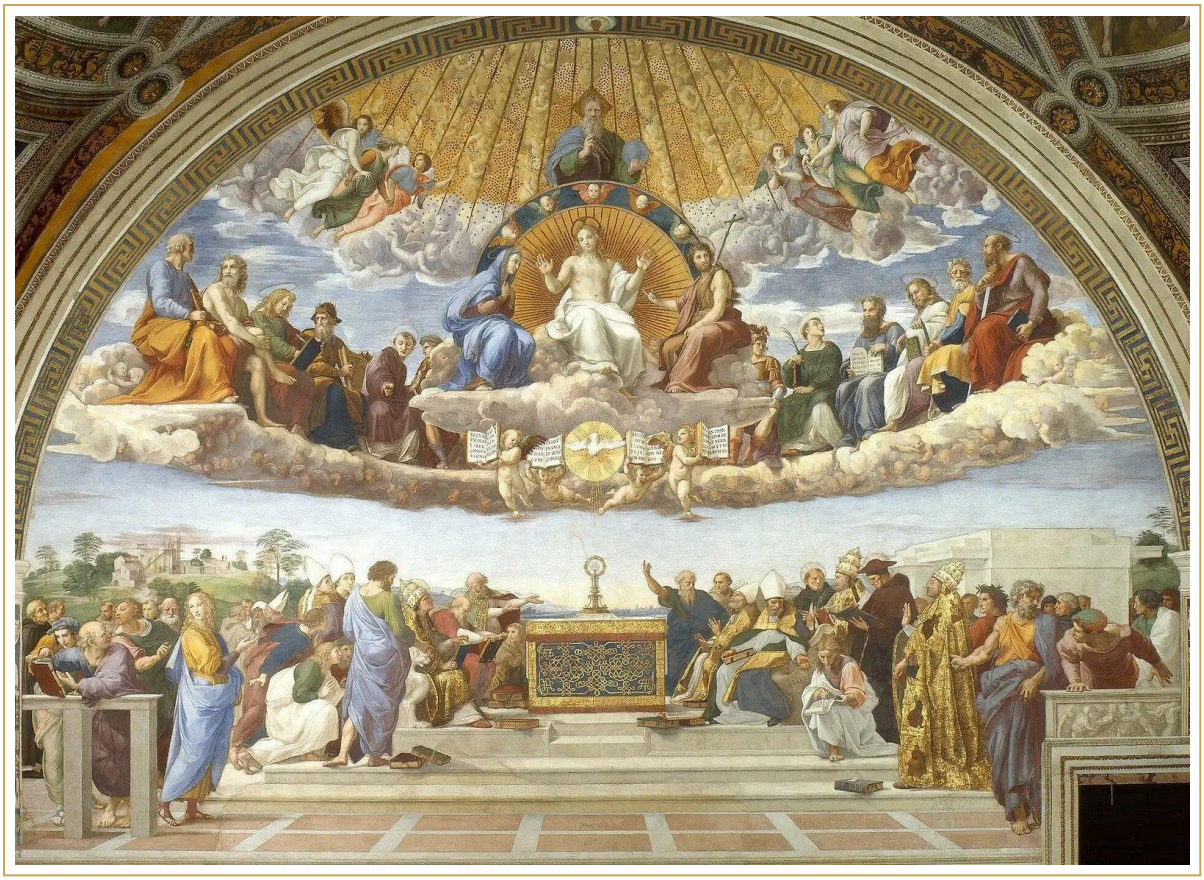
Around the portrait of Dante, included among the great poets and sages depicted in the chapel, appear **eleven monochrome scenes inspired by the first cantos of the *Purgatorio***: Dante and Virgil before Cato, the encounter with Sordello, the negligent, the gate of Purgatory and the proud weighed down by enormous stones, among others. The choice was not merely ornamental. As Marianna Villa has shown, those scenes made it possible **to complete the eschatological journey of the chapel by incorporating precisely Purgatory**, absent from the great compositions on the upper walls (Villa, 2016).

The case of Orvieto is therefore especially revealing. **The *Divine Comedy* was no longer simply inspiring an isolated character or detail: whole episodes of the poem were being integrated into a great Christian programme on the ultimate destiny of the human being.** Dante provided images with which a cathedral could also represent that intermediate reality of purification that completed the journey between damnation and glory.



Luca Signorelli, Dante and scenes from Purgatory (c. 1500-1503), chapel of San Brizio, Orvieto Cathedral.

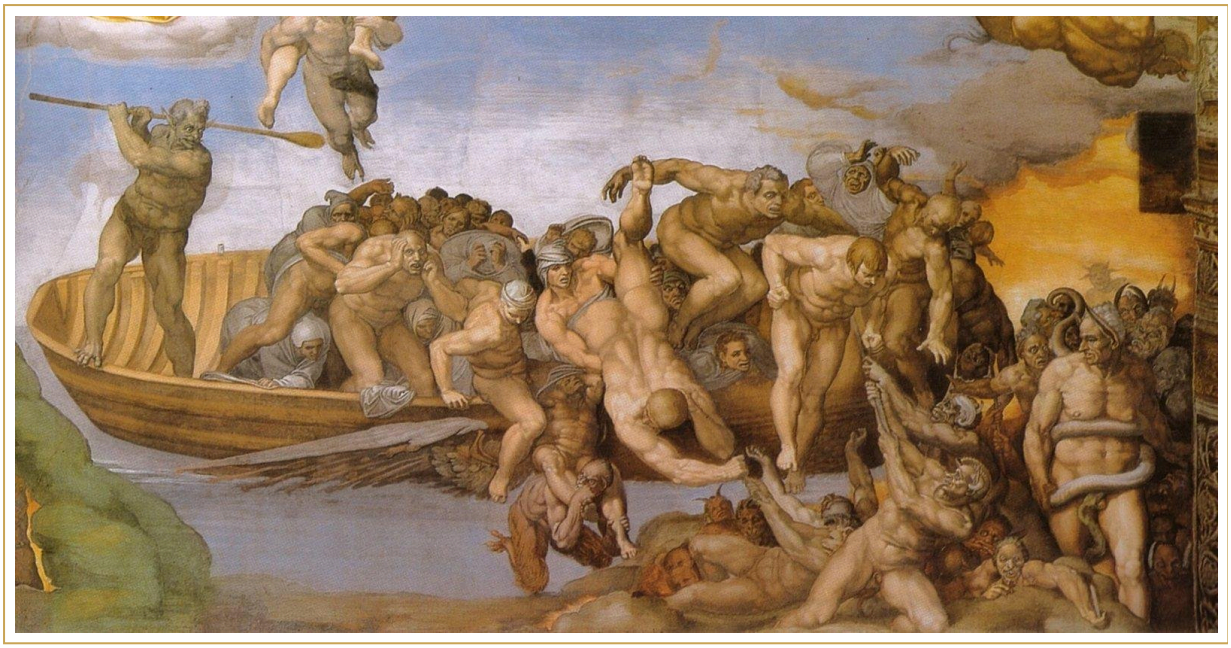
Very shortly afterwards, an even more significant recognition took place in Rome. Between 1508 and 1511, **Raphael**, commissioned by **Julius II**, decorated the *Stanza della Segnatura*, used as the pope's library and private study. The programme of the room represents four great domains of human knowledge: Theology, Philosophy, Poetry and Justice. Dante appears twice: among the great poets of Parnassus and, more revealingly still, in the so-called Disputation of the Holy Sacrament, the great composition devoted to **Theology**. There, around the Eucharist, the Church triumphant and the Church militant come together, with the Fathers of the Church, popes and theologians; among them Raphael included the face of Dante, placed behind Sixtus IV. The Vatican Museums themselves emphasise this double presence of the poet in the programme conceived for the papal rooms (Biferali, n.d.).



Raphael, Disputation of the Holy Sacrament (1509–1510), Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican. Image: Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

The Comedy would also enter the Vatican through Michelangelo, one of the most important artists in the history of Christian art. The relationship between **Michelangelo and Dante** went much deeper than the occasional use of a few images from the *Comedy*. The Florentine artist was already regarded by his contemporaries as an extraordinary connoisseur of the poet: **Benedetto Varchi claimed that he knew practically the whole *Comedy* by heart**, and from the sixteenth century onwards Dantean affinities were pointed out in his sculptures, paintings and poems.

Modern research has found echoes of Dante in the **Sistine Chapel ceiling**, painted between 1508 and 1512, although not all these correspondences can be demonstrated with equal certainty. Michelangelo's admiration for Dante was also documented by a notable event. In **1519**, when the Florentines asked Pope Leo X to allow the poet's remains to be moved from Ravenna to Florence, Michelangelo joined the petition and offered to make a worthy tomb for the "divine poet" himself. Decades later he would even compose sonnets in his honour. For Michelangelo, then, Dante was not merely an iconographic source, but one of the great intellectual and spiritual points of reference of his own creative work (Pál, 2022).



