

Dante, Lady Poverty, and the Donation of Constantine¹

Few themes are as persistently recurrent and as obsessively repeated in Dante's work as the condemnation of church corruption, which he considers the cause for all political malaise and social affliction in his contemporary society. It is the church's wealth, in Dante's view, that originates its political power and is the cause of the deplorable situation of the Italian peninsula, split as it is in a myriad of tiny states fighting each other and being unable to unify under a strong empire that could compete with France. The event that Dante considers at the root of this endemic problem in European politics is the Donation of Constantine.²

In his work, and particularly in the *Comedy*, Dante speaks repeatedly, almost compulsively, about the Donation of Constantine as constituting the stumbling block for all possibilities of solving Italy's problems. In the Malebolge, he explodes in an invective against it:

Ahi, Costantin, di quanto mal fu matre,
non la tua conversion, ma quella dote
che da te prese il primo ricco patre!

[Ah, Constantine, what wickedness was born—
and not from your conversion—from the dower
that you bestowed upon the first rich father!]
(*Inf.* 19.115-117)³

In the third pouch of the eighth circle among the fraudulent souls, Dante places the simoniac popes, those who corrupted the church by selling and buying ecclesiastical privileges, sacraments, and absolutions; they are buried head down in small holes in the ground that are a parody of baptismal fonts, and are also a reminder that in Dante's time the capital punishment for murderers was to be buried alive head down. The similarity seems to indicate that, precisely like murderers kill their fellow humans, the higher clergy is guilty of assassinating the church with their wrongdoing.

Dante refers to the Donation again in *Purgatorio* 32, when the greediness of ecclesiastics is attributed to the church's legitimation, which stopped its persecutions, but allowed it to acquire the power that corrupted its original spirit:

VETTORI

Poscia per indi ond' era pria venuta,
l'aguglia vidi scender giù nell'arca
del carro e lasciar lei di sé pennuta;
e qual esce di cuor che si rammarca,
tal voce uscì del cielo e cotal disse:
«O navicella mia, com' mal se' carica!»

[Then I could see the eagle plunge—again
down through the tree—into the chariot
and leave it feathered with its plumage; and,
just like a voice from an embittered heart,
a voice issued from Heaven, saying this:
“O my small bark, your freight is wickedness!”]
(*Purg.* 32.124-129)

The Donation becomes synonymous with corruption of the church and Dante refers to it again when he evokes Constantine in the Heaven of Mercury in *Paradiso* 6.1-6 and again in the Heaven of Jupiter, when he sees Constantine in the eye of the allegorical eagle in *Paradiso* 20.55-60. He is always careful to separate the virtues of the emperor who legitimized Christianity from the mistake he made of endowing the church with money, land, and power, but his condemnation of this wrongful action is unmitigated.

Because the Donation of Constantine has mysterious origins and a very complicated history, it is important to highlight how it came about and developed.⁴ What we commonly identify as the “Donation of Constantine” is a document officially known as the *Constitutum Constantini*, which was readily available to churchmen throughout the Middle Ages in any copy of Gratian’s *Decretum*, at Chapter 14 of the 96th Distinction. The *Decretum* is the first comprehensive and systematic compilation of Canon Law that Gratian put together in the twelfth century to collect and organize all the laws and regulations the church had accumulated over the twelve centuries of its history. The *Constitutum Constantini* that became part of the *Decretum* is a short book, a first-person narrative, that doesn’t quite look or sound like a juridical document; it is a quasi-hagiographical text, in which the Emperor Constantine himself (272-337 CE) offers a personalized—and, quite clearly, a fictional—version of his own conversion and baptism. The Emperor writes that, when he was sick with leprosy, the pagan priests attempted to cure him by making him bathe in the blood of innocent infants, but he refused these barbaric

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practices in horror, accepting instead to consult Pope Sylvester, who cured him by simply immersing him in a pool of water three times. Touched by the miracle of being healed, Constantine converted to Christianity and was baptized. As a gesture of gratitude for his restored physical health and for the salvation of his soul, Constantine donated Rome and the western half of the Roman Empire to the pope; he also handed over to Sylvester the imperial insignia, including scepter, lance, orb, and various other *ornamenta*, and declared the pope the leader of the western empire. In the text, Constantine finally announces the foundation of a new city named Constantinople after himself, which he will adopt as the new capital of the empire, because it would not be appropriate for the emperor and the pope to share the same location. Subsequently, he leaves Rome to the pope and moves to Constantinople. This is the account offered in the booklet.

