

Paradise Canto 11

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Canto XI

Argument

Thomas Aquinas enters at large into the life and character of St. Francis; and then solves one of two difficulties, which he perceived to have risen in Dante's mind from what he had heard in the last Canto.

O fond anxiety of mortal men!
How vain and inconclusive arguments
Are those, which make thee beat thy wings below.
For statutes one, and one for aphorisms[1]

[1: The study of medicine.]

Was hunting; this the priesthood follow'd; that,
By force or sophistry, aspired to rule;
To rob, another; and another sought,
By civil business, wealth; one, moiling, lay
Tangled in net of sensual delight;
And one to wistless indolence resign'd;
What time from all these empty things escaped,
With Beatrice, I thus gloriously
Was raised aloft, and made the guest of Heaven.

They of the circle to that point, each one,
Where erst it was, had turn'd; and steady glow'd,
As candle in his socket. Then within
The lustre,[2] that erewhile bespake me, smiling
With merer gladness, heard I thus begin:

[2: The spirit of Thomas Aquinas.]

"E'en as His beam illumines me, so I look
Into the Eternal Light, and clearly mark
Thy thoughts, from whence they rise. Thou art in doubt,
And wouldst, that I should bolt my words afresh
In such plain open phrase, as may be smooth
To thy perception, where I told thee late
That 'well they thrive';[3] and that 'no second such[4]
Hath risen,' which no small distinction needs.

[3: See the last Canto, v. 93.]

[4: See the last Canto, v. III.]

"The Providence, that governeth the world,
In depth of counsel by created ken
Unfathomable, to the end that she,[5]
Who with loud cries was 'spoused in precious blood,
Might keep her footing toward her well - beloved,[6]
Safe in herself and constant unto Him,
Hath two ordain'd, who should on either hand
In chief escort her: one,[7] seraphic all
In fervency; for wisdom upon earth,
The other,[8] splendour of cherubic light.
I but of one will tell: he tells of both,
Who one commendeth, which of them soe'er
Be taken: for their deeds were to one end.

[5: "She." The Church.]

[6: Jesus Christ.]

[7: "One." St. Francis.]

[8: "The other." St. Dominic.]

"Between Tupino,[9] and the wave that falls
From blest Ubaldo's chosen hill, there hangs
Rich slope of mountain high, whence heat and cold[10]
Are wafted through Perugia's eastern gate:
And Nocera with Gualdo, in its rear,
Mourn for their heavy yoke.[11] Upon that side,
Where it doth break its steepness most, arose
A sun upon the world, as duly this
From Ganges doth: therefore let none, who speak
Of that place, say Ascesi; for its name
Were lamely so deliver'd; but the East,
To call things rightly, be it henceforth styled.
He was not yet much distant from his rising,
When his good influence 'gan to bless the earth.
A dame,[12] to whom none openeth pleasure's gate
More than to death, was, 'gainst his father's will,[13]
His stripling choice: and he did make her his,
Before the spiritual court,[14] by nuptial bonds,
And in his father's sight: from day to day,
Then loved her more devoutly. She, bereaved
Of her first Husband,[15] slighted and obscure,
Thousand and hundred years and more, remain'd
Without a single suitor, till he came.
Nor aught avail'd, that, with Amyclas,[16] she
Was found unmoved at rumour of his voice,
Who shook the world: nor aught her constant boldness,
Whereby with Christ she mounted on the Cross,

When Mary stay'd beneath. But not to deal

[9: Thomas Aquinas describes the birthplace of St. Francis, between Tupino, a rivulet near Assisi, or Asceti, where the saint was born in 1182, and Chiascio, a stream that rises in a mountain near Agobbio, chosen by St. Ubaldo for his retirement.]

[10: Cold from the snow, and heart from the reflection of the sun.]

[11: Vellutello understands this of the vicinity of the "mountain" to Nocera and Gualdo; and Venturi of the heavy impositions laid on those places by the Perugians.]

[12: In the under church of St. Francis, Assisi, is a picture painted by Giotto from this subject. It is considered one of the artist's best works. See Kugler's "Handbook of the History of Painting, translated by a lady." Lond. 1842, p. 48.]

[13: In opposition to the wishes of his natural father.]

[14: He made a vow of poverty in the presence of the bishop and of his natural father.]

[15: "Her first Husband." Christ.]

[16: Lucan makes Caesar exclaim, on witnessing the secure poverty of the fisherman Amyclas: -

"O happy poverty! thou greatest good
Bestow'd by Heaven, but seldom understood!
Here nor the cruel spoiler seeks his prey,
Nor ruthless armies take their dreadful way." etc. - Rowe.]

Thus closely with thee longer, take at large
The lovers' titles - Poverty and Francis.
Their concord and glad looks, wonder and love,
And sweet regard gave birth to holy thoughts,
So much, that venerable Bernard[17] first
Did bare his feet, and, in pursuit of peace
So heavenly, ran, yet deem'd his footing slow.
O hidden riches! O prolific good!
Egidius[18] bares him next, and next Sylvester,[19]
And follow, both, the bridegroom: so the bride
Can please them. Thenceforth goes he on his way,
The father and the master, with his spouse,
And with that family, whom now the cord[20]
Girt humbly: nor did abjectness of heart
Weigh down his eyelids, for that he was son
Of Pietro Bernardone,[21] and by men
In wondrous sort despised. But royally
His hard intention he to Innocent[22]
Set forth; and, from him, first received the seal

On his religion. Then, when numerous flock'd
The tribe of lowly ones, that traced his steps,
Whose marvellous life deservedly were sung
In heights empyreal; through Honorius'[23] hand
A second crown, to deck their Guardian's virtues,
Was by the eternal Spirit inwreathed: and when
He had, through thirst of martyrdom, stood up
In the proud Soldan's presence,[24] and there preach'd
Christ and His followers, but found the race
Unripen'd for conversion; back once more
He hasted (not to intermit his toil)
And reap'd Ausonian lands. On the hard rock,[25]

[17: Of Quintavalle; one of the first followers of the saint.]

[18: "Egidius." The third of his disciples, who died in 1262. His work, entitled "Verba Aurea," was published in 1534, at Antwerp.]

[19: Another of his earliest associates.]

[20: "Whom now the cord." St. Francis bound his body with a cord, in sign that it required, like a beast, to be led by a halter.]

[21: A man in an humble station of life at Assisi.]

[22: Pope Innocent III.]

[23: "Honorius." His successor Honorius III, who granted certain privileges to the Franciscans.]

[24: The Soldan of Egypt, before whom St. Francis is said to have preached.]

[25: Mt. Alverna in the Apennines.]

'Twixt Arno and the Tiber, he from Christ
Took the last signet,[26] which his limbs two years
Did carry. Then, the season come that He,
Who to such good had destined him, was pleased
To advanced him to the meed, which he had earn'd
By his self - humbling; to his brotherhood,
As their just heritage, he gave in charge
His dearest lady:[27] and enjoin'd their love
And faith to her; and, from her bosom, will'd
His goodly spirit should move forth, returning
To its appointed kingdom; nor would have
His body[28] laid upon another bier.

[26: "The last signet." Alluding to the stigmata, or marks resembling the wounds of Christ, said to have been found on the saint's body.]

[27: "His dearest lady." Poverty.]

[28: He forbade any funeral pomp to be observed at his burial; and, as it is said, ordered that his remains should be deposited in a place where criminals were executed and interred.]

"Think now of one, who were a fit colleague
To keep the bark of Peter, in deep sea,
Helm'd to right point; and such our Patriarch[29] was.
Therefore who follow him as he enjoins,
Thou mayst be certain, take good lading in.
But hunger of new viands tempts his flock;[30]
So that they needs into strange pastures wide
Must spread them: and the more remote from him
The stragglers wander, so much more they come
Home, to the sheep - fold, destitute of milk.
There are of them, in truth, who fear their harm,
And to the shepherd cleave; but these so few,
A little stuff may furnish out their cloaks.

[29: St. Dominic, to whose order Thomas Aquinas belonged.]

[30: "His flock." The Dominicans.]

"Now, if my words be clear; if thou have ta'en
Good heed; if that, which I have told, recall
To mind; thy wish may be in part fulfill'd:
For thou wilt see the plant from whence they split;[31]
And he shall see, who girds him, what that means,
'That well they thrive, not swoln with vanity.'"

[31: "The rule of their order, which the Dominicans neglect to observe."]