

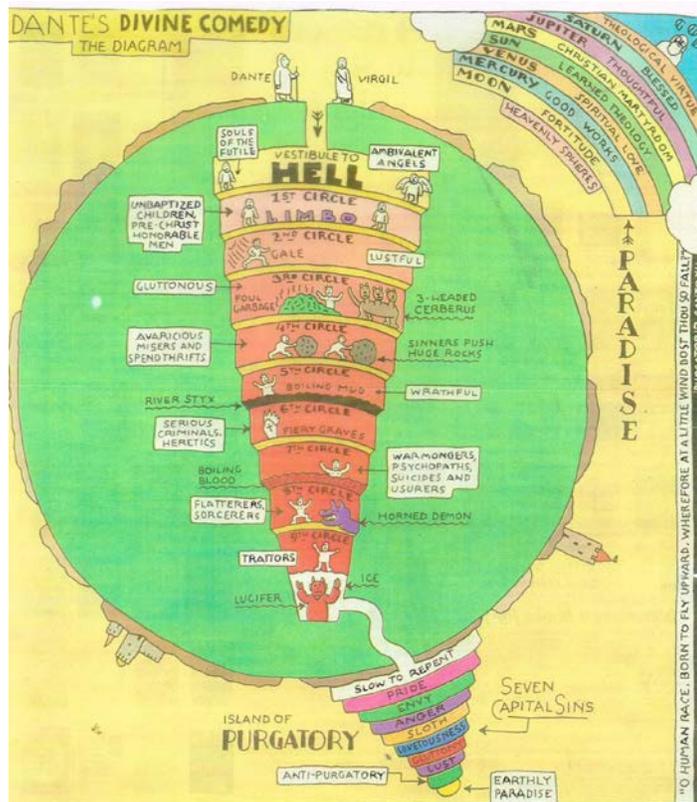
## **The Life of the Mind at Today's University: What Would Dante Say?**

Thank you, Ramón. President Linnane, Vice President Snyder, Associate Dean Roughani, Deans Leggio and Smith, administrators, colleagues, friends, students and families, I am honored and humbled to be chosen for this award. I am, (I believe) the third awardee who did not know Bernard Nachbahr personally to be so recognized. Yet I feel that because of his international interests, including founding the Leuven program in Belgium, where I too have stayed in the Nachbahr Huis, I almost know him. Since my first year at Loyola (then College) in 1989, I have heard that he was everyone's friend, and I know that he considered Italy to be almost paradise—and students at our Leuven program still celebrate that by going to Rome during their year in Belgium.

I am also honored to follow others before me here in receiving the award, and most particularly, in the path of two noted medievalists; the historian Kelly DeVries in 2008<sup>1</sup> – who urged us “Be the cream!” that is, the best; and the theologian, Fritz Bauerschmidt, who in 2009, challenged us to engage in active discussion of the life of the mind within the Catholic intellectual tradition of the University and what that means.<sup>2</sup>

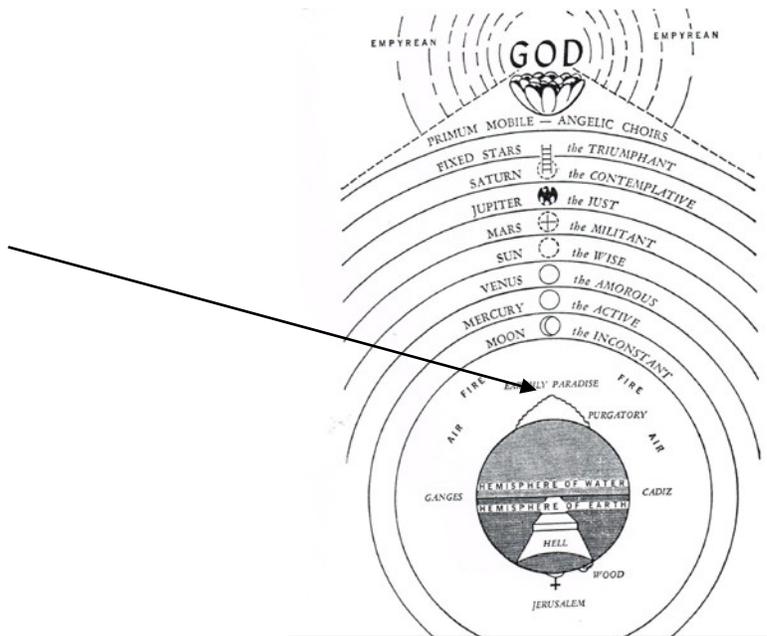
When I think of an ideal of the university, I remember Valentine Giamatti, a professor of my undergraduate years. I studied Dante's *Comedy* with him in his last semester of teaching. (Yes, you should recognize the name; he was the grandfather of the actor, Paul Giamatti, and father of the now deceased Bart Giamatti, initially President of Yale University and then, commissioner of major league baseball in his “dream job.”) Suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease, Val Giamatti was about to retire, so I rushed to take his course after just one year of formal Italian instruction. He taught in an office located in the College greenhouse; surrounded by glass with green in the background, sitting at a seminar table, he regaled us with details of Florence, Dante's life, and Italian medieval poetry. At the end of the semester, we met at his home, a few blocks from campus, where he showed us his collection of translations of the *Comedy* into many different languages, but also his collection of *buccherio*, Etruscan pottery brought out of Italy when it was still permitted. He (and his family) demonstrate the broad culture and varied interests that nourish the mind in a positive way. His books are now at that College library, and his shared love of the *Comedy* and what formed it remains with us all, his students.