Michelangelo, The Last Judgement (1536–1541), Sistine Chapel: Charon and Minos. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

That influence reaches its most evident expression in the **Last Judgement of the Sistine Chapel**, painted between 1536 and 1541. There the relationship with the *Divine Comedy* ceases to be an interpretative hypothesis and becomes explicit: **Charon strikes the damned with his oar to make them disembark, and Minos appears as the infernal judge with his body coiled by a serpent**, images taken directly from the *Inferno*. The Vatican Museums themselves describe the Dantean reference in this part of the fresco as evident (Vatican Museums, n.d.).

Both Dante and Michelangelo **sought to make visible** what lies beyond ordinary experience: the resurrection of the body, judgement, salvation and damnation, the eternal destiny of the human being. **One through words, the other through painting and sculpture, both gave sensible form to the great last realities of the Christian faith.** That this convergence should find its monumental expression precisely in the pope's chapel shows how far Dante's imagination had penetrated into the very heart of Christian art.

The relationship between Dante and the Church found another monumental expression in Florence. Between **1572 and 1579**, Giorgio Vasari and Federico Zuccari covered the more than 3,600 square metres of the interior of **Brunelleschi's dome** with another huge **Last Judgement**. The Opera del Duomo, which today cares for the monument, describes the whole iconographic programme devised by Vincenzo Borghini as inspired by Dante (Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, 2024a; 2024b). The arrangement of the blessed and the damned in different groups and realms draws on the ordering of Dante's afterlife, and **Dante was depicted among the blessed, alongside the Doctors of the Church**.



Vasari and Zuccari, The Last Judgement (1572–1579), dome of Santa Maria del Fiore. Photo: Paolo Villa, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0 (resized).

These examples —from the early portrait in the Bargello to the great monumental programmes of Florence, Orvieto and Rome— show how **Dante's imagination was gradually incorporated into the visual heritage of Western Christianity.** An extraordinary dialogue between poetry, faith and art thus took place: Dante received images from the churches of his time, turned them into poetry, and that poetry later returned to the great spaces of the Church, transformed once again into images. The Divine Comedy **entered cathedrals, papal palaces and the Sistine Chapel, and for centuries helped to shape the way in which Christian art imagined some of the last realities of the faith.**



"Dante received images from the churches of his time, turned them into poetry, and that poetry returned to the churches, transformed once again into images."

III

A MOMENT OF CONTROVERSY: THE *Monarchia*

Dante's long fruitfulness within Christian culture was not without tensions. The main one did not concern the *Divine Comedy*, but another of his writings: the *Monarchia*, the Latin treatise in which Dante set out his conception of the relationship between spiritual and temporal power.

The most controversial point lay in the third book. Dante argued that the emperor's authority did not come from the pope but directly from God, and he assigned different ends to the two powers: it belonged to the pope to lead humankind towards its eternal destiny; to the emperor, to secure the conditions of justice and peace needed to attain temporal happiness. This was not the modern separation of Church and State, but a medieval conception of two authorities that received different missions from God and which, precisely for that reason, were not to absorb one another. In the final passage of the treatise Dante still acknowledged a singular dignity in the pope and stated that the emperor should show him the reverence of a son towards his father (Alighieri, 2019, book III).

These ideas soon acquired a political dimension that went beyond theoretical discussion. During the grave conflict between **John XXII and Louis of Bavaria**, supporters of the emperor used arguments from the *Monarchia* to maintain that imperial authority did not depend on papal approval (Boccaccio, 1918). The treatise thus became an instrument linked to one of the great conflicts between Papacy and Empire in the fourteenth century.

It was in this context, around **1329**, that the harshest episode in the whole ecclesial reception of Dante took place. According to the testimony handed down by Boccaccio and other reports of the time, Cardinal **Bertrando del Poggetto**, legate of John XXII in Italy, had the *Monarchia* condemned and publicly burned in Bologna, considering that it contained heretical doctrines (Boccaccio, 1918).

Opposition to Dante's political theses continued. The Dominican **Guido Vernani**, lector at the *Studium* of Bologna, wrote his *De reprobatione Monarchiae* in those years, an explicit refutation of the treatise (Vernani, 2004). Later on, other churchmen would also dispute its theses, among them the future Saint Antoninus of Florence.

In the sixteenth century the question passed from theological debate to **institutional censorship**. The *Monarchia* was included in indexes of prohibited books and eventually appeared in the Roman Index promulgated under Paul IV in **1559** (Index auctorum, 1559), as well as in later editions. It remained there for several centuries. The exact chronology of its removal has been the subject of some historiographical discussion: 1881, under Leo XIII, has traditionally been given (Di Paola Dollorenzo, 2020), although more recent studies have noted that it still appears in a later edition before disappearing definitively from the Index at the end of the nineteenth century.

It is important, however, **to distinguish carefully between the history of the *Monarchia* and the reception of the *Divine Comedy***. During the very centuries in which certain political theses of Dante were being opposed, the *Comedy* continued to be copied, edited, commented on, taught and incorporated into Christian art. Dante could appear in the Duomo of Florence, in Raphael's papal rooms or, through his images, in the Sistine Chapel, while his political treatise remained under censorship.

The eighteenth century offers several especially eloquent examples of this distinction. In **1732**, while the *Monarchia* was still among the prohibited books, the Jesuit **Pompeo Venturi** published in Lucca a new commentary on the *Divine Comedy*. The work, which first appeared anonymously with a dedication to Pope Clement XII, had largely been conceived for teaching purposes: to help students in the colleges of the Society of Jesus read and understand the poem. It was widely circulated, went through numerous editions and became one of the most widely used Dante commentaries for much of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth (Marzo, 2020).

Venturi's reading was not uncritical. He recognised in Dante firmness in the Catholic faith and deep religious feeling, but he censured some of his invectives against popes and clerics and warned the reader against statements he considered doctrinally problematic. Precisely here lies the interest of the case: **reservations about certain positions of Dante did not prevent a Jesuit from making the *Comedy* an object of commentary, teaching and study within Catholic culture**.

A gesture of a very different kind took place a few decades later. Between **1780 and 1782**, during the pontificate of Pius VI, Cardinal **Luigi Valenti Gonzaga**, papal legate in Romagna, promoted the construction of the mausoleum that still houses Dante's tomb in Ravenna today. The project was entrusted to the architect Camillo Morigia, who built a small neoclassical temple expressly intended to honour the poet's memory and to keep his remains. Valenti Gonzaga was not acting as a private individual: he had been appointed papal legate in Romagna in 1778 and exercised governing functions in the Papal States from Ravenna (Tedesco, 2020).



Dante's Mausoleum in Ravenna, built between 1780 and 1782 on the initiative of the cardinal legate Luigi Valenti Gonzaga and designed by Camillo Morigia.

The contrast is particularly expressive: **while the *Monarchia* was still listed among the prohibited books, a senior representative of the papal government was promoting one of the principal monuments dedicated to Dante**. The censorship of certain political theses did not, therefore, amount to a rejection of the poet or of his great poem.

A few years later, Rome would offer another expression of the same reality. The Conventual Franciscan **Baldassarre Lombardi** published in **1791-1792** *La Divina Commedia nuovamente corretta, spiegata e difesa*, the first complete Roman edition of the *Comedy*. It was the fruit of nearly twenty years of study, and its very title summed up an ambitious programme: to correct the text, to explain it in its literary, historical, allegorical and theological dimensions and, significantly, **to defend Dante against criticisms he considered unjust**. Prominent among these were the objections Venturi had raised against the poet, especially for his attacks on the papacy and on certain churchmen (Roda, 2005; Colombo, 2025).

Lombardi's edition was widely circulated and was reprinted many times during the nineteenth century. Its importance lies not only in its publishing success, but in the fact that a Franciscan religious should publish in Rome an edition of the *Divine Comedy* whose declared purpose was **to explain and defend Dante**, including the fundamental orthodoxy of his poem. A recent study has interpreted that undertaking precisely as a significant moment in the ecclesial reception and defence of Dante at the end of the eighteenth century (Colombo, 2025).

All this helps to place the controversy over the *Monarchia* in its true dimension. **The fundamental question was not whether or not Dante belonged to the Christian tradition, but how certain theses on the relationship between temporal and spiritual power were to be understood.** It was

an especially delicate discussion at a time when the papacy needed to preserve its independence from emperors, kings and territorial powers, while itself exercising political and temporal functions. To judge that controversy solely by contemporary categories would risk simplifying a profoundly medieval problem.

