

Paradiso, Cantos XXIII–XXXIII**Cantos 23–27, The Fixed Stars (The Church Triumphant: Faith, Hope, and Love)**

The sphere of the “fixed stars” is the sphere of the constellations.

The Planets (22.133-54)

Beatrice tells Dante to prepare for the Empyrean by looking back to where he has already passed. He smiles at the paltry nature of the Earth in relation to the glory of the heavens. With this, he reinforces the idea that earthly pursuits are useless.

Peter, James, and John (24-27)

The apostles Peter, James, and John appear to test Dante on the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. Peter, who denied Jesus, tests faith. James, buried in the pilgrimage site of Santiago de Compostela, tests hope. John, the disciple most loved by Jesus, tests love. Fun fact: Dante's three sons were named after these apostles.

Adam (26.82-142)

Adam, the first human created, joins Dante, Beatrice, and the three apostles. Adam answers four questions for Dante: 1) when Adam was created; 2) how long he was in Eden; 3) why God became angry; 4) the language Adam spoke in Eden. (26.109-14). On the third question, Adam says it was not because he ate the fruit but (like Ulysees) “only the going beyond the mark.” (26.117). As for his time in Eden, he says he and Eve were only there for a few hours.

Peter's fury (27.37-66)

Peter (the first pope) turns red with fury, reflected in the whole sphere of the fixed stars, when he talks about the current state of the papacy. He calls the popes wolves in shepherd's clothing (27.55-56) and blames them for the “Babylonian captivity” (the move of the apostolic see from Rome to Avignon).

Cantos 27-29, The Primum Mobile (The Angels)

This outer sphere is the swiftest moving and the one that gives motion to the others, hence its name, “First Mover.”

Angelic Orders (28.16-29.145)

The nine orders of angels form nine luminous rings that circle an overwhelmingly bright light. They are arranged, like the planetary spheres, according to their proximity to God. Dante, using an early medieval text called *The Celestial Hierarchy*, sees from greatest (inner circle) to least (outer circle): Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. This differs from Dante's description in an earlier work, which he based on the writings of Gregory the Great. Here he tells us that Gregory, mistaken, laughed when he saw the real order of the angels in heaven (28.130-5). Dante approaches angels using Aristotelian ideas: he associates angels with pure reason and contemplation (since they are superior to humans on the Great Chain of Being), but also calls them “pure act” (29.33), unchanging beings free from matter and

potentiality. This borders on heresy, since only God is supposed to be truly “pure act.” He does, however emphasize that angels are only “sempiternal” (eternal beings only after their creation).

Cantos 30-33, The Empyrean (The Abode of God)

The White Rose (30.106-32.138)

All the blessed reside with God in the Empyrean, and Dante sees them arranged in the shape of an enormous white rose. The Queen of the rose is the Virgin Mary (traditionally associated with roses). This rose may also be meant to reflect the rose windows of those large cathedrals dedicated to Mary (like Notre Dame). One half of the rose holds those who believe in the Christ to come (saints of the Old Testament), the other with those who believe in Christ already come (saved Christians). Two gendered rows mark the division: Mary and the women of the Hebrew Bible (Eve, Sarah, Judith, Ruth, etc., including Beatrice) and John the Baptists and the Christian fathers (St. Augustine, St. Francis, St. Benedict, etc.). Part of the rose contains the souls of blessed children (blessed not through their free will, since they had not reached the age of reason, but through predestination and God's foreknowledge of their faith).

St. Bernard (31.58-33.51)

Beatrice is suddenly replaced by a new guide, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-53), abbot of the monastery of Clairvaux. Bernard, known for his devotion to Mary (he was called her “faithful Bernard,” 31.102), shows Dante the blessed residents of the rose (where he sees Beatrice in her rightful place). Bernard asks for Mary to grant Dante the ability to look on God and withstand the experience.

The Trinitarian Circles (33.115-45)

Dante sees three circles of the same circumference, distinguished by different colors. One appears to reflect the other (Father and Son), and the third appears as fire breathed equally by the others (the Holy Spirit). Dante's receives an instant of divine grace to help him comprehend the perfect fit between a human figure and the second circle (Jesus in both his human and divine natures). He likens his (unsuccessful) attempt to understand this to a geometer attempting to “square the circle.”

So...

Why do you think Beatrice disappears (compare this to Virgil's sudden disappearance in *Purgatorio*)? Why does Dante not get to say goodbye to these two?

In talking about the Trinity, Dante uses a mathematical/geometric metaphor (squaring the circle). Throughout the *Comedy*, he mixes theology with philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, music, law, and political science. What do you think Dante was attempting to accomplish with this interdisciplinary approach? Should science, philosophy, law, etc. have a place in theological discussions? Why or why not?