Valentine Giamatti helps to respond to my Loyola colleagues' challenges by offering Dante's take on the life of the mind in reminding us of the good parts. I'm sure my title may have caused some trepidation at first; the *Comedy* is unfortunately more appreciated for *Hell* than for *Paradise*, with *Purgatory* a mere stepping-stone. In fact, in August 1999, the *New York Times* published a cartoon of Dante's *Divine Comedy* on its "Bookend" page at the back of the Sunday *Book Review* section:<sup>3</sup>



and two weeks later, a reader (in the letters of that same section) took the editor to task, saying the “[...] ‘diagram’ of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (Aug. 8) is strikingly representative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s view of the poem, a myopic view in which hell looms huge, seeming to encompass all we know of life’s drama, while purgatory and heaven are just abstract border motifs” (August 29, 1999).<sup>4</sup> And in fact, we tend to think of popes inserted head down in trash-can like holes with flames dancing on their feet, rather than Bernard’s hymn to Mary. It is, after all, human nature to fantasize about one’s nemesis being tortured, in this life or the next. On this occasion of celebrating our best, however, we particularly want to look at the successful spirits and the words Dante puts in their mouths. So don’t worry; we’re skipping the tortures by dreaming and flying, with just three major stops on the way to the end (not unlike Scrooge in the “Christmas Carol”).

We'll avoid Hell entirely, and most of Purgatory. While in Purgatory, Dante has a series of prophetic dreams, the third and last of which is just before entering Earthly Paradise at the top of Purgatory.



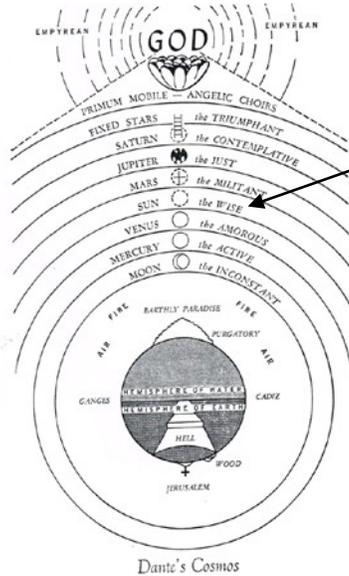
Thomas Bergin, *Dante's Cosmos* (NY: Orion, 1965).

In it, he sees Leah gathering flowers to dress herself up, as her sister Rachel gazes in a mirror; Leah says, “seeing satisfies her, doing satisfies me” [lei lo vedere e me l’ovrare appaga] (*Purg* 27: 106-8),<sup>5</sup> opposing the active (gathering flowers) and contemplative (looking into a mirror) life. Dante later sees Rachel, the contemplative sister, high in Heaven, just below Mary. That he mentions her there is not an insignificant choice, since he includes only nine specific names,<sup>6</sup> and, I would argue, this is an endorsement of that life style.



Dante's vision of Leah and Rachel, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1855

Dante continues through Earthly Paradise (at the top of Purgatory) into the heavens, and then visits the heavens of the moon, of Mercury and of Venus, arriving at the circle of the Sun, the fourth heaven, where twelve wise men form a crown around him.



Among these is the great Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas, who recounts St. Francis's life as an ideal to follow, “seraphic in his love” [fu tutto serafico in ardore] (*Par* 11: 37).



London, BM Yates Thompson 36 (Giovanni di Paolo mid 15th c)

Shortly thereafter, still among the wise, the great Franciscan theologian Bonaventure presents the life of Dominic, who “in a short time [...] became a great teacher” [in picciol tempo gran dottor si feo] (*Par* 12: 85).



London, BM Yates Thompson 36 (Giovanni di Paolo mid 15th c)

Two great philosophers of different orders thus present the other's founder in a positive light and as models to follow in acts of intellectual generosity. Francis too, Dante sees in the final scene high in heaven, just below John the Baptist and just above St. Benedict. (I'll remind you all now that Dante was two centuries too early for Ignatius, so I'm not ignoring him.)

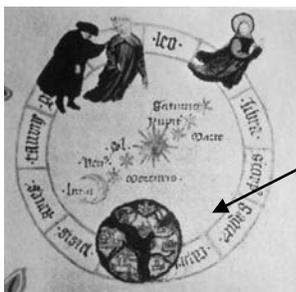
Our final stop today before the heaven of the Empyrean is in the circle of Saturn, where the contemplative St. Benedict tells his own story, explaining that the others there are all “contemplative / men on fire with the zeal that gives birth to holy flowers and fruit” [...contemplanti / uomini fuoro, accesi di quel caldo / che fa nascere i fiori e ' frutti santi] (*Par* 22: 46-9).



London, BM Yates Thompson 36 (Giovanni di Paolo, mid 15th c)

His is the only human face that Dante asks to see behind his robe of light (*Par* 22:58-60).

Benedict then turns righteous rage (the result of long contemplation) upon the state of Dante's world. Afterwards, to re-attain calm, Dante pauses before the next circle, contemplating where he has been, with, furthest away, “The little threshing floor/ that makes us so ferocious” [L'auola che ci fa tanto feroci], Earth (*Par* 22: 151).



Padua, Seminario 67, f. 274v (Paduan, early 15th c.)

The *Divine Comedy* ends with Dante's ascent to the Empyrean, the final circle, where he concludes by viewing a sort of stadium, an image where all the figures of heaven are represented in a way so as to facilitate human comprehension. It includes -- and he names-- Rachel, Francis and Benedict (this last revealed in human form, as Dante had requested) (*Par* 32. 4-47).



London, BM Yates Thompson 36 (Giovanni di Paolo, mid 15th c)

Thus, in the penultimate scene of his *Comedy*, Dante views the ranks of the blessed, and, ahead of his time, sees paradise as a rose, peopled half with men and half with women, half with Christians and half not, choosing specifically to mention contemplation (not action alone); fruits of study; and the demonstration of mutual intellectual respect, in spite what might have be the case "on the little threshing floor" of earth. These are the elements, I suggest, of which Dante might remind us today as examples for our search to be the best (the cream) in engaging with the role of the university (Catholic or not) on this ferocious threshing floor, over time and in our time, the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup>



Chicago, Newberry Library, Wing ZP 535 .A354 (Venice, 1502)

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<sup>1</sup> " [Be the Cream! Achieving the Life of the Mind](#)".

<sup>2</sup> "[The Life of the Mind at a Catholic University](#)".

<sup>3</sup> Seymour Chwast, Bookend, "NY Times Book Review Section," August 8, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to the editor, "NY Times Book Review Section," August 29, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> All quotes from the Italian *Commedia* are from the edition of Giorgio Petrocchi, *La divina commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, 4 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1966-67). Translations from Robert M. Durling & Ronald L. Martinez's *Purgatorio* (Oxford: UP, 2003) and *ibid.*, *Paradiso* (Oxford: UP, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> The nine specific names are Rachel, Beatrice, Sarah, Rebecca, Judith, John, Francis, Benedict, Augustine (Par 32: 7-10, 31, 34-36).

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Dr. Christopher Kleinhenz, Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin, Madison, for the manuscript illumination reproductions and to Dr. John McLucas, Professor of Italian and Chair of the Foreign Languages Department at Towson University for reading a draft for me and sharing his thoughts. Any errors that remain, and the opinions, are of course, my own. The images are not to be reproduced or publicly displayed, as copyright fees have not been paid for such display.