For that very reason, the history of the *Monarchia* should occupy its limited place within the healthy relationship between Dante and the Church.

IV

DANTE, THE CHURCH AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

The nineteenth century opened a new stage in the reception of Dante. The Divine Comedy continued to be read as one of the great expressions of Christian culture, but on top of that tradition another interpretation was now superimposed, destined to acquire enormous force: **Dante as father of the language and symbol of the Italian nation**. In the years of the Risorgimento, his figure came to represent the longing for an Italy able to overcome its political divisions and recognise itself in a common history, language and culture.

Florence had anticipated this new dimension even before Italian unification. Between 1818 and 1829 **Stefano Ricci's great cenotaph of Dante was erected in the basilica of Santa Croce**, and it was solemnly inaugurated in 1830. Promoted by Grand Duke Ferdinand III and financed by public subscription, it was the city's first official tribute to the poet who had died in exile and been buried in Ravenna (Opera di Santa Croce, n.d.). Dante appears seated on a sarcophagus, accompanied by the allegorical figures of Italy and Poetry. His presence in Santa Croce, which in those years was becoming a true "pantheon of the Italians", thus brought together **two dimensions destined to coexist throughout the century: the Christian poet and the cultural father of a nation**.



Cenotaph of Dante (1830), Santa Croce, Florence. Photo: MenkinAlRire, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0 (resized).

That national appropriation reached its most spectacular expression in **1865**, when the sixth centenary of Dante's birth was celebrated. Florence had just become the capital of the new Kingdom of Italy, and the commemorations inevitably took on a strong political meaning. Dante was celebrated as father of the Italian language and as one of the great figures able to give the new State a common memory. On 14 May, before King Victor Emmanuel II and the banners of many Italian cities, the monumental statue by **Enrico Pazzi was unveiled in Piazza Santa Croce, its pedestal proclaiming simply: "To Dante Alighieri, Italy".**



"Artistic recreation: unveiling of Enrico Pazzi's statue of Dante in Piazza Santa Croce, Florence, on the sixth centenary of his birth."

The **context was especially delicate for the Church**. Italian unity had not been completed: Rome was still part of the Papal States, and the so-called Roman Question set the new kingdom against the temporal power of the pope. In some circles of the Risorgimento, Dante —critic of certain popes and defender of the autonomy of imperial power— was therefore presented as a forerunner of the national cause and even as a symbol of opposition to the temporal power of the Church. The image of the "ghibellin fuggiasco" then took on a political meaning that went far beyond the historical Dante.

But it would not be accurate either to turn the 1865 centenary into a simply secular or anticlerical celebration. The boundaries were far more porous. The **official oration of the Florentine celebrations was entrusted to Father Giambattista Giuliani**, a well-known priest and Dante scholar. The same poet could serve the construction of a new national identity and continue to be studied and celebrated by men of the Church. The political dispute over temporal power did not remove the Christian roots of the Comedy, nor the long ecclesial tradition of reading that had accompanied it since the fourteenth century.

"The same poet could serve the construction of a new national identity and continue to be studied and celebrated by men of the Church"

That same centenary was accompanied in Ravenna by an almost novelistic event. On **25 May 1865**, during building work in the old Franciscan convent next to Dante's tomb, a bricklayer accidentally found a small wooden box in a wall of the **Quadrarco di Braccioforte**. An inscription made it possible to identify its contents: they were the **poet's remains**, hidden for centuries by the Franciscans

and whose whereabouts had been lost. The box still bore the note written by Friar Antonio Santi in 1677, certifying that these were the "ossa Dantis". The bones were reassembled, displayed publicly for a few months and finally returned to the mausoleum.

The discovery unexpectedly closed a story begun more than three centuries earlier. As we have seen, in **1519**, when Leo X granted the Florentine request to move Dante's remains and Michelangelo offered to make him a worthy tomb, the Franciscans of Ravenna had prevented the transfer by hiding the bones. That they should reappear precisely during the **sixth centenary of the poet's birth** has a symbolic force that is hard to ignore. The religious who had guarded his memory for centuries had managed to keep in Ravenna remains that Florence disputed, and the rediscovery placed Dante's tomb once again at the centre of the 1865 commemorations. The story shows, once more, how far the poet's memory had also remained bound to religious institutions and communities long before the great papal pronouncements of modern times.

The nineteenth century is therefore particularly revealing. Dante had become so broad a heritage that different sectors could recognise themselves in him and emphasise different aspects of his work. Patriots saw the father of the language and the forerunner of Italy; scholars recovered his texts with growing historical and philological rigour; artists found in his life and in the Comedy an almost inexhaustible source of inspiration; and the Catholic world continued its dialogue with a poet whose vision of the human being, of sin, of freedom and of God remained deeply rooted in the Christian tradition.

Towards the end of the century, the papacy's relationship with Dante also began to become increasingly visible. With **Leo XIII**, elected in 1878, interest in medieval thought and in Saint Thomas Aquinas received an enormous boost. In that context a renewed study of Dante was also promoted. The removal of the Monarchia from the Index has traditionally been placed during his pontificate, and **a chair devoted to Dante studies was established** at the Leonine Institute of Higher Literature in Rome, entrusted to Monsignor Giacomo Poletto (Di Paola Dollorenzo, 2020). The initiative was part of a broader cultural project that sought to show the intellectual vitality of the medieval and Christian tradition.

The papacy was thus acknowledging ever more explicitly the importance of Dante for contemporary Catholic culture. The reception that for centuries had found expression in readings, commentaries, churches, works of art and teaching was now emphasised by these initiatives promoted directly from Rome.

This context prepares the ground for the twentieth century. From then on, popes would not merely encourage the study of Dante: they would quote his verses, draw on his images in catechesis and theological reflection and eventually **devote to him some of the most significant documents ever written by popes about a poet**. The great Dante centenaries would offer privileged occasions to make that relationship manifest.

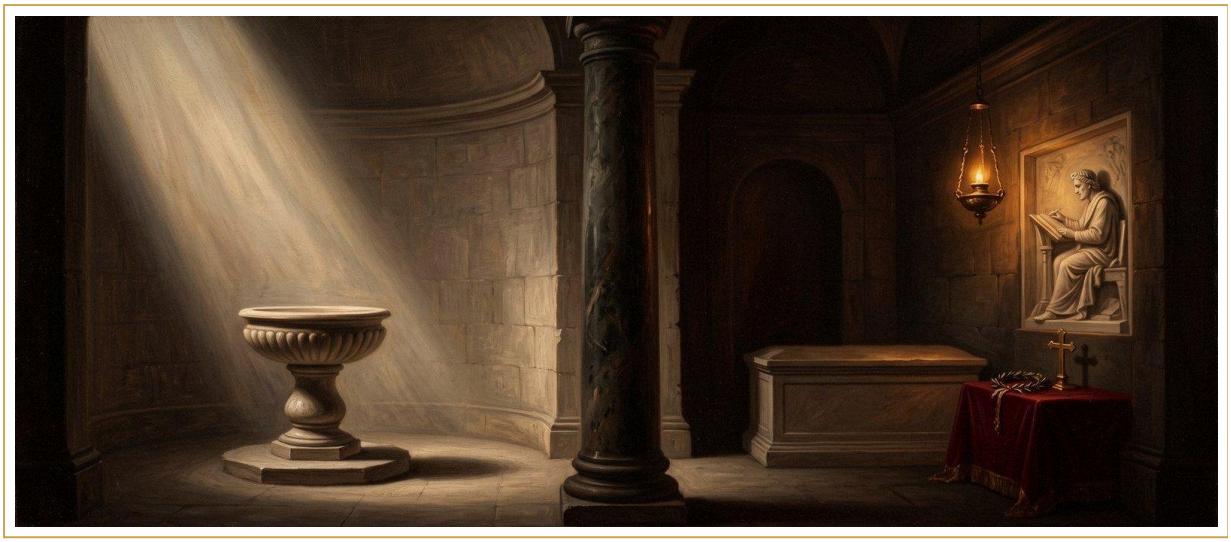
V

THE GREAT DANTE ANNIVERSARIES AND THE CHURCH

The great Dante anniversaries offer a privileged vantage point for understanding how the Church made ever more explicit a relationship that went back many centuries. Around these anniversaries we find **restorations of places linked to the poet, symbolic gestures, celebrations, academic initiatives and some of the principal papal texts devoted to Dante**.

