

Companion guide
for the video program

Pioneers of the Spirit

Dante Alighieri

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Gateway Films
VISION  **VIDEO**

Pioneers of the Spirit DANTE ALIGHIERI

Background

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) was born in Florence, Italy, the son of a notary. His name is a contraction of Durante. We know from his writings that he had an excellent education in both secular and religious studies. He may have studied at the University of Bologna, and he refers to the influence of Ser Brunetto Latini, one of the learned men of his time. The earliest fact we have of his life is that he was betrothed when he was only 12 years old. But Dante had only two major loves — the city of Florence and a woman he wrote about as Beatrice. It is believed that his Beatrice was Bice, daughter of Folco Portinari. Dante first saw her in 1274 when he was nine years old, and she became the inspiration for his later poetic works. About 1287 she became the wife of Simon dei Bardi, a wealthy banker. The lady's death in 1290 was a profound shock to Dante, but we do know that in 1293 he finally married Gemma Maneto Donati, who bore him two sons, Pietro and Jacopo and a daughter, Antonia. A third son, Giovanni, is sometimes mentioned.

These were the days of the conflicts between the Guelphs (middle class and tradesmen) and the Ghibellines (nobles). Dante served as a soldier and was a participant in the battle at Campaldino in 1289 and later in the siege of Caprona Castle at Pisa on the side of the Guelphs. Later, Dante decided to enter the field of politics. At that time no one could hold political office without membership in a guild, so in 1295 he was enrolled in the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries. That same year he was one of the Florentine council for the election of "priors," and five years later was one of the "priors" himself.

Dante's political efforts were counter-productive, because his support of the opponents of Pope Boniface VIII led to his condemnation in 1301/2, the sack of his house and his banishment for two years from his beloved Florence. Later, banishment was changed to permanent exile.

Now that he had lost his two great loves, Florence and Beatrice, Dante began a period of wandering. During this time he became interested in the history and importance of the Roman Empire. In 1310 the Emperor Henry VII came to Italy. It was for the Emperor that Dante wrote *De Monarchia*. Because the treatise expressed Dante's advocacy of separation of Church and State, and the relinquishing of temporal power by the Church, he once again came in conflict with the power structure. In 1329 the treatise was condemned as heretical. Dante visited Padua, and Mantua — some say he also visited Paris, England and Flanders — but after spending some years in Verona, he moved to Ravenna. It was here that his daughter, Antonia, entered a convent. Dante made a brief ambassadorial trip to Venice, and upon his return in 1321 he died and was buried in the monastery of the Franciscan friars in Ravenna.

Works by Dante

Vita Nuova (1283-1292) — In Italian. Love poems written in honor of Beatrice.

Canzoniere — Minor love poems, songs, ballads and sonnets written in Italian.

Convivio (1306?-1307) — In Italian. Refers to the "banquet" of learning, comprises four of fourteen proposed treatises. Dante proposes the idea that true nobility does not derive from heredity or wealth but from the practice of virtue.

De vulgari eloquentia — A work in Latin which deals with the origin and history of languages in general and goes on to examine fourteen Italian dialects. Only two of a projected four books were written.

Epistles — All in Latin. Subject of dispute as to number and authenticity.

De monarchia (in three books, 1310-1311?) — Claims the Emperor and the Pope are equally God's vicars. Presents opposition to the temporal power of the popes.

De aqua et terra — It asks the question (in Latin) “Can water in its own sphere or natural circumference be in any place higher than the dry land or habitable part of the earth?”

Bucolic Eclogues — Includes the request to come to Bologna to receive the poet’s crown, which Dante refused.

Divina Commedia (Italian) — In his poem Dante imagines a visit to hell and purgatory guided by his mentor, the Latin poet Virgil. After an emotional journey, Dante meets his Beatrice again and, purified, returns to the world.

Questions for Discussion

1. We are tempted to see Dante as “a man for all seasons.” In what ways do you think he was a man of his times?
2. Do you believe the infatuation he had for Beatrice was essential to his creativity?
3. *Divine Comedy* is Dante’s major work and his only religious work. He claimed that its purpose was to point out to those yet living the error of their ways and to turn them to the path of salvation. Why do you think it is still considered one of the great pieces of literature?
4. Dante chose Virgil, the pagan poet, as his “guide” in *Divine Comedy*, partly because the poem was modeled on Virgil’s *Aeneid* and partly because Virgil was looked upon in the Middle Ages as both a sage and a necromancer. Would you have chosen another guide, and if so, whom would you have chosen?
5. How does Dante show his genuine faith in this great work? Is there any one passage quoted in the video that especially appeals to you?
6. What has Dante to tell us today, and how can the lessons of the *Divine Comedy* be made relevant for us in the coming twenty-first century?
7. Do you think Dante would have written *Divine Comedy* if he had not been exiled? Think back to experiences of exile in your own life, experiences that made you feel as cut off from your world as Dante must have felt cut off from Florence. Did crisis deepen or change your faith in any way?
8. Spiritual advisor Nora Anthony claims that we can grow through experiences of great love as well as through experiences of exile. What do you think? How has it been in your life?
9. Which of Dante’s images speak to you most profoundly? For instance, can you remember a time when you felt lost in a dark wood? When you had to climb a mountain but felt blocked and trapped? Does your image of God change in times like these?
10. Professor Peter Hawkins states that *Divine Comedy* “is profoundly counter-cultural. It is centrally about change.” Do you think that living the Christian life requires living counter-culturally and change? How or how not?
11. The narrator says, “In many ways, Dante’s life rings true for anyone who find spiritual renewal in the midst of a mid-life crisis.” Does this statement resonate with you? What times in your life have brought you spiritual renewal?
12. Professor Peter Hawkins suggests that understanding the poem as bringing the self in alignment with God fits the idea that psychological maturation and spiritual growth are inextricably linked. Or does bringing the self into alignment with God suggest a tension between psychological maturation and spiritual growth to you? How has it been in your life and in the lives of those you love?

13. Have you ever found yourself asking what the gift is in the midst of suffering — or perhaps after the crisis has passed? Has the act of asking the question changed you? How?
14. Set time aside to write a story or poem that mirrors your own inner journey.
15. Dante's guides, Virgil and Beatrice, are important to him, in part because Virgil models professional competence and success to Dante, and Beatrice represents pure love to him. Who has guided you? What have they modeled and/or represented for you that has been especially important?
16. Our commentators suggest that for Dante, hell is entrapment of which you're unaware, that purgatory is a healing process of which you're very aware and that heaven is becoming spiritually whole. How would you define hell, purgatory and heaven?
17. Do you think the Rev. Alan Jones is correct when he claims that God dwells inside a great emptiness deep within us? What about his notion that the journey home is to go down through this emptiness?
18. Virgil explains to Dante that we must be prepared through spiritual cleansing for the mercy of God. What do you think? Must we be prepared for mercy? How? Why? Do you think you've ever been prepared for God's mercy? How?
19. Dante, as Professor Peter Hawkins suggests, lived in a society in which it was difficult to live a seeker's life. Imagine how our society could be more conducive to living a more spiritually and morally satisfying life.

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Dante on the Internet

For Online publications about Dante: http://orb.rhodes.edu/encyclp/culture/lit/Italian/da_onpu.htm

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