**Great Catholic Writers: Dante**

T.S. Eliot, the great 20th-century poet and literary critic, wrote: “Dante and Shakespeare divide the world between them. There is no third.” Harold Bloom, a literary critic of our own day, writes of Dante: “One cannot discuss genius in all the world’s history without centering upon Dante, since only Shakespeare, of all geniuses of language, is richer.”

Dante Aligheri was born in Florence, Italy, in 1265. For much of his life, he found himself in the middle of an intense conflict among completing political groups in Florence, the city he so loved. He became involved and was influential in the political sphere, but when a rival group took power in 1301, Dante was exiled from Florence, and his enemies threatened to burn him to death if he ever returned. That would be the last time Dante would see his beloved city (Biographical note in Dante, *Inferno*, translated by Anthony Esolen, New York: Modern Library, 2005, p. v – vii).

From an early age, Dante had a great love and gift for writing poetry. Of great significance to Dante the poet was a beautiful woman named Beatrice Portinari, who was something of a muse to Dante. For Dante, she was the “’bringer of blessings,’ a beatific guide capable of pointing him toward the inner perfection sought by every noble mind” (ibid., p. vi).

The fictionalized Beatrice played a critical role as guide and intercessor in Dante’s greatest and most celebrated work, *The Divine Comedy*, a poem which he began in the first decade of the 14th century. It is a comedy in the old sense of the word: a story with a happy ending (as opposed to a tragedy). This great work is divided into three parts: Hell (*Inferno*), Purgatory (*Purgatorio*), and Heaven (*Paradiso*). Dante broke new ground by writing in his own native Italian, the language of the people, rather than Latin, the language of the scholars, professional poets, and universities. *The Divine Comedy* is simultaneously a literary masterpiece and a work of deep philosophy and theology. Dante was a great student of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and brings his theology to bear brilliantly in this deeply Catholic work.

Anthony Esolen, celebrated translator of *The Divine Comedy*, discusses the structure of Dante’s work in the following way, and offers a glimpse into the genius of Dante:

Dante invented his rhyme scheme (*terza rima* [sets of three lines in which the rhyme scheme carries from one part to the next]) precisely to give glory to the Trinity; so, too, the threefold division of the poem, reflecting the threefold division of the hereafter into Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Since tradition held that Christ died at age thirty-three, each of the sections of the poem contained thirty-three, each of the sections of the poem contains thirty-three cantos, except for the unworthy *Inferno*, which contained either thirty-four or thirty-two, an excess or a deficiency, depending on whether we consider that Hell begins in the first canto or at the gates in Canto Three. Just as the fall of Adam is the happy fault that brought the Redeemer into the world, so the numerical blemish of the Inferno brings the whole *Comedy* to an even one hundred cantos, the square of ten, itself the square of the Trinity plus Unity. And in each of the three canticles of the poem there are ten circles: in the *Inferno*, ten rings of sinners whose deeds grow fouler as we descend farther below, until, in the dead center of the earth, we find Lucifer. And that is only a hint of the complexity of Dante’s use of number and mathematics (ibid., p. xix).