Particularly prominent was the **sixth centenary of Dante's death, in 1921**. Benedict XV wanted the Church to take an active part in a commemoration that was taking on international dimensions. At the very beginning of his pontificate he had supported the restoration of the church of **San Francesco in Ravenna**, the former San Pietro Maggiore, where Dante's funeral had been held and beside which he had been buried (Benedict XV, 1914). In that 1914 letter he justified the participation of Catholics with an especially significant statement: **"l'Alighieri è nostro"**, "Alighieri is ours" (Benedict XV, 1914).

As the centenary approached, the pope also approved the programme of the Ravenna celebrations and, on **30 April 1921**, published the **encyclical *In praeclara summorum***, the first great papal document devoted entirely to the poet (Benedict XV, 1921). Benedict XV also wished to link the celebrations symbolically with two places that marked the two ends of Dante's life: **San Giovanni in Florence**, the Baptistery where he had been baptised, and **San Francesco in Ravenna**, beside his tomb. In a sense, the centenary thus spanned his whole Christian journey, from the baptismal font to the place of his death.



"Benedict XV imagined the 1921 centenary between two places: the font where Dante was baptised and the tomb in Ravenna where his pilgrimage ended."

The anniversary also gave rise to other initiatives within the Catholic world. That same year saw the publication of *Il più bel ricordo del VI centenario di Dante, ossia Catechismo della Dottrina Cristiana, pubblicato per ordine di Sua Santità Pio X, meditato e studiato con Dante*. Its author, who signed himself **"Minimo Sacerdote in Cristo"**, took the catechism approved by Pius X and accompanied its teachings with verses from the *Comedy* (Pius X, 1912; Minimo Sacerdote in Cristo, 1921). It was not a work personally commissioned by Pius X, who had died seven years earlier, but a commemorative initiative that shows how far Dante's poetry could also be used to support popular Christian formation.

A series of significant gestures took place in **1965, the seventh centenary of Dante's birth**. Throughout that year Paul VI undertook several initiatives combining memory, art, study and faith. On **19 September** he offered a **gold cross for Dante's tomb in Ravenna**, wishing to give the tomb an explicit sign of "religion and hope"; on **14 November** he sent a **gilded laurel wreath** to the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence; and, at the close of the Second Vatican Council, he gave the Council Fathers an **art edition of the *Divine Comedy*** (Paul VI, 1965b; Francis, 2021). A few days later he also announced the creation, at his own expense, of a **chair of Dante Philology at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart** (Paul VI, 1965b).



"Artistic recreation: at the close of the Second Vatican Council, in December 1965, Paul VI gave the Council Fathers an art edition of the Divine Comedy."

This gift to the Council Fathers carries a particular symbolic force. As bishops from all over the world were concluding one of the most important ecclesial events of the twentieth century, Paul VI placed Dante's work in their hands. The *Comedy* thus appeared not as a medieval relic, but as a text that could continue to accompany a Church that had just reflected deeply on its relationship with the human person and the contemporary world.

The great document of that centenary was the apostolic letter ***Altissimi cantus***, signed on **7 December 1965**, the very eve of the close of the Council. In it Paul VI took up and developed the old affirmation of belonging: **"Dante is ours"**, immediately making clear that this was not a matter of turning the poet into a confessional trophy, but of recognising the profound Christian roots of his work and the **responsibility to explore its riches** (Paul VI, 1965a). The pope's interpretation of the purpose, beauty and transforming power of the *Comedy* will be examined later.

Half a century later, the **750th anniversary of Dante's birth, in 2015**, offered a new occasion. Francis joined the celebrations with a message addressed to the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture on the occasion of a solemn event held in the Italian Senate (Francis, 2015). There he again presented Dante not simply as a historical figure to be commemorated, but as an author able to keep accompanying people today. An expression that Francis would later develop at length was already emerging forcefully: Dante as a **"prophet of hope"**.

The broadest commemoration of Francis's pontificate came with the **seventh centenary of Dante's death, in 2021**. The celebrations had begun in October 2020, when the pope received a delegation from the archdiocese of Ravenna-Cervia on the occasion of the opening of the Dante Year (Francis, 2020). The high point came on **25 March 2021** with the publication of the **apostolic letter *Candor lucis aeternae***.

The date had been carefully chosen. **25 March**, the solemnity of the Annunciation, marked the beginning of the year in old Florence and has traditionally been linked with the start of Dante's journey in the *Comedy*. The coincidence made it possible to connect the centenary with the mys-

tery of the Incarnation, central to the Christian vision of humankind and of God that runs through the poem (Francis, 2021).



On 25 March 2021, solemnity of the Annunciation and the beginning of the year in old Florence, Francis published *Candor lucis aeternae*.

The letter is also uniquely valuable for reconstructing this history because Francis begins by expressly recalling the popes who had honoured Dante before him. **He does not present his own intervention as a novelty, but as a new link in an already established papal tradition**. Benedict XV, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI appear as different stages of a relationship that each generation receives and interprets anew (Francis, 2021). The great themes of Francis's reading of Dante —hope, freedom, mercy, desire, grace and prophetic criticism— will be addressed in the following sections.

Taken together, these anniversaries show a remarkable continuity. **1921** made the sixth centenary of Dante's death an occasion to restore places linked to him, to proclaim his Christian roots publicly and to devote an encyclical to him; **1965** added symbolic gestures, academic initiatives and a great apostolic letter in the very context of the Second Vatican Council; **2015 and 2021** confirmed that this relationship was still alive in the twenty-first century.

But perhaps the gestures are as eloquent as the documents: restoring the church where his funeral was held, placing a gold cross beside his tomb, sending a laurel wreath to the Baptistery where he was baptised, handing the *Divine Comedy* to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, creating chairs for its study, or successively devoting an encyclical and apostolic letters to him. **The great anniversaries thus made visible, ever more publicly, a relationship that had been developing for centuries.**

VI

DANTE IN THE WORDS AND ACTIONS OF THE POPES: FROM LEO XIII TO BENEDICT XVI

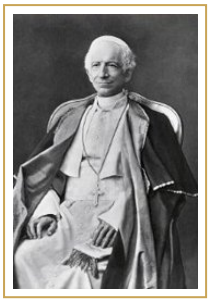
That the great papal pronouncements on Dante should be concentrated from the end of the nineteenth century and, above all, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries does not mean that until then the Church had kept its distance from the *Divine Comedy*. As we have seen, long before the popes began to devote specific documents to it, the poem had for centuries been read by religious and theologians, explained in churches and universities, used in preaching and incorporated into some of the great spaces of Christian art.

In the history of the Church, life has preceded explicit formulation, as happened with faith in the Trinity or in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Although the reception of a poet naturally does not belong to the same order as a truth of faith, this leads us to appreciate that before the nineteenth century esteem was expressed not so much in writing as through the cultural practice of the Church itself.

From the nineteenth century, that long-standing presence began to find an ever more explicit and continuous papal expression. Changes in the papacy's forms of communication, the development of Dante studies and the great centenaries offered popes new occasions to express in words what for centuries had also been manifested through commentaries, teaching, institutions and art.

From Leo XIII onwards, popes would promote studies and chairs, quote Dante's verses in speeches and catecheses, and find in the *Divine Comedy* an extraordinarily fruitful language for speaking about faith and reason, truth and beauty, freedom, hope, mercy and love. Each pope would approach the poet from different concerns, and precisely that diversity allows us to observe how a centuries-old relationship took on ever more conscious and explicit forms.

✦ Leo XIII: Dante and the Renewal of Christian Thought



With **Leo XIII (1878-1903)** an especially important stage begins. His interest in Dante must be understood within a much broader cultural project: the recovery of medieval thought and, in particular, of Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose philosophy he promoted with the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of 1879 (Leo XIII, 1879).

In that context he also gave new impetus to Dante studies. The removal of the *Monarchia* from the *Index librorum prohibitorum* has traditionally been placed during his pontificate although, as we have noted, the exact chronology of that removal is disputed. More certain and more significant was the creation of a **chair devoted to Dante at the Leonine Institute of Higher Literature**, linked to the Lateran University. The teaching was entrusted to the priest **Giacomo Poletto**, who would devote much of his life to studying the relationships between Dante, Scripture and the thought of Saint Thomas (Di Paola Dollorenzo, 2020).

The importance of the gesture goes beyond an academic matter. There was no need to "recover" the *Divine Comedy*, which had been present in Catholic culture for centuries; what was new was **making its study the explicit object of an initiative promoted by a papal institution**.

✦ Benedict XV: Dante, a Christian Poet



With **Benedict XV (1914-1922)** the relationship received, for the first time, a far-reaching papal formulation. We have already seen the importance of the 1921 centenary and of the encyclical *In praeclara summorum*; here what matters above all is the pope's interpretation of the poet.

For Benedict XV, what is essential is not that Dante was a Christian, but that **faith is one of the sources of his poetic greatness**. Scripture, the Fathers, Saint Thomas and the whole Christian tradition provided the *Comedy* with material that Dante's genius transformed into poetry. Adherence to the faith, the pope maintains, does not clip the wings of intelligence and artistic creation, but can raise them higher (Benedict XV, 1921).

Nor did Benedict XV ignore the poet's invectives against certain popes. He acknowledged their excesses, but stressed that they never destroyed his adherence to the Church or his reverence for the mission entrusted to Peter (Benedict XV, 1921). This question would reappear in the writings of Paul VI and Francis.

✦ Pius XI: Dante as a Papal Language



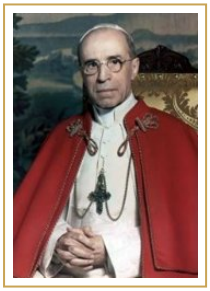
With **Pius XI (1922-1939)** another step was taken: Dante began to appear naturally in papal statements, not necessarily as the main subject, but as an **author able to express a Christian idea through his verses**.

Studies of the papal reception of Dante have noted how frequently Pius XI drew on the *Comedy* as a literary and religious authority (Merla, 2014). One of his favourite passages was the reference in the *Purgatorio* to "quella Roma onde Cristo è romano" (Alighieri, n.d., *Purg.* XXXII, 102). The expression allowed him to present Rome not simply as a political capital, but as a city marked by a Christian and universal vocation.

He also quoted Dante in his encyclicals. In *Rite expiatis* (1926), written for the seventh centenary of the death of Saint Francis of Assisi, he drew on canto XI of the *Paradiso* to present the saint as a sun sent by Providence and evoked Francis's marriage to Lady Poverty, which that same canto celebrates (Pius XI, 1926). In *Non abbiamo bisogno* (1931), after the Fascist government had dissolved the youth associations of Catholic Action, he used, without naming Dante, a line from canto V of the *Inferno* —"and the manner still offends me"— to express that he was pained as much by the fact itself as by the violent way in which it had been carried out (Pius XI, 1931).

This use is significant: **Dante no longer needed to be introduced or justified. His verses could enter papal discourse spontaneously as part of a shared cultural language.**

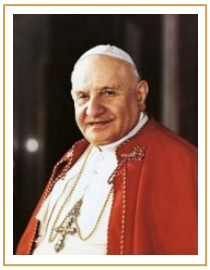
✦ Pius XII: Faith, Reason and a Language for Interpreting History



Pius XII (1939-1958) also drew repeatedly on Dante, particularly in addresses to the world of culture and science. He found in him an example of that harmony between rational knowledge, contemplation of the universe and faith which occupied an important place in his own thought (Merla, 2014).

In a 1939 address to the **Pontifical Academy of Sciences**, for example, he applied the "spiriti magni" of Dante's Limbo to the philosophers in Raphael's *School of Athens*: ancient reason had reached extraordinary heights, but could not by itself attain the fullness of revealed truth. The *Disputation of the Sacrament*, located in the same Vatican room, represented for Pius XII that further horizon. Dante thus helped him to present faith as the **culmination of rational knowledge rather than its adversary** (Pius XII, 1939).

✦ Saint John XXIII: Dante Returns to the Pontifical University

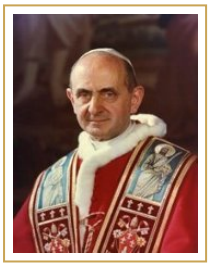


Saint John XXIII (1958-1963) made less abundant use of Dante in his speeches than some of his successors, but he was responsible for an institutional initiative of great importance. In the years immediately before the Second Vatican Council, he promoted the restoration at the **Pontifical Lateran University of the teaching of Dante's theology**, which had disappeared after the closure of the Leonine Institute in 1913. The course was entrusted to Monsignor **Giovanni Fallani**, one of the great Catholic Dante scholars of the twentieth century (Di Paola Dollorenzo, 2020).

To this academic initiative must be added a particularly expressive testimony from January **1963**. Receiving the participants in a congress promoted by the Dante Alighieri Society, John XXIII expressly linked the poet's name with an ideal of life in which **"the high values of culture, transfigured by faith"** contribute to the harmonious development of the person (John XXIII, 1963).

The reference is brief, but significant. While the Church was celebrating the Second Vatican Council and renewing its dialogue with the contemporary world, a pontifical university was once again studying the *Divine Comedy* from its theological dimension, and John XXIII himself presented Dante as a **meeting point between culture, human formation and Christian faith**.

✦ Saint Paul VI: Poetry Able to Transform the Human Person



In **Saint Paul VI (1963-1978)** we probably find the broadest and most systematic papal reflection on Dante before the twenty-first century. We have already seen the gestures made during the 1965 centenary; here what matters especially is what he found in the *Divine Comedy*.

In *Altissimi cantus* he presented the poem as a universal work able to embrace earth and heaven, time and eternity, personal experience, history, reason and revelation. But he gave special importance to its purpose: for Paul VI, the *Comedy* does not seek merely to arouse aesthetic admiration. It is a **"practical and transforming"** work, meant to lead humankind from disorder to wisdom, from sin to holiness and from misery to happiness (Paul VI, 1965a).

From this also derives his reading of it as a **poem of peace**: the *Inferno* shows peace lost, the *Purgatorio* peace hoped for and the *Paradiso* peace finally attained. Faith and reason —Beatrice and Virgil— appear as realities called to cooperate along the human journey.

Paul VI likewise attaches enormous importance to the relationship between **truth and beauty**. The loftiest arguments of theology may be inaccessible to many; poetry and art, by contrast, make truth visible and tangible. Dante achieved precisely that: **he turned the great theological questions into aesthetic experience, making beauty a vehicle of truth and goodness**.

That is why his famous "Dante is ours" should not be understood as appropriation. Recognising the poet's deep Christian roots obliges the Church, above all, to **explore the human and spiritual treasures of his work and make them bear fruit** (Paul VI, 1965a).

✦ John Paul I: Dante Explained in a Catechesis



The very brief pontificate of **John Paul I**, lasting only thirty-three days, offers a small but especially expressive example of how far Dante had already become a familiar language for catechesis.

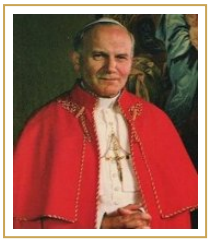
At the general audience of **20 September 1978**, devoted to hope, he drew on cantos XXIV, XXV and XXVI of the *Paradiso* to present the three theological virtues. With his customary simplicity he described Dante undergoing a kind of **"examination in Christianity"**: Saint Peter questions him on faith, Saint James on hope and Saint John on charity. Dante answers and "passes the exam with top marks" (John Paul I, 1978).

The scene is small, but significant. It is no longer a solemn document on Dante or a commemoration: **the *Divine Comedy* works spontaneously as an instrument for explaining Christian doctrine to the faithful**.



"John Paul I explained the theological virtues through Dante's examination before Peter, James and John: faith, hope and charity."

✦ Saint John Paul II: "Trasumanar" and the Dignity of the Human



With **Saint John Paul II (1978-2005)** Dante's presence once again became very intense. In 1985 he inaugurated the exhibition *Dante in the Vatican*, conceived by Giovanni Fallani, and throughout his pontificate he turned to the poet many times (John Paul II, 1985).

One of the Dantean concepts that most interested him was the verb **trasumanar**, coined by Dante at the beginning of the *Paradiso*. John Paul II saw in it more than linguistic daring: it expressed the possibility that **the human being may be raised up by God without thereby losing his or her humanity**. In his interpretation, Dante succeeded in ensuring that "the weight of the human" did not destroy the divine present in humankind and, at the same time, that the greatness of the divine did not cancel the value of the human (John Paul II, 1985).

This idea is closely bound up with his vision of art. For John Paul II, the *Comedy* manages to speak of eternal life and the mystery of God through **theological thought transformed by the power of poetry and image**. Dante was thus a privileged example of the capacity of art to make the transcendent perceptible. In the final section of his *Letter to Artists* he again turned to the *Paradiso* to propose the Virgin as model and inspiration for artistic creation (John Paul II, 1999).

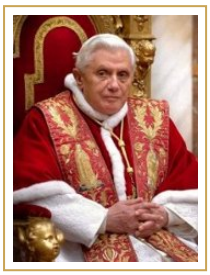


"Trasumanar: for John Paul II, Dante shows the human being raised up by God without losing his humanity."

Especially beautiful was the gathering held at **Castel Gandolfo on 31 August 1997**. After listening to a reading of the last canto of the *Paradiso*, John Paul II invited those present to become **"pilgrims of the spirit"** themselves and to let Dante lead them to the contemplation of "the love that

moves the sun and the other stars". Seven centuries later, he said, Dante's poetry was still able to instil courage and hope in people today (John Paul II, 1997).

✦ Benedict XVI: the Human Face of the Love that Moves the Universe



With **Benedict XVI (2005-2013)** we reach one of the deepest theological interpretations of Dante ever offered by a pope. In January 2006, presenting the content of his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, Joseph Ratzinger turned precisely to the last canto of the *Paradiso* (Benedict XVI, 2005).

Dante reaches the end of his journey before the eternal Light and at last contemplates that which sustains all reality. Benedict XVI observes that the image of **"the love that moves the sun and the other stars"** retains something of the Aristotelian conception of love as a force that moves the cosmos, but Dante discovers something radically new: **at the centre of that Light there appears a human face, Jesus Christ**.

There Benedict XVI finds the decisive difference between the unmoved mover of Greek thought and the Christian God. The force that sustains the universe is not an impersonal energy or a reality indifferent to human destiny: **it is a Love that has taken on a human face, flesh and heart**.

It is hard to find a more eloquent example of the fruitfulness Dante achieved within the Church's thought. **The last canto of a work written seven centuries earlier served a theologian pope to explain the core of his first encyclical on Christian love.**



"In the last canto, Dante discovers a human face at the centre of the Light. For Benedict XVI, that is the difference of the Christian God."

✦ An Ever More Natural Tradition

Taken together, these pontificates show **how explicit and varied the uses of Dante have been:** Leo XIII institutionalises his study; Benedict XV vindicates the Christian roots of his genius; Pius XI naturally incorporates his verses into papal language; Pius XII uses his images to dialogue with science and to pass moral judgement on history; John XXIII returns Dante's theology to the pontifical university; Paul VI discovers in the *Comedy* a power of human transformation; John Paul I uses it to catechise; John Paul II finds in it an extraordinary synthesis of humanity and transcendence; and Benedict XVI turns to the last canto of the *Paradiso* to speak of the very mystery of the Christian God.

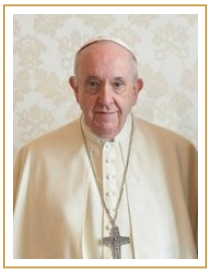
Dante had thus gone from being read, commented on and used by religious in medieval churches and convents to becoming, seven centuries later, **a regular interlocutor of the popes for speaking about faith, culture, beauty, freedom, hope and the human encounter with God**.

VII

DANTE IN THE CHURCH OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Dante's presence in the Church is still very much alive. In the twenty-first century his verses continue to be used to speak about central questions of Christian and human experience. With Francis this reading acquired an especially pastoral dimension; with Leo XIV, the last line of the *Divine Comedy* once again became, in 2026, a key for interpreting the present.

✦ Francis: Dante, Travelling Companion and Prophet of Hope



Francis turned to Dante repeatedly during his pontificate and consciously took up the long tradition of his predecessors. In his very first encyclical, *Lumen fidei* (Francis, 2013), he drew on canto XXIV of the *Paradiso*, where Dante describes faith as a "spark" that becomes a flame and shines like a star. The pope uses that image to present faith as a light that grows and progressively illuminates the path of life.

But the fundamental key to his reading lies in the image of the **journey**. For Francis, the *Divine Comedy* is not only a work to be admired, studied or preserved: it is an itinerary in which readers can recognise themselves. As he pointed out in 2015 and developed at length in *Candor lucis aeternae*, Dante sets out from darkness and bewilderment to advance towards freedom, fulfilment and the contemplation of God. That is why he can present him as a **"prophet of hope"**: someone able to show that human beings are not condemned to remain forever in the place where they have lost their way (Francis, 2015; 2021).

This interpretation gives particular importance to **desire**. Human life is moved by a longing for happiness that no limited reality can fully satisfy. Dante turns that desire into a path: the pilgrim passes through sin, discovers his disordered affections, gradually recovers his freedom and comes to understand that what he was seeking finds its fulfilment in God. For Francis, the *Comedy* thus becomes an extraordinary poetic representation of the human condition.

That path is also an **education of freedom**. Salvation does not appear as something imposed from outside. Dante constantly receives help, but he has to walk. Freedom, wounded and disoriented, must be awakened, purified and reordered towards the good. In the *Inferno* he contemplates the

consequences of certain choices; in the *Purgatorio* he learns that it is still possible to change; in the *Paradiso* he discovers a freedom that reaches its fullness precisely in communion with the good and with God (Francis, 2021).

Hence the importance of **mercy and hope**. The *Comedy* does not present only a universe of justice and moral responsibility. Between Hell and Paradise rises Purgatory: the realm of those who can still grow, acknowledge their errors, purify their desires and learn to love rightly. Dante's journey thus affirms that evil and bewilderment need not be the last word on a life.

Francis also gives a privileged place to the women who set the pilgrim's salvation in motion: **Mary, Lucy and Beatrice**. Dante does not leave the dark wood alone. Even before he is aware of his situation, someone has cared for him and mobilised the help he needs. The initiative of love precedes human effort and then accompanies its free response (Francis, 2021).



"Francis stresses that Dante does not leave the dark wood alone: Mary, Lucy and Beatrice have taken care of him before he knows it."

Dante's harsh invectives against certain churchmen also occupy an important place in Francis's interpretation, and he even speaks of **"prophetic criticism"**. Hence, for Francis, the *Divine Comedy* is not simply a literary monument to be preserved. Dante "asks not only to be read, commented on, studied and analysed": **he invites the reader to become a traveller too** (Francis, 2021). **The poem's relevance lies precisely in its capacity to accompany human beings from their own dark woods towards a freer, reconciled and fuller life.**

✦ Leo XIV: Love Still Moves



The continuity of this Dantean presence has also become clear with **Leo XIV**. On **22 August 2026**, in his address to the Rimini *Meeting*, the pope found the starting point for his reflection precisely in the line with which Dante had closed the *Divine Comedy* seven centuries earlier: "*L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*" (Leo XIV, 2026).

The line made it possible to formulate a deeply contemporary question: **does that Love still have force in a world marked by conflict, confrontation and mistrust?** Leo XIV's answer was unequivocal: "The love that moves the sun and the other stars", he said, **"has not disappeared, has not lost its vigour or its intensity"** (Leo XIV, 2026).

This interpretation strikingly extends the one offered twenty years earlier by Benedict XVI. Dante's love is not an abstract cosmic principle. **It moves**: it acts, awakens, calls, draws the human being out of self-enclosure. And for Leo XIV's Christian reading, its concrete historical form is found in the love of God revealed in Christ, able to break the logic by which evil is answered with more evil.



""The love that moves the sun and the other stars has not disappeared" (Leo XIV, 2026)."

That is why the pope can immediately carry Dante's line into the present. In the face of a culture marked by confrontation and power, he proposes what he calls the **"realism of mercy"**: the conviction that the transformation of history does not come only from force, but also from the capacity to recognise the other, even the adversary, as a brother (Leo XIV, 2026). The movement that Dante contemplated in the universe thus becomes a criterion for acting within history.

Leo XIV ended his address by returning once more to Dante, wishing that the Love "that moves the sun and the other stars" might continue to guide those present. **The last line of a medieval work could still serve, in 2026, as an immediately understandable expression of a Christian conviction about God, the human person and history.**

✦ A Voice that Still Speaks

Dante **is a natural part of the cultural and spiritual language of the Church.** The *Divine Comedy* can be read as the pilgrimage of the human being, a school of freedom, a story of conversion, a celebration of mercy, a prophetic call to renewal or a contemplation of the Love that sustains the universe. Each age discovers new emphases in it without exhausting a work whose roots remain profoundly Christian.



"Recent popes and the Divine Comedy"

The journey that began with the **first commentators of the 1320s** thus acquires a remarkable continuity and, **seven centuries later, the Christian fruitfulness of the *Divine Comedy* remains alive.**

VIII

PROPHETIC CRITICISM: THE POPES AND DANTE'S INVECTIVES

Dante's deep reception within the Church raises an inevitable question: **how have the popes interpreted the harsh accusations that the *Divine Comedy* levels against some of their predecessors?** Dante places popes among the damned, announces the infernal destiny of others still living, and puts in the mouth of Saint Peter himself some of the severest words in the whole poem against ecclesiastical corruption.

The answer actually begins with Dante himself. His extraordinary freedom in judging the conduct of certain popes coexists with an unequivocal recognition of the dignity of the mission they exercise. In canto XIX of the *Inferno*, after violently rebuking **Nicholas III** for simony, Dante says that only his **"reverence for the supreme keys"** the pope had held in life keeps him from using even harsher words (Alighieri, n.d., *Inf.* XIX). He can condemn the man without scorning the keys of Peter that were entrusted to him.



"Dante condemns Nicholas III, but only his 'reverence for the supreme keys' keeps him from using even harsher words (Inferno XIX)."

Even more revealing is the case of **Boniface VIII**. Few popes are so closely linked to Dante's political misfortune and exile, and the *Comedy* repeatedly anticipates his damnation. Yet when, in the *Purgatorio*, he recalls the outrage of Anagni in 1303, in which men linked to Philip IV of France

seized and humiliated the pope, Dante sees that violence as something graver than an attack on a political adversary: he sees Christ taken captive again **"in his vicar"** (Alighieri, n.d., *Purg.* XX). The man he judges with great severity remains, by virtue of his ministry, the vicar of Christ.

This tension —**extraordinarily free criticism of whoever occupies the see and deep respect for what the see represents**— would be precisely one of the keys used by modern popes to interpret Dante's invectives.

✦ Benedict XV: Real Abuses and Reverence for the "Supreme Keys"

Benedict XV addressed the problem directly in *In praeclara summorum* in 1921. He did not try to soften Dante's harshness. He acknowledged that the poet had attacked some popes of his time with a bitterness that could overstep the limits, and he related part of that vehemence to political struggles, the injustices suffered and the bitterness of exile (Benedict XV, 1921).

But he immediately introduced a fundamental nuance: there was also **conduct deserving of reproach** in the Church of that time, which had provoked similar denunciations from men renowned for their holiness. Dante might be carried away by his political passions or be mistaken in certain judgements; that did not automatically make the evils he denounced imaginary.

For Benedict XV, the decisive proof lay in what Dante never called into question. However vehement his attacks on churchmen, **"the respect due to the Church" and reverence for the "Supreme Keys"** never disappeared (Benedict XV, 1921). The pope thus found in Dante himself a fundamental distinction: **the conduct of the man is one thing, and the dignity of the mission entrusted to him is another**.

✦ Paul VI: Dante's Severity Should Not Be Hidden

Paul VI took up the question in *Altissimi cantus* (1965) in an even more explicit tone. After proclaiming that **"Dante is ours"** because of his faith, his love for Christ and his bond with the Church, he immediately recalls that his voice was raised, "cutting and severe", against more than one pope, and that he levelled harsh reproaches at ecclesiastical institutions and representatives.

> *"Dante is ours"*
>
> PAUL VI, ALTISSIMI CANTUS (1965)

And he adds something particularly significant: **the Church has no reason to hide it**. Paul VI acknowledges the influence of Dante's temperament and political passion —recalling that he was even more merciless towards his beloved Florence—, but he also admits that his censures could be

directed against **"deplorable faults"**. What is fundamental is that this severity never broke "his firm Catholic faith" or his **"filial affection for holy Church"** (Paul VI, 1965a).

The expression "filial affection" offers an especially fruitful key. It allows us to interpret the violence of some pages of the *Comedy* not as the hostility of someone who looks at the Church from outside, but as **the indignation of someone who feels part of it and finds intolerable the distance between what it is called to be and what some of its representatives make of it**.

Dante's severity thus springs, to a large extent, from the height of his expectations. Precisely because he considers the mission entrusted to Peter sacred, he judges especially harshly those who use that mission to enrich themselves, favour particular interests or increase their temporal power.

✦ Francis: from Uncomfortable Criticism to "Prophetic Criticism"

With **Francis** a new shift takes place. *Candor lucis aeternae* does not merely justify Dante's invectives or explain why they are compatible with his faith: **it integrates them positively into the poet's Christian mission**.

Recalling the words of Paul VI, Francis expressly states that recognising Dante's Christian greatness does not exempt the Church from welcoming his words of **"prophetic criticism"** against those who are called to proclaim Christ and end up representing only themselves (Francis, 2021).

The idea gains special force in canto XXVII of the *Paradiso*. After Saint Peter's terrible invective against Boniface VIII and against the corruption of those who occupy his see, the apostle commands Dante not to keep silent, when he returns to the world, about what he has seen:

> *"open your mouth / and do not hide what I do not hide"*
>
> (ALIGHIERI, N.D., *Par.* XXVII)



"Saint Peter commands Dante: 'open your mouth / and do not hide what I do not hide'. Francis reads it as a prophetic mission."

Francis reads these words as a true **prophetic mission**. Dante's denunciation reaches believers, "whether Popes or simple faithful", when they betray their adherence to Christ, turn the Church into an instrument of their own interests or idolise power and wealth. But the aim of that denunciation is not to destroy the Church: through it Dante becomes, precisely, the spokesman of a **"profound renewal"** (Francis, 2021).

The development is significant. **Benedict XV** acknowledges that political passions and the wounds of exile help to explain some of Dante's excesses, but he also admits the existence of real abuses. **Paul VI** states that the Church should not hide those censures and interprets them in the light of the poet's "filial affection". **Francis** goes a step further and presents them as part of his own prophetic mission.

These are not three incompatible interpretations, but **three successive emphases on one and the same reality**. The question gradually ceases to be only how to reconcile the invectives against certain popes with Dante's Christian faith, and becomes what that critical freedom can say to the Church itself.

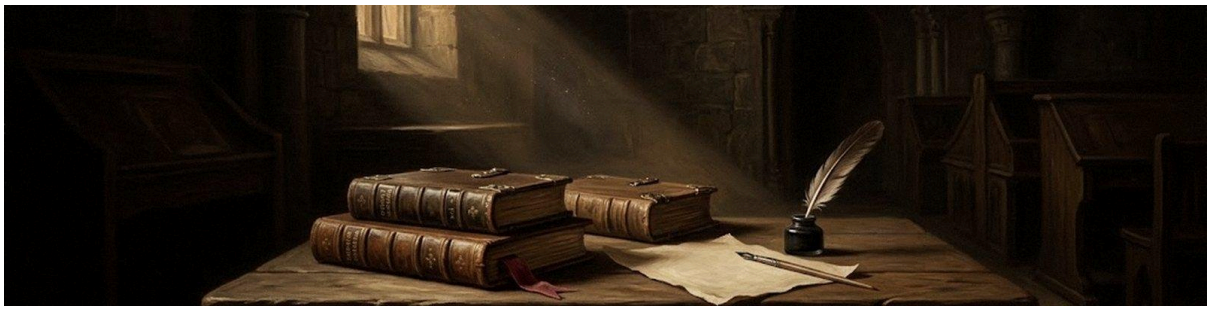
IX

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH FIND IN DANTE?

After more than seven centuries of readings, commentaries, images, teaching, commemorations and papal documents, one question may be asked: **what has the Church found in Dante that makes it return to his work again and again?**

The answers vary with the ages and the popes. It is not a matter of turning Dante into a systematic theologian or of adopting all his opinions. His extraordinary fruitfulness springs rather from another capacity: **that of turning the great questions of faith into human experience, images and poetry**. Some dimensions recur with particular continuity.

✦ Faith, Theology and Beauty



One of them is the relationship between **faith and artistic creation**. Since Benedict XV, the popes have insisted that the Christian depth of the *Divine Comedy* is not a limitation of its literary greatness, but one of its principal sources. From Scripture, the liturgy, the Fathers, Saint Thomas and the whole of medieval Christian culture, Dante received a rich vision of humankind and of the universe. But he did not merely repeat it: **he transformed it into characters, landscapes, encounters, music, light and beauty** (Benedict XV, 1921).

Paul VI perceived this union of truth and beauty with special clarity. Theology does not weigh on the *Comedy* as a doctrinal addition. Dante makes ideas take on a face and invisible realities become imaginable. Sin is contemplated in those who have chosen it; purification is experienced by climb-

ing a mountain; grace acts through encounters and mediations; ultimate happiness is expressed through light, music, movement and love (Paul VI, 1965a).

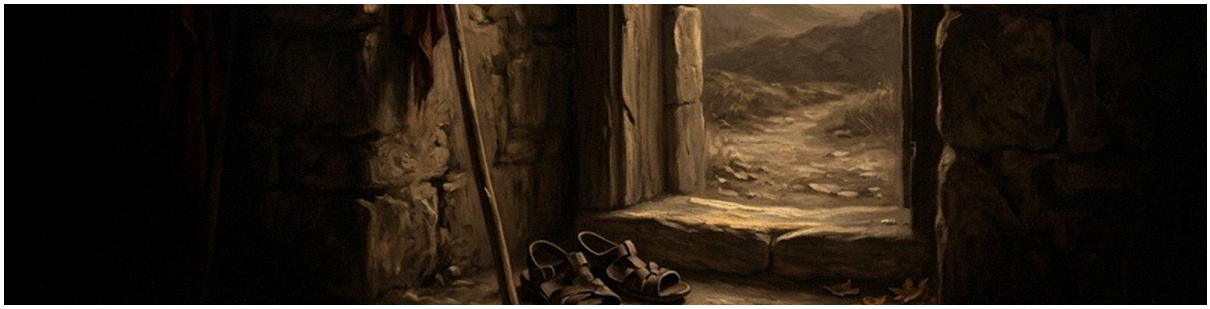
John Paul II would speak, in this sense, of **theological thought transformed by the power of art**. A treatise can explain a doctrine intellectually; Dante also succeeds in making it visible, tangible and imaginable (John Paul II, 1985). Here too lies one of the reasons for his extraordinary influence on Christian art: the *Comedy* provided images capable of representing some of the last realities of the faith that lie beyond ordinary experience.

Through poetry, Dante made imaginable what theology expresses through concepts. A particularly eloquent example appears in canto IX of the *Purgatorio*. The theological tradition before Dante had distinguished two complementary dimensions in the power of the keys entrusted to Peter: the **discernment needed to judge the penitent** and the **authority to bind and absolve**. Dante turns that theological distinction into a concrete and memorable image. The angel guarding the gate of Purgatory draws from his garment **two keys: one of silver and one of gold**. The first requires "more art and skill", because it is the one that undoes the knot; the second is "more precious" and represents the power to absolve (Alighieri, n.d., *Purg.* IX).

The later fortune of that image is especially suggestive. **The combination of a gold key and a silver key would also become established in papal iconography and heraldry.** Dante's formulation is thus one of the earliest and most memorable literary testimonies to a pairing of colours that would come to be permanently associated with the keys of Peter. In the Sistine Chapel itself it already appears in Perugino's *Delivery of the Keys*, where Christ hands Peter a golden key and a silver one, and it reappears half a century later in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, where Saint Peter, standing beside Christ, again holds the two keys.

It cannot be established that these depictions depend directly on Dante. But the continuity of the image is extraordinarily expressive: **a distinction formulated by theology as discernment and power takes on in Dante the visible form of two keys, silver and gold, and those same metals later reappear in some of the great Christian images of Saint Peter and in papal symbolism itself.** It is an especially clear example of how Dante's poetry could transform a theological idea into an image capable of remaining in the memory.

✦ The Human Journey: Freedom, Grace and Transformation



The Church has also found in Dante an extraordinary representation of **the human being on the way**. The *Divine Comedy* begins with a man who is lost. Dante does not know exactly how he came to the dark wood, but he must recognise where he is before he can get out of it. From that moment, the whole journey can be read as an education of freedom.

In the *Inferno* he contemplates the consequences of choices that have ended up imprisoning those who made them; in the *Purgatorio* he discovers that desire can be reordered and that it is possible to learn to love again; in the *Paradiso* he contemplates a freedom fully realised, not as the absence of bonds, but as the harmony of the will with the good.

But Dante does not travel that road alone. **He constantly receives help**. Virgil, Beatrice, Lucy, Mary and many other mediations make his progress possible. Grace does not replace his freedom: it awakens it, accompanies it, heals it and leads it towards its fulfilment. This dimension has acquired particular relevance in the readings of John Paul II and Francis.

John Paul II found a privileged expression of this elevation in the verb Dante coined at the beginning of the *Paradiso*: **trasumanar**. Reaching God does not mean destroying or despising what is human. The divine does not compete with humankind: **it transforms and elevates it**. The desire for truth, beauty, love and happiness is not to be eliminated, but led towards what can fully satisfy it (John Paul II, 1985).

The *Comedy* thus offers a profoundly affirmative vision of the person. Human beings can lose their way, but they can also recognise where they are; they can grow used to evil, but they can also learn; they can need help without ceasing to be free. **Dante's journey is, ultimately, a journey of transformation.**

✦ Justice, Mercy and Hope



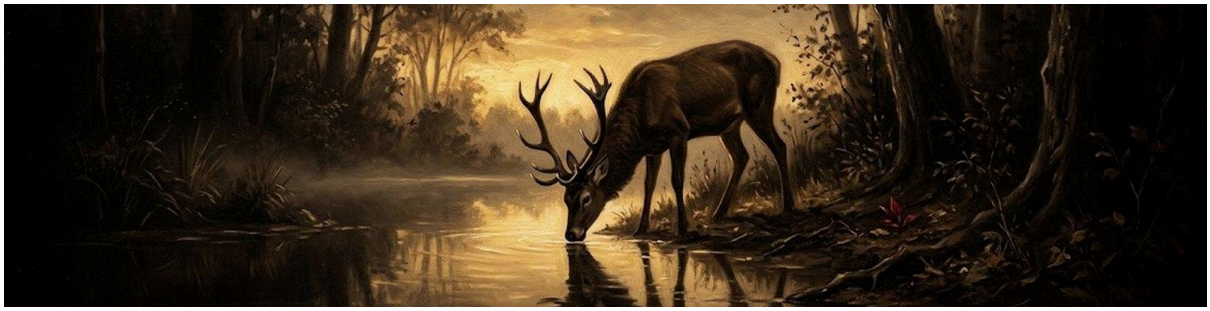
Few literary works have imagined **moral responsibility** as powerfully as the *Divine Comedy*. Choices have consequences and human freedom matters. But modern popes, especially Francis, have insisted that justice does not exhaust the meaning of the poem.

Between Hell and Paradise rises **Purgatory**. There are those who have recognised the disorder of their lives and can still change. The souls neither deny their errors nor evade their consequences: they acknowledge them, accept purification and move towards ever greater freedom.

That is why Francis has been able to present Dante as a **"prophet of hope"**. Hope does not consist in denying evil, minimising responsibility or pretending that all choices are equivalent. It consists in affirming that, as long as the road remains open, **human beings need not remain forever shut up in what they have been**. In Purgatory no one is shut up in what they were: it is the realm of those who can still change (Francis, 2015; 2021).

The *Comedy* begins with a man lost in a wood and ends with that same man contemplating God. Between these two extremes unfolds the possibility of recognising evil, accepting help, purifying desire, recovering freedom and learning to love. **Dante's justice does not cancel mercy; it makes visible the seriousness of a transformation that needs to be real.**

✦ Human Desire and the Love that Fulfils It



Finally, many of the papal readings seem to converge on a reality that runs through the whole *Comedy*: **desire**.

Dante's human being desires constantly. He may desire wrongly, love in a disordered way or expect from a limited good what it cannot give him; but he cannot stop searching. In the *Purgatorio* this intuition becomes a true pedagogy of love: the ultimate problem is not simply whether we love or not, but **what we love, how we love it and what place we give to each thing**.

The whole journey leads gradually towards the discovery of what can fulfil that desire. That is why Benedict XVI found in the last canto of the *Paradiso* an extraordinary poetic formulation of Christianity. At the end of his journey, Dante discovers that the principle sustaining the universe is not an anonymous force. At the centre of the Light appears **a human face: Christ**. The Love that moves the cosmos has entered history and taken on the human condition (Benedict XVI, 2006).

Francis returned repeatedly to that ending, and Leo XIV did so again in 2026. **"The love that moves the sun and the other stars"** has thus become one of the most fruitful Dantean lines in the contemporary papal reception, because it concentrates in a single image an essential conviction of the Christian faith: **at the ultimate foundation of reality lies not absurdity, force or necessity, but Love** (Francis, 2021; Leo XIV, 2026).

✦ A Work that Still Bears Fruit

Faith and reason, theology and beauty, freedom and grace, justice and mercy, criticism and belonging, desire and fulfilment: perhaps one of the reasons for Dante's extraordinary Christian fruitfulness is precisely **his capacity to hold together realities that we often tend to separate**.

The Church has not found in the *Divine Comedy* a manual of doctrine or a work whose statements must be accepted without discussion. It has found something different: **one of the most powerful poetic representations ever written of the human being before God**.

That is why the *Comedy* could be commented on just a few years after its author's death, explained in churches and universities, used by preachers, read by religious and theologians, incorporated into cathedrals and papal palaces, made an instrument of teaching, quoted by popes and proposed, more than seven centuries later, as a **travelling companion for people today**.

Perhaps that is why it is still alive. The question that set Dante's journey in motion remains ours as well: **how to pass from the wood in which we can lose ourselves to the Love in which we can at last find ourselves.**



X

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«L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle»

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DANTE AND THE CHURCH

Seven Centuries of a Continuous and Fruitful Dialogue

JOSÉ MARÍA DÍAZ PUENTE · NOVEMBER 2026

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The Divine Comedy, canto by canto: summaries, reflections and reading keys