



MINISTER GENERALIS

ORDINIS FRATRUM MINORUM CONVENTUALIUM

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700th Anniversary of the Death of Dante Alighieri

Dear brothers:

To speak plainly - but with great reverence - I propose to honor Italy's greatest poet, Dante Alighieri. Called simply "the Poet" by many, this year marks the 700th anniversary of Dante's death. At the same time, I want to announce to the whole Order that the Dante Center of the Friars Minor Conventual in Ravenna is offering various initiatives and reflections for this celebration.

Indeed, the renowned city of Ravenna, located in Italy's Emilia-Romagna Region, was witness to the exile, death and burial of the world-famous Florentine. Thus from September 5, 2020, through September 12, 2021, a comprehensive program for Dante's anniversary will take place there.

Dante was not only a poet but also a man of letters, a politician, an expert in philosophy and theology, and a great interpreter of history. Beyond the objective importance of such an illustrious personality, I want to commemorate the great familiarity that Dante had with our Order.

In fact, "Dante had special ties with the Friars Minor Conventual, having attended, as an outsider, courses in philosophy at their Friary of Santa Croce in Florence. Moreover, according to the authoritative and balanced commentator on Dante, Francesco Bartolo da Buti (ca. 1324-1406), Dante had been a novice at Santa Croce [...], but he left before taking his vows, [...] preferring instead to join the Third Order. On January 27, 1302, he was banished from Florence for political reasons, and as is known, took refuge in various courts of Italy, until he was welcomed by Guido Novello da Polenta, Lord of Ravenna, where he died, at age fifty-six, during the night of September 13-14, 1321. He had desired to rest eternally with the beloved sons of St. Francis and chose as his burial place the Church of San Francesco of the Friars Minor Conventual in Ravenna. Thus, after the solemn funeral, he was buried in the cemetery area, in a tomb set against the external western wall of the ancient canonical cloister"¹.

Historians tell us that the presence of the Minorite friars in Ravenna began as early as 1218, and that from 1261, the Franciscan community was installed in the church of San Pietro Maggiore (built between 425-451). However, over time it became known as the "Church of San Francesco." Except for some interruptions caused by suppressions, our friars have been present there to this day, in this place, which preserves the Poet's earthly remains.

¹ I. L. GATTI, *Francescani Conventuali a Ravenna: 750 anni di presenza accanto alla tomba di Dante. Storia e carisma*. Conference held at San Francesco in Ravenna September 12, 2011, https://centrodantesco.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Conferenza_P._Liberale_750_anni_francescani_ravenna.pdf. Cf. also: I. L. GATTI, *S. Francesco di Treviso. Una presenza minoritica nella Marca trevigiana*, Centro Studi Antoniani, Padua 2000, pp. 125-127.

However, Dante's close relationship with the Order is really due to the true bond he felt with St. Francis of Assisi, who, because of his "Canticle of creatures", is considered the first poet of Italian literature. It must be said, however, that Dante's bond with Francis seems to have formed, not only, or mainly, in the literary sphere, but certainly - if I may say so - within the context of their similar cosmological vision.

In fact, "the Poet" was not only an eminent man of letters, he was a thinking believer. Yet he was also a critic of the socio-political reality of his time, as well as the morals of his day and -ultimately- a critic of the very structures of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which in those days flaunted power and a great worldliness. More impressive was St. Francis of Assisi, a penitent, an imitator of Christ, a man who made clear evangelical choices, choices that became alternatives to imperial and feudal norms and - indeed - an alternative to the contemporary nascent bourgeoisie.

The Poverello inspired, by his life, an ecclesial movement of conversion and rebuilding. Dante, in his "Commedia," later renamed the "Divine Comedy," also proposed a real "*itinerarium mentis in Deum*, [a journey to the mind of God] from the darkness of eternal damnation to the tears of purifying penance [...] to the Source of light"².

It is no coincidence that he dedicated an entire canto of his greatest literary work "Paradiso" (Canto XI) to St. Francis and to his city.

This anniversary, therefore, in addition to celebrating Dante's personality and poetic muse, is also an invitation for us Franciscans to interpret the present time with faith and seriousness, and to "position ourselves" among those who live the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, who is infinite Charity, with commitment (Faith) and poetry (Hope).

I take this opportunity to thank and congratulate the Dante Center of the Friars Minor Conventual in Ravenna, Italy. This cultural enterprise was developed by the former Province of Bologna and inaugurated in Ravenna on the eve of the 700th anniversary of the birth of Dante Alighieri, through the efforts of Friar Severino Ragazzini (1920-1986)³.

I extend my blessing to all those who during this anniversary will help deepen our knowledge and our relationship with such an eminent figure. My wish is for each of us to "pass through the many dark woods still widespread in our land and to complete happily our pilgrimage through history in order to arrive at the goal dreamt of and yearned for by every man and woman: 'the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars (Par. XXXIII, 145)'"⁴.



f. Carlos A. Trovarelli

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Minister general

² PAUL VI, *Lettera apostolica motu proprio "Altissimi cantus" per il VII Centenario della nascita di Dante Alighieri*, December 7, 1965, accessible online at: http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19651207_altissimi-cantus.html

³ To learn more about the story of the Dante Center of the Friars Minor Conventual, cf. <https://centrodantesco.it>.

⁴ FRANCIS, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture for the Solemn Celebration of the 750th Anniversary of the Birth of the Supreme Poet Dante Alighieri* May 4, 2015 (accessible online at: [www.vatican.va/content/francesco-en/messages-pont-messages-2015-documents-papa-francesco_20150504_messaggio-dante-alighieri.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages-pont-messages-2015-documents-papa-francesco_20150504_messaggio-dante-alighieri.html)).