

“Dante is Ours”

Rarely, if ever, has the anniversary of a poet been so widely observed as was, on September fourteenth last, the six hundredth anniversary of the death at Ravenna, of Dante Alighieri, one of the greatest poets of all time. Heralded by two Encyclicals from the Holy See—one to the Archbishop of Ravenna, urging him to prepare a celebration fitting to the memory of the man, and the other to the students of literature the world over, reminding them of his achievements as a poet—the sexcentenary celebration of Dante's death was the highest tribute that could have been paid to a man who, because he was a man, was, with the passing of years, doomed to be forgotten.

Dante has escaped oblivion, and deservedly. Down through the centuries Italy has jealously kept his name enshrined. Italy's peasants quote his poetry more readily than they scrawl their signatures. Italy's aristocracy—yes, and outside the confines of national prejudice, Catholics and Protestants alike of every nation—all join in acclaