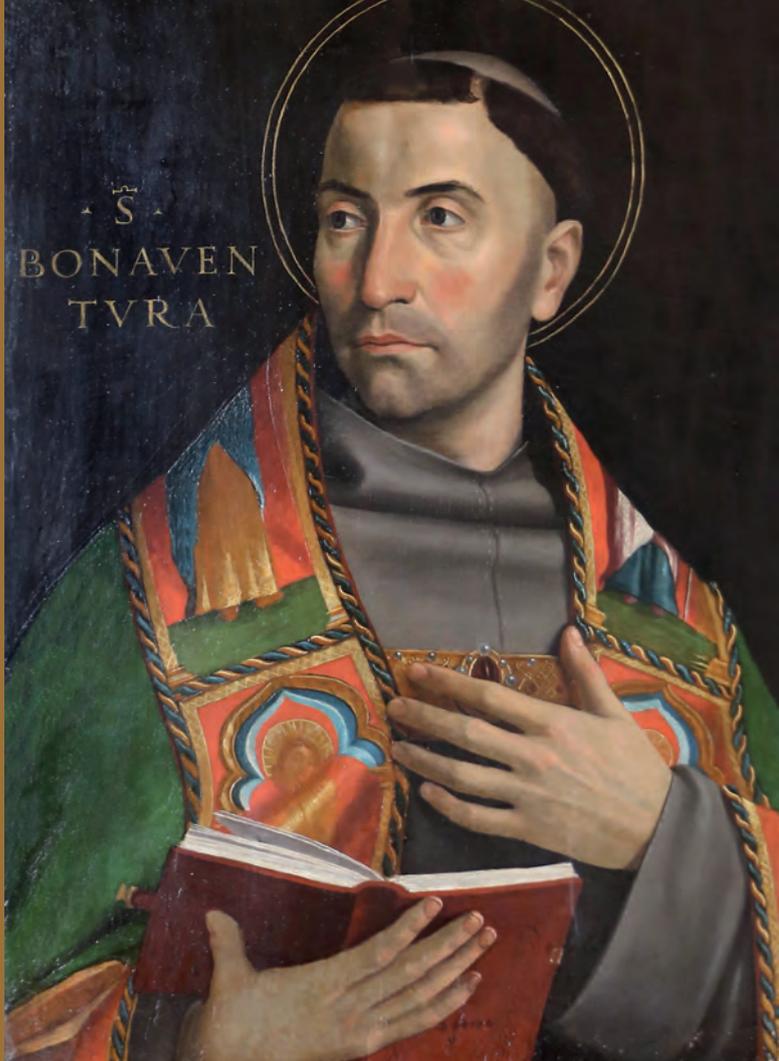


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St. Bonaventure

A Voice Still Relevant Today

A LETTER FROM THE MINISTERS GENERAL
OF THE FIRST ORDER AND THE THIRD ORDER REGULAR
on the 750th anniversary of the Death of St. Bonaventure.

Lecto genua
mea ad do
minū prem
dñi nri ihu
xpi ex quo oī
pinitas in celo et in terra
noīatur vt det vobis scōz
diuicias glē sue virtutē co
roborari per spm ei⁹ in
teriori hoīe habuere xpm p
fide in cordibz vris in cari
tate radicati et fundati
vt possitis pprehendere
cū oībus scīs que sit lon
gitudō latitudō sublimi
tas et profudū Dare etiā
freminere scie mītatē xpm
vt impleamini in oem
plenitudinē dei Magn⁹
doctor gentiū et predi
tor veritatis diuino imple
tus spū tāquā vas elec
tū et scīficatū in hoc ver
bo aperit sacre scriptu
re que theologica dicit
ortū pgressū et statū in
sinuans ortū septure que
attendit scdm influētiā
būssie trinitatis pgres

sū aut scdm exigētiā
hūane capacitatis. sta
tū vero siue fructū scdm
suy habūdanciā sepleis
sime felicitatis Virtus nā
q̄ nō est p hūanā inuesti
gationē s̄ p diuinā reue
lacionē que fluit a p̄lu
minū ex quo oīs p̄nitās
in celo et in terra noīatur
a quo per filiū ei⁹ ihu xpm
manat in nos sp̄s scīs et
per spm scōm didicē et dis
tribuentē dona singulis
put vult dat fides. et per
fide hātat xpc in cordibz
nris. Hec ē noticiā ihu xpi
ex q̄ originalit⁹ manat fir
mitas et intelligētiā tota
sacre septure Vnde et in
possibile ē qd̄ aliq̄s i ip̄as
ingrediat agnoscedā n̄
prius fide xpi habeat sibi
infusa tāq̄ tota sacre septure
lucernā et ianuā et etiā
fundamētū Est enī ip̄a
fides oīm scīalū et luā
cionū q̄ diu peregrinam⁹
a dño fundamētū stabili
ens et lucerna dirigens



February 2, 2024
PRESENTATION OF THE LORD

*To All the Brothers
of the Franciscan First Order
and Third Order Regular,
and to All the Brothers and Sisters
of the Franciscan Family*



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The 750th anniversary of the death of the Seraphic Doctor (d. July 15, 1274), gives us an opportunity not only to remember and celebrate the service he rendered to the Order and the entire Church, but also to repropose him as a gift that is still valid for our time.

During his visit at the 1974 international conference celebrating the 700th anniversary, Pope Paul VI recommended St. Bonaventure “to all the children of the Church ... so that, by careful meditation on his message, they may become an effective witness in the Church and in the world.”

Aware of his importance, but also that he is not always as well known and appreciated as he should be, even within our own circles, we want to accept again the invitation of Pope Paul VI by sharing some reflections on his life and message, certain that it will be a useful gift for us in the Franciscan Order to better live our commitment to the Church and the world.

It is not easy to reproduce in a few lines the theological and Franciscan richness contained in the nine volumes of the *Opera omnia* of Saint Bonaventure. We have chosen, therefore, to highlight some aspects of the three main areas of his activity in chronological order of their development. First, Bonaventure was a theology master at the University of Paris until 1257, when he left the position after being elected general minister of the Order, a position which he held continuously until the end of his life. Dur-



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ing the time he embraced these two commitments he also revealed himself as a mystic – the third area of his activity which benefited the Order and the Church. Through this, he was able to place his experience of God at the service of others especially through spiritual direction.

This letter also affords us the opportunity to express our gratitude to the many scholars, friars and lay people who, with passion and perseverance, have dedicated themselves over the last fifty years to this great and complex figure of a theologian, friar and mystic, thereby keeping his memory alive and demonstrating the richness and relevance of his thought.

Master of theology: with his mind on its journey toward God

Bonaventure was born in 1217 in Bagnoregio, a small and very quaint town in central Italy, not far from Viterbo. In the year 1235, thanks to his father's financial situation, he was sent to Paris to study the liberal arts. There, he came to know the Order of Friars Minor, which he decided to join in 1243. He was asked to continue in Paris with a full academic course of studies in theology, where in the year 1252/53 he obtained the degree of *magister theologiae* in the study of the friars of Francis.

His productivity in theology was prolific. To recall just a few titles: the four large volumes of the *Commentary on the Sentences*, the *Theological Questions* together with the *Theological Sermons*, the famous 1259 text of the *Journey of the Mind into God*, and finally the three series of university lectures (*Collationes*) held in Paris in the last years of his life, of which the most famous is certainly the *Hexaemeron*. However, the most interesting work that retraces his theology is surely the *Breviloquium*, composed around 1257 as a theological synthesis offered to his students and to all the friars. In this work, Bonaventure attempts to “abbreviate” and make more easily accessible the description of the plan of



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Civita di Bagnoregio

salvation found in Scripture, which, “expressed both in the writings of the saints and in those of the doctors in a sometimes common manner,” is in danger of being perceived by beginners as “confused, disordered, unexplored like an impenetrable forest” (*Breviloquium*, Prol. 6:5). From this work we recall some significant elements of his theology.

This first aspect is related to a passionate approach to doing theology, which requires a disposition towards methodology: those who study theology must possess the discipline of the mind, moved by devoted, passionate and ardent love. Therefore, among the labors friars are called to do is the intellectual one, equally or perhaps more arduous and demanding than the manual one. In practice, it is the passing of the credible (what is believed by faith) to the intelligible, giving the reasons for it, for only then will the love of what is believed reach its culmination, giving to reason the ultimate argument for adhering to faith.

This effort is burdensome and tiring, because the teacher is called “to bring to light the hidden things.” And so, as Bonaventure notes in advance, once again in the prologue of the *Breviloquium*, “no one will find this task



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Cesare Mariani,
*Assumption of the
Virgin Mary in a Vision of
St. Bonaventure* (1863).
Rome, Church
of Santa Lucia
del Gonfalone

easy except with a long practice in reading the text and entrusting its literal meaning to memory” (Prol. 6:1). All of this will only be possible if the “purpose and objectives” are clear and we can take on the effort of understanding faith with seriousness and commitment: “Then we shall truly know that love which surpasses all knowledge, and thus we shall be filled with the fullness of God” (Prol. 4). For theology enables us to grow in goodness and embrace salvation: *ut boni fiamus et salvemur* (Prol. 5:2).

The *Breviloquium* highlights a further element of Bonaventure’s theology: Christocentrism. In the sevenfold division of the text, which begins with the treatise on the “One and Triune” God and culminates in the eschatological return of man to God, the text’s center is occupied by the Incarnate Word. In this perspective Christ emerges as the key to salvation history, the “perfection of the universe,” the source of our re-creation. The Christian life unfolds, then, by entering with intelligence and love into the mystery of salvation history, which has Christ as its ultimate logic.



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Only through Christ can one reach the intelligent wonder of God! In Bonaventure's theology we can ultimately hear the sentiments of Francis of Assisi who exclaimed: "Therefore we must desire nothing else other than the only true God, who is the full good, every good, all the good, true and supreme good, *which alone is good!*" (Rnb 23:9, FF 70). As a true son of the poverello, Bonaventure contemplated the Most High as an infinite mystery of goodness, which gives itself through Christ in every circumstance. The Father, the great source of goodness, communicates totally and infinitely his divine nature to his beloved Son, the "median person" of the Trinity. In their mutual breath of Love, they are united in the bond of the Spirit, the "gift from which all other gifts have been given."

The expressive and productive moment of Good is the creative act of the cosmos that remains in continuous expansion, not only in terms of nature but also of knowledge. Both being and knowing reveal the same origin and the same purpose: the fullness and expansion of the Good. Both are written in the "Book of Creation" and can be read by the intelligence and love of man, called to recognize and love the Triune God in everything. This is precisely what Pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato Si'*, explicitly re-proposing Bonaventure: "*the Trinity has left its mark on all creation [...] each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure*" (No. 239) from this - again appealing to the Saint of Bagnoregio - should result a "universal reconciliation with every creature" (No. 66). And this is possible because as Bonaventure says, "The divine Word is in every creature and therefore every creature speaks of God" (*Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, c. 1 ad resp.).

The human person is a privileged reflection of the relationship within the Trinity, who, with the infused gift of the Holy Spirit, brings to perfection the mystery as it is manifested in the entire universe. It is in this anthropological context that Bonaventure qualifies the human person as a "microcosm", not only because it is comparable to the



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“macrocosm” but also because it is its fulfillment or, vice versa, its destruction: the quality of human life conditions the quality of the environment in which he lives. Pope Francis continually reminds us of this, calling everyone to hear the cry that rises up from the earth and from the poor. Whenever we foster “fraternity and social friendships” among peoples, we also foster environmental quality on the earth, defending it from our rivalry and greed.

In short, according to Bonaventure, theological intelligence must become an experience of God and a passion for this world, allowing us to discover in it a clear sign of divine love.

The master from Bagnoregio strongly challenges us on how sensitive we are, not only to the Scriptures but also to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, illuminating our intelligence and our affection, making us capable of “bringing to light the hidden things (of God)” and being a gift to “all the children of the Church” and the world.

Minister of the Order: a passionate leader

On February 2, 1257, at around forty years of age, St. Bonaventure’s life changed radically. During the chapter celebrated in Rome, in the church of the *Ara Coeli*, where a hundred friars representing the thirty-three provinces of the Order convened, the friars, at the suggestion of the outgoing general minister, John of Parma, elected a friar who did not attend the chapter and was in Paris: Bonaventure of Bagnoregio.

From the beginning, he was aware of the burden he would have to bear: the government of 30,000/35,000 friars scattered throughout Europe, from England to Mongolia/China and North Africa. Such rapid growth, together



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with the complicated feature of profound cultural diversity in the Order, was a cause of serious concern, which needed to be addressed with great attention and passion. This is what emerges in his first circular letter, written immediately after his election in April 1257. In addition to calling the friars to conversion of mind and heart on various points of Minorite life, Bonaventure wanted to remind them of their vocation within the Church: “to be a mirror of full holiness” (*Lettera I*, 1: in *Opere di san Bonaventura: Opuscoli francescani/1*, vol. XIV/1, Rome 1993, 113). Among the various shortcomings recalled by the general minister in that letter, one at times still seems valid: “make the lazy brothers work.”

To further this renewal of the quality of life, Bonaventure, again at the request of the general chapters, would write two important texts. The first was presented in 1260, at the Chapter of Narbonne, when the assembly approved the *General Constitutions*, in which the compiler had re-ordered and completed the many confusing constitutions that the Order had adopted since 1239. At the following Chapter, celebrated in Pisa in 1263, the assembly of friars received well and made official the second work produced by Bonaventure: the *Major Legend* and the *Minor Legend of Saint Francis* – texts which have ever since remained for all the definitive narrative on the holiness of Francis. With these two works – one juridical and one narrative – Bonaventure provided the friars with a dual and complementary set of guidelines: the juridical norms to be followed and the model of life to be imitated.

Bonaventure’s qualification as the “second founder of the Order,” though exaggerated, nevertheless has some truth in it. With his long activity in government, he brought a definitive identity to the Friars Minor by reaffirming with clarity a twofold mandate: a strong commitment to evangelization and an attentive fidelity to one own call to minority. In both aspects the figure of Saint Francis was the decisive reference point: his holiness was the guar-



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antee. This is what Bonaventure anticipates with great solemnity in the prologue of his *Legend*, where Francis is qualified as “a messenger of God, worthy of Christ’s love and set as an example for the perfect following of Christ” (*LegM* prol. 2: FF 1022). In short, as general minister of the Order he took on with courage and intelligence a delicate task: to guard the ideals of the first friars, and to integrate with that the Order’s identity as developed from wide and firm engagement in pastoral and cultural activity for the promotion of faith and Christian life.

Two other Franciscan works by the Saint of Bagnoregio should be mentioned. He composed a *Rule for Novices* in 1260 in which, among other aspects, he reminded those who wished to embrace the life that “voluntary poverty is the foundation of the whole spiritual edifice.” The other text is the extensive and rich collection of the *Sunday Sermons and Saints* (1267-68). Aware of the inadequate preparation of the brothers for the office of preaching, Bonaventure, with his sermons, wanted not only to remind them of the importance of this task, but also to offer a tool to help them better fulfill their service.

It is estimated that Bonaventure, during his term as general minister, spent a quarter of his time traveling the streets of Europe. His travels as animator and guide of the Order ended on May 23, 1273, when Gregory X named him cardinal bishop of Albano and asked him to commit himself to the preparation of the Second Council of Lyon, which was to be celebrated in May of the following year. On that occasion an extraordinary general chapter was also convened precisely in Lyon to proceed with the appointment of Bonaventure’s successor as the head of the Order. Jerome of Ascoli, the future Pope Nicholas IV, was elected. Two months later, on Sunday morning, July 15, while the Council was taking place, Bonaventure left this world to join the One whom he had sought with all his heart and mind. His funeral was celebrated the following day. The acts of the Council describe that event in these



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words, “Bonaventure was loved by God and by the faithful,” and “all who met him in life were filled with deep affection for him.”

As general minister, he bequeathed to us a clear and strong witness: his passion for the Order, to which he had handed over the holy memory of Francis as the ultimate measure of fidelity to his Minorite vocation and pastoral commitment.

In this sense, Bonaventure, as a “minister” invites us to ask the question about our sense of belonging to the Order, stimulating us to live it both as a gift received from God and as a commitment to be realized together for the benefit of the Church and the world.

Mystic of love: affect, the pinnacle of knowledge

Historically, Bonaventure, rather than as a minister and teacher, has perhaps been best remembered as a mystic, to the point of being called by Leo XIII “the prince of mystical theology.” It is true that for Bonaventure mysticism fulfills both the path of intelligence applied to faith and the sense of belonging to an Order of lesser brothers, because in both cases the end is always the same: the “savor” of God.

In this journey the point of reference placed by Bonaventure is surely the mystical event of the stigmata of St. Francis: “by a seraphic glow of longing he had been lifted up toward God, and by his sweet compassion had been transformed into the likeness of Him Who of His exceeding love endured to be crucified” (*LegM XIII:3*).

Faced with the question of how one should proceed to make the “experience of God” possible, Bonaventure, drawing from his own experience, offers a dazzling answer, pro-



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Biagio Puccini,
*Saint Bonaventure
in Ecstasy* (1708).
Rome, Church of
San Paolo alla Regola



posed at the end of the famous text, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*: “If you ask how these things come about, you ask for grace, not instruction, not understanding ... not light, but the fire that sets us completely aflame and brings us to God” (*Itinerarium* VII 6).

The process, however, stems from an anthropological presupposition: man is the “being of desires” (*vir desideriorum*) tending by nature towards the unique and ultimate object that alone can fulfill his quest: God. Bonaventure himself was a man of desire: whether in his service to the



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Order, his academic teaching, or his preaching of the Gospel, he was moved by the desire to contemplate the crucified Christ, the ultimate reference for thinking about and loving God. For in Him alone is found the root of the awe that should inflame the heart and mind of every man: the excess of love with which He chose to be crucified. Enveloped and transported by that love, one is “led to God”: “We pass with Christ crucified from this world to the Father” (*Itinerarium* VII 6). In this journey of affective return, a mystical Pascha, Christ is the medium, the center not only of the mystery of the Trinity but also of the dynamics of man’s heart in his desire for God: He is the only Mediator “to lead men back to God” (*De reductione* 23).

It can be understood from these hints that Bonaventure’s mysticism is essentially relational, ordered toward the Other, that is, on the way to God, through the human flesh of the One who, out of an excess of love, became one of us to make us one with God. Bonaventure’s mysticism can therefore be likened to a journey of man accompanied by the humanity of Christ as the only way to the Father. Consequently, in his Christological proposal of the mystical way, the words with which Francis of Assisi opens the *Regola non bollata* are realized: “The rule and life of these brothers is [...] to follow the teaching and footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Regola non bollata* I:1), the one who became the Word incarnate and was crucified.

In a Christmas sermon, the two instances of the flesh of Christ are placed in perfect harmony: “In order to perfectly make peace, the most faithful Mediator first gave himself to humanity in the Nativity and then offered himself totally to God on the behalf of men in the Passion.” By seeing, believing and adhering to this mystery of incarnate and crucified love, man’s journey is realized, enlivened and sustained by the Holy Spirit: “no one receives it except he who desires it, nor does anyone desire it except he who is inflamed in his innermost being by the fire of the Holy Spirit sent to earth by Christ” (*Itinerarium* VII 4).



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However, the gift of the Spirit, which enables the mystical Pascha to be fulfilled, does not spare man the burden of the journey' that is, an experience of God sought and prepared through a process done in stages and in order. Bonaventure's ascetical-mystical works are an offering of a method by which one can practice desire and search. We recall two texts: *Tree of Life* and *Threefold Way to God*. In the former, at the center is the affective contemplation of Christ revealed on that tree of life that was the cross; in the latter, meditation on three instances of human experience by which we taste peace (through the purification of desires), truth (through the illumination of the intellect) and finally charity (through the Spirit that inflames the soul to unite it to the crucified and spousal love of Christ).

Bonaventure reminds us that man is the "desiring one" called to a journey toward the One who gives everything its uniqueness, truth and beauty.

But in this journey of daily encounter with the One who alone suffices, are we not often in danger of being dis-tracted, that is, being pulled away from Him only to be scattered among the numerous?

How often do we experience this "distraction" in which we lose the Whole by confusing it with the parts?

Instead, Bonaventure reminds us that everything has meaning and value if it helps us to achieve the one thing necessary: "being led to God." Shouldn't the centennial celebration of the Stigmata of St. Francis in 2024 be a time to remember what is essential and what can enable us to regain everything else in a new and complete way?





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Conclusion: the threefold legacy left to us by Bonaventure

Bonaventure's life ended in July of 1274; a life spent with generosity and passion in three areas that also represent components of our religious vocation today to be "meditated on with attention" – the invitation of Pope Paul VI stated above.

As a *master* of theology, Bonaventure teaches us the way of intelligence tempered by wisdom; a way in which we can move from the confused darkness of the forest to a deeper understanding of our faith (enlightenment), bringing "the hidden things to light". As a *minister* of the Order, he reminds us of our commitment to make our lives a witness animated by a readiness for renewal (purification) so that, even in radically different temporal and cultural circumstances, our life as minors can remain a "shining mirror of holiness." As a *mystic*, he shows us the center from which everything originates and is fulfilled, namely Christ crucified, who from the cross bestowed "the fire of the Holy Spirit" by which we reach our ultimate goal: "to be transferred" and "transformed into God," the One who fills all things and makes them good and beautiful.

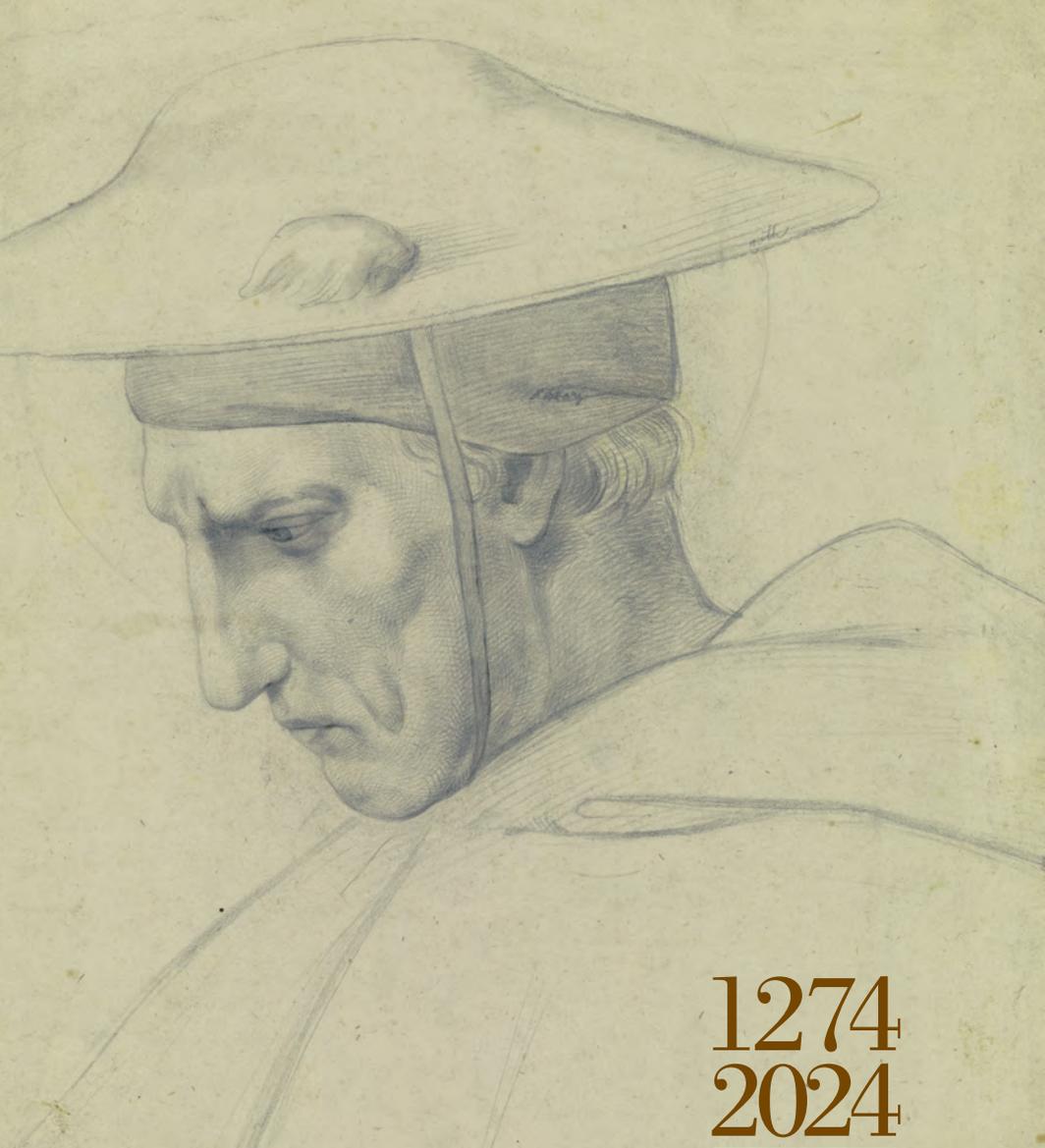
Peace and all Good.

Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM
General Minister

Fr. Carlos Alberto Trovarelli, OFM Conv
General Minister

Fr. Roberto Genuin, OFM Cap
General Minister

Fr. Amando Trujillo Cano, TOR
General Minister



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Conference of the Ministers General
of the Franciscan First Order and TOR