Historians have later reconstructed the facts on the basis of other sources. Finding himself at the crucial moment of transition from paganism to Christianity, Constantine, as the astute and pragmatic politician that he was, saw all the advantages of making Christianity legal; he allowed it to spread widely and become the main unifying element for the empire (especially in the west, where Christians were still a minority). He sympathized with it and even presided over the Council of Nicaea in 325, when the bishops came together to determine important dogmas of the faith and decry heretical movements. However, he never actually converted until the end of his life, when he was baptized shortly before dying, as was customary for many Christians at the time. Because of his role in history as the first Christian emperor, who turned Christianity from the persecuted sect of a minority to a tolerated religion of the empire, throughout the Middle Ages Constantine was hailed a saintly figure who allowed the gospel to spread in a reunified and thriving empire. That is also why he was the perfect candidate for the role of writer of the *Constitutum*, the booklet also known as the Donation of Constantine.

The Donation itself would have happened at the beginning of the fourth century, after Christianity had been recently declared a legal religion with the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, and the newly proclaimed legitimate church can assume an even more important role in the social and political life of the empire. The Edict of Milan is viewed as the beginning of the Roman church's political and temporal power, which up to now had been purely spiritual. Moreover, Constantine's submission to the Pope is later considered the origin of the papal

crowning of kings and emperors and the emperors' and kings' subordination to the Pope throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.

Dante considers Constantine's Donation to be at the origin of church corruption; he rages and rants against the *Constitutum*, calling it an illegitimate document, even though he considers it authentic. When discussing the division of powers between Empire and Papacy in *De monarchia* 3.10.5, he quotes Aristotle's *Ethics* and claims with impeccable logic that, in order for any donation to be legitimate, two conditions need to be met: 1) the donor needs to have the authority and power to donate something; and 2) the receiver must be authorized to receive it. He also shows clearly that the emperor doesn't have the authority and power to donate any part of the empire, for it is his duty to administer and manage it, but he doesn't own it, so he cannot dispose of it as his possession. Similarly, the pope is a spiritual leader, not a political leader, so he doesn't have the authority to receive land and wealth (Alighieri 345).

Even in the middle of a highly philosophical and political argumentation involving the division of powers between the Pope and the Emperor, Dante was thinking about the importance for the church to remain poor and pure, when, in the same passage of *De monarchia*, he quotes the gospel of Matthew 10:9-10, "nolite possidere aurum neque argentum neque pecuniam in zonis vestris, non peram in viam neque duas tunicas neque calciamenta neque virgam / dignus enim est operarius cibo suo," "provide yourselves with no gold or silver, not even with coppers for your purses, with no haversack for your journey or spare tunic or footwear or a staff, for the laborer deserves his keep" (*The New Jerusalem Bible* 1624). Just to reinforce Christ's command to keep the precept of poverty, Dante also quotes the parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke 22:35-36. Interestingly, he opposes the validity of the Donation by quoting sacred scripture; he eschews the argumentations of political and ecclesiastical leaders who mix Christianity with worldly affairs and goes straight to the source of the Christian message.

Dante blames the Donation of Constantine for the church's transformation from a spiritual institution, purified by persecutions and rendered alive by internal and external tribulations, into a political entity that was corrupted by its constant dealings with power and money. What Dante didn't know, and could not know at the beginning of the fourteenth century, is that the Donation of Constantine is a fake document that was fabricated approximately three centuries after Constantine, when the King of France wanted to

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protect the papacy from Lombard invasions and drafted this document to show that the territories in central Italy actually belonged to the papacy and could not be taken over by the Lombards. It was not Constantine who donated land and riches to Pope Sylvester, as the fake document stipulates, but it was instead Pepin the Short, the King of the Franks, who donated his lands to Pope Stephen II in approximately 755 CE in an act that is known as the Donation of Pepin. The forgery was discovered in the fifteenth century and the Donation was disproved at first by Nicholas of Cusa on theological grounds and then—and even more convincingly—by Lorenzo Valla on philological grounds.

Dante didn't have the theological, the philological or the historical knowledge to prove that the Donation was false, but he showed that logically, even though for him it was authentic, it was nevertheless illegitimate; he also realized that such an act unleashes all kinds of theological and political complications, as, for example, the clash between earthly and heavenly power, the pope's authority as deriving from the emperor and not vice versa, and it is also in stark opposition to Christ's mandate for the foundation of a heavenly kingdom that is very different from an earthly kingdom. That is why Dante considers it to be at the root of all church corruption and involvements with the secular world and condemns it repeatedly in his writings.

While considering the negative repercussions of wealth and possessions on the history of the church, Dante is also concerned with the issue of managing money more in general, both for the clergy and for secular people, and he makes a point of condemning excessive saving and extravagant spending in Hell and also in Purgatory. In Hell the poet places Plutus, the Greek god of riches, as guardian of the avaricious and the prodigal in the Fourth Circle, and he calls him "il gran nemico," "the great enemy" (*Inf.* 6.115). These souls are punished by having to roll heavy weights in opposite directions to confirm their commitment to burdensome and oppressive possessions in their earthly lives; Virgil explains to Dante that these souls, "con misura nullo spendio ferci" ("no spending that they did was done with measure"; 42), so now they are damned to shout at each other "Perché tieni?", "why do you hoard?" and "Perché burli?" ("why do you squander?"; 30), as part of their *contrapasso*. This sin originates in excessiveness and the text insists on the sinners' lack of control and measure in administering their money. The concept of *misura* is the vernacular expression for Aristotle's idea of continence, which these

souls clearly lack, as does their guardian Plutus, whose monstrosity contrasts Aristotelian logic and introduces the incontinence of the avaricious and the prodigal (see *Commento Baroliniano*).

I believe the direct reference here is to the culture of money in Dante's time that allowed excessive accumulation of wealth, but also excessive spending. Interestingly, Dante remarks that the majority of these sinners are clerics. This is the case also in Purgatory, where the avaricious and the prodigal are condemned to lie facing downward and stare at the floor of the Fifth Ledge of the Purgatorial Mountain, with their hands and feet tied down, to signify their love for material things during their life on earth. Pope Adrian V confesses to Dante that his most excruciating suffering is caused by being unable to look upward toward God, but still having to look down at the earth, whose possessions caused him to sin (*Purg.* 19.88-145).

In Dante's world, however, the most egregious sin related to money is usury. Having been raised in Florence during the second half of the thirteenth century, Dante had witnessed the radical change from an agricultural and manufacturing economy to the culture of commerce and money that had been established by few families that had accumulated immense wealth through banking. That explains how his condemnation of monetary accumulation in the hands of few people is unmitigated. In *Inferno* 17, the usurers suffer a particularly harsh punishment under a rain of fire, together with the other violent against God, the blasphemers and the sinners against nature, in the third ring of the Seventh Circle. Dante blames their "sùbiti guadagni" ("quick gains"; *Inf.* 16.73), their desire to make money quickly, and the expression he uses is in line with a contemporary interpretation of usury as a sin related to time. Usury was a grave sin and corresponded to what is known in contemporary society as loansharking, a process that has been normalized with the banking system, which has made lending money for interest a common and acceptable practice. Initially, usury was directly related to the rise of mercantile exchange, because any merchant was in need of cash and needed to borrow it from somewhere. The only difference between a goods merchant and a usurer, in Jacques Le Goff's opinion, is that the goods merchant deals with merchandise of some sort, while the usurer only moves money around (Le Goff 25-52).

The condemnation of usury is biblical and occurs in Genesis 3:17-19, but it is also in Aristotle's *Physics*, as Virgil reminds Dante in *Inferno* 11. Nature is God's creation and art is mankind's creation, argues Dante's Virgil, so that art becomes God's granddaughter. As

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instructed by God, women and men are supposed to earn their living with the sweat of their brow, working the earth or laboring in art, and, while even commerce involves some form of laboring, usury is instead all based on lending money and waiting for it to grow interest; it is its profitable inertia and lucrative apathy that make it sinful. That is why the *Tabula exemplorum*, the thirteenth-century collection of moral tales and proverbial wisdom, states that “usurers were bandits (*latrones*) because they sold time, which did not belong to them” (Le Goff 35). In medieval spirituality, time belonged to God alone and it was offered as a gift to human beings so they could employ it to save themselves; that is why using time to make money is considered sinful. In iconographic representations of the late Middle Ages, usurers are depicted on their deathbed with a pouch or a small bag hanging from their neck or from their waist, which contained the money they had unlawfully earned in life and were now asked to give back. This is exactly how Dante portrays the usurers, who sit under the rain of fire, which is the common punishment for all the violent against God, and they carry a pouch hanging from their neck; they do nothing and seem to be simply waiting, in the same way that in their lives they had waited for their money to grow interest. The Poet Dante goes even a step further, however.

In *Inferno* 17, the Pilgrim Dante looks at the emblems the usurers hold on their chests and, thanks to the family’s coat-of-arms depicting various animals (the lion, the goose, the sow), he meticulously identifies their families as having degenerated their aristocratic standing with lucrative but demeaning monetary transactions as usurers. The poet clearly intends to blemish them and smear their names in public. He condemns loansharking but also, more generally, the greedy behavior of those who have abandoned courtly virtues and noble attitudes for a culture solely centered on money. Although he died too early to see the fortunes of the Bardi, the Peruzzi, and the Acciaiuoli rise and acquire fame through banking, thereby making Florence rich and a center of international finance in the fourteenth century, Dante did however witness and condemn the money-lending activities of the Florentine Gianfigliuzzi and the Obriachi, and also of the Scrovegni of Padova (*Inf.* 17.58-66). It has been argued that usury was also a practice the Alighieri family may have been implicated in, so the poet’s feelings against this sin are particularly strong (Barbero 91-93).

If wealth is synonymous with political power and corruption, Dante indicates he believed in a poor Church, for poverty equaled

purity. The debate on Church poverty goes back at least two centuries before Dante's time, when Bernard Clairvaux preached in favor of poverty as the main reforming strategy for his religious order, the Cistercians, and against the accumulation of land and riches in the style of other Benedictine foundations. One example is the Monastery of Cluny, which was the largest and most powerful in Europe until the beginning of the twelfth century; from an economic point of view Cluny relied heavily on rents, tithes, feudal rights, as well as pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela, who were charged a toll by the monastery in order to pass through its territories. On the contrary, the renewed Cistercian application of the rule of poverty obliged monks to simply work the land in order to support themselves. With Saint Bernard as their main proponent and advocate, the Cistercians implemented a return to agricultural labor, which was the original means of sustenance for Benedictine monks, as stipulated in St. Benedict's rule; growing their own food made them independent of all the monetary exchanges and financial transactions that Cluniac life depended on. Cistercians made their living from the sweat of their brow, not by piling up money and riches, to use Dante's semantics when he condemns usurers. The contrast between the Cluniac monasteries and the Cistercian reformation will culminate with the Cistercians supplanting the Cluniacs as the most important religious order at the end of the twelfth century (Rapley 23-28). Dante's stand in relation to these two orders is clear in the condemnation of Cluny in *Inferno* 23, where the hypocrites of the sixth pouch in the eighth circle wear long cloaks resembling those donned by the monks at Cluny:

Là giù trovammo una gente dipinta
 che giva intorno assai con lenti passi,
 piangendo e nel sembiante stanca e vinta.
 Elli avean cappe con cappucci bassi
 dinanzi a li occhi, fatte de la taglia
 che in Clugnì per li monaci fassi.
 Di fuor dorate son, sì ch'elli abbaglia;
 ma dentro tutte piombo, e gravi tanto,
 che Federigo le mettea di paglia.
 Oh in eterno faticoso manto!

[Below that point we found a painted people,
 who moved about with lagging steps, in circles,

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weeping, with features tired and defeated.
And they were dressed in cloaks with cowls so low
they fell before their eyes, of that same cut
that's used to make the clothes for Cluny's monks.
Outside, these cloaks were gilded and they dazzled;
but inside they were all of lead, so heavy
that Frederick's capes were straw compared to them.
A tiring mantle for eternity!]

(*Inf.* 23.58-67)

Completely opposed to the hypocritical Cluniac monks evoked so far down in Hell is Dante's portrayal of the Cistercian Saint Bernard Clairvaux, whose role as the third guide for the Pilgrim Dante in the *Comedy* testifies to his importance in the poet's spiritual panorama. He picks up from Beatrice and leads the Pilgrim in heaven all the way to the vision of the Trinity, no doubt because he wrote a fundamental theological treatise on the Virgin Mary, and his prayer to Mary in *Paradiso* 33 will allow him the necessary intercession to disclose the door of the Trinity for Dante. I would also argue, however, that Bernard is assigned this crucial role because of his indefatigable work as reformer of the Benedictine Order, the Cistercians being newly devoted to poverty and totally detached from corrupt means of earning money.

Closer to Dante's time, poverty had become a hot topic that was widely debated both inside and outside the church. The Poor Men of Lyon, headed by Peter Waldo (1140-1205) at the end of the twelfth century, proposed poverty as the main asset in the Christian spiritual path and protested that the opulence and power of the Roman curia were contrary to evangelical teaching (see Little 120-128). They were considered heretical and persecuted; they eventually formed a proto-Protestant church in the western Alps between France and Italy that has survived to this day and is known as the Waldensian Church (Chiesa Valdese or Église vaudoise [see Volpe 51-61]).

Within the Roman church, the rise of Mendicant Orders, in particular the Franciscans, spurred new discussions on the importance of material poverty for spiritual edification. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi undressed on the square of San Rufino in his hometown to show the importance of going back to the essential purity of nakedness. He claimed that this was the condition of humanity in the Garden of Eden, when the absence of clothing signified mankind's freedom from the entanglements of materiality

as well as their freedom from sin. Francis's action resulted in the subsequent stipulation and ratification of a Rule for his newly founded Franciscan Order, according to which poverty features as an essential virtue for everyone who wants to join. This started an animated debate (this time from within the church, as a legitimate, non-heretical movement) on what radical poverty exactly means, why it is important for the life of the church, and how it ought to be implemented. The debate was lively from the start, because, if it was easy to agree on the importance of poverty, it was difficult to define a practical application of the rule of poverty in the daily life of the brothers and sisters of the Order.

Dante witnessed firsthand the split created by different interpretations of the rule of poverty among the Franciscans, which very early on separated in two factions, the Observant or Spiritual side maintaining the importance of a strict adherence to absolute poverty, and the Conventual or Relaxed side believing in a less rigid application of the rule. Dante reports the oscillating fortunes of one or the other faction of the Franciscan Order and its relationship to church establishment. Matteo d'Acquasparta, who was general of the order from 1287 to 1302, advocated certain relaxations of the rule prescribed by Francis; these relaxations were vehemently opposed by Ubertino da Casale, the leader of the Observants; under Pope Celestine V the Observants prevailed; Boniface VIII during his tenure as pope sided with the Conventuals and in 1317 Pope John XXII likewise condemned the Observants and accused Ubertino of heresy. In a famous episode that spans canto 11 and 12 of *Paradiso*, Dante aims for a poetic reconciliation of the two sides, when he has Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, former general of the Order and its most important theologian, speak about a possible compromise between radical and relaxed interpretations of the Franciscan rule of poverty:

Ben dico, chi cercasse a foglio a foglio
 nostro volume, ancor troveria carta
 u' leggerebbe 'I' mi son quel ch'i' soglio';
 ma non fia da Casal né d'Acquasparta,
 là onde vegnon tali a la scrittura,
 ch'uno la fugge e altro la coarta.

[I admit that, if one were to search
 our volume leaf by leaf, he might still read
 one page with, 'I am as I always was';

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but those of Acquasparta or Casale
who read our Rule are either given to
escaping it or making it too strict.]

(*Par.* 12.121-126)

Bonaventure complains that there is no consistency, so very few can say “I am as I always was,” and, through his words, the Poet Dante himself seems to be making the same complaint. The two opposite sides of the Franciscan Order contend over the interpretation of poverty, whether too rigidly applied or too loosely understood, so that neither Matteo d’Acquasparta nor Ubertino da Casale seem to merit the title of loyal follower of their founder. The bitter battle between the two sides of the Order will result later on (in 1517) in two separate Orders, the Friars Minor and the Conventuals, later on followed by further division and the creation of the Capuchins (in 1528).

Despite the internecine debate, the poet finds in the Franciscan attitude to wealth a relieving solution to the culture of money that was developing fast around him and that he considers particularly dangerous for the secular world, but especially troubling for the church. While he embraces the spiritual concept of going back to the essential elements of evangelical life, Dante also values the Franciscan literature that develops all around the idea of poverty, which becomes a symbol besides being a virtue. Francis’s pursuit of poverty for himself and for his Order is documented from very early on in several hagiographic texts that show in allegorical terms Francis’s quest for a woman called Lady Poverty, whom he woos like a lover in the style of Provençal poetry. Far from being the beautiful, elegant, and richly attired woman Provençal poets pursued, Lady Poverty presents herself as a disheveled woman, dressed in rags, starved, but completely contented in her impecunious, destitute condition. In one of these texts, the *Sacrum Commercium Sancti Francisci cum Domina Paupertate*, Francis and his brothers want to be united with Lady Poverty forever, so they decide to seek her out and marry her.⁵ They embark on an expedition to find her; they climb a mountain and undergo many trials and tribulations in the fashion of many romantic heroes or suitors, until they find her at the top of the mountain. This very poetic narrative of Francis’s love pursuit for Lady Poverty is an anonymous text, whose dating is still debated. The majority of critics at the moment agree that it may have been written very early on after the death of the Saint and survived the purging of all Francis’s biographies during Bonaventure of Bagnoregio’s tenure as general of the Order, when he destroyed all previous accounts of the Saint’s life

and published the official biography, the *Legenda maior*, after the 1260s or even the 1270s. This highly spiritual text is rife with biblical quotations and filled with references to other Franciscan texts; it is quite clearly inspired by courtly love literature with its topoi of *Frauendienst*, the protagonist being at the service of the Lady, whose status is so far above the poet's or the male protagonist's that he can't even dream of reaching her as equal or loving her as a partner. Lady Poverty is an oxymoron, and the woman shows in her name the irony of inheriting a legacy of love and devotion for wealthy and beautiful women starting from the Provençal model, but reversing all the topoi of that tradition. Unlike the beautiful, elegant, and exquisitely attired woman many poets described, Lady Poverty is ugly, dirty, uncombed, and dressed in rags—and yet her description is not satirical. She would be comical if Francis and his companions were repulsed by her. On the contrary, they aspire to conquer her love and appreciation, and they love her exactly because her qualities are the reverse of the earthly, mundane attributes of other women. In literary terms, this is an esthetics of ugliness *avant la lettre*. Poverty in the *Sacrum Commercium* is also an allegory for Wisdom, the virtue that in biblical terms preexisted everything and was God-the-Creator's companion in an empty universe before the creation of the cosmos. She also prepares and opens the way for the Incarnation, as Francis reminds her when they encounter:

before he (Christ) came to earth from his radiant homeland, you prepared an appropriate place for him, a throne upon which he would sit and a dwelling-place in which he would rest, that is, a very poor virgin from whom his birth would shine upon this world. (Armstrong 535)

Her loyalty makes her stand by Christ and follow him to his death, as the same text underlines:

You were with him in the mockery of the Judeans, in the insults of the Pharisees, in the curses of the chief priests. You were with him in the slapping of his face, in the spitting, in the scourging. He who should have been respected by everyone was mocked by everyone, and you alone comforted him. You did not abandon him even to death, death on the cross. (536)

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Dante's *Paradiso* also mentions poverty as being by Christ's side and appropriates the parallel between the life of Francis and the life of Christ with regards to poverty. When the poet depicts a masterly portrait of Francis of Assisi in *Paradiso* 11, there is no longer much room for misunderstanding what poverty really means to Dante; it is the main Christian virtue as it was—or should have been—for the Franciscan Order. Francis is represented as the loyal supporter of Lady Poverty throughout his earthly life, exactly like Christ himself, an idea which is in line with the narrative of the *Sacrum commercium*. This is how he describes Francis's relationship to an allegorized Poverty:

Questa, privata del primo marito,
millecent'anni e più dispetta e scura
fino a costui si stette senza invito;

.....

sì che, dove Maria rimase giuso,
ella con Cristo pianse in su la croce.
Ma perch'io non proceda troppo chiuso,
Francesco e Povertà per questi amanti
prendi oramai nel mio parlar diffuso.

[She was bereft of her first husband; scorned,
obscure, for some eleven hundred years,
until that sun came, she had had no suitor

.....

when she, even when Mary stayed below,
suffered with Christ upon the cross. But so
that I not tell my tale too darkly, you
may now take Francis and take Poverty
to be the lovers meant in my recounting.]

(*Par.* 11.64-66; 71-75.)

In the narrative of Francis's mystical marriage to Lady Poverty, Dante uses typically Franciscan symbolism and terminology, but he even goes a step further than hagiographic texts and declares that Poverty has been deprived of a husband for eleven hundred years between Christ and Francis, because no one liked her enough to be married to her after she accompanied Christ on the cross. Not even Mary went up on the cross with Jesus, but Poverty did, accompanying him to his martyrdom and death. The poetic imagery of a contrast

between the two women, Poverty and Mary, creates an interesting parallel and a dichotomy. The detail of Poverty accompanying Christ to his death, while Mary stays behind at the foot of the cross, seems to have been borrowed directly from the *Sacrum Commercium*.

In poetic and hagiographic terms, Lady Poverty can and must be desired. She is an aspiration and an ideal more than a real presence. The *Sacrum Commercium* describes in full Francis's longing to attain her and narrates a symbolic wedding banquet made of a piece of stale bread and just water consumed out of a broken cup. But, in its essence, the virtue of poverty remains unattainable, as shown by the long, divisive, and combative debate between the various factions of the Franciscan Order, in an attempt to decide to what degree radical poverty was realistic and practicable. Lady Poverty is also geographically distant and difficult, almost impossible to reach. She lives at the top of a high mountain and the friars climb for days before they can get to her. Her identity constantly shifts between real, tangible presence and diaphanous, eternal symbolism. For Dante she is the Franciscan alternative to a corrupt Church, and he adopts her as the spiritual and political ideal that will reform the Church and purify it from within. Although his knowledge of the texts of radical Franciscans, such as Peter of John Olivi or Ubertino da Casale, is still debated, the insistence on Francis's undressing (*Par.* 11.58-63), the mystical marriage with Lady Poverty (*Par.* 11.64-75), and the friars taking off their shoes in order to join the Order (*Par.* 11.79-87) confirm Dante's adherence to the idea of poverty proposed by the Observant faction of the Franciscans. Dante is also aware, however, of the poetic value of the personification of Poverty, who for Francis is a Lady in the style of Provençal poetics. As he was forging his own Lady Beatrice, Dante may have had this model in mind; Beatrice is equally unattainable as Poverty and he will honor her at the summit of Purgatory, which is partly an earthly mountain and partly a heavenly kingdom; in the Garden of Eden he will enjoy her presence beyond space and time, where he can admire her in glorified form. Being unable to love her in the world after her death, the Pilgrim Dante travels to the afterworld to be reunited with her and show her his devotion.

Dante's transgressive thinking involves dreaming of a reformed church that goes back to the poverty preached in the Gospel; it also involves arresting the rise of indiscriminate monetary gains by few wealthy families that only get wealthier through usury, now legitimized by the rise of banking; and finally it involves being

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reunited with his beloved in the kingdom of the dead. While many evils of his world originate in the Donation of Constantine that corrupted the Church's spiritual purity, Dante clearly indicates how radical Franciscan thought seems to bring the only viable solution to the propagation of a culture of money and the restoration of true evangelical values.

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NOTES

¹ A slightly different version of this article appeared in Italian in Vettori, "Costantino, il Papa, Dante e la Povertà Franciscana."

² The following studies have been particularly useful for the connection between Dante and the Donation of Constantine: Maccarrone 71–86; Maffei; Nardi, "La 'donatio Constantini' e Dante;" Nardi, *Nel mondo di Dante*, 109–159; Pagliaro, 281–289; Puletti.

³ For the text of the *Comedy*, see Petrocchi; for the English translation, see Mandelbaum.

⁴ The bibliography on the Donation of Constantine is very long; for this study I referred in particular to the following: Barnes; Cessi; Pamphilus; Fried; Hermann-Otto; Maffei; Marcone, *Costantino il Grande*; Marcone, *Pagano e cristiano*.

⁵ The English version of the *Sacrum Commercium* consulted for this study is Armstrong et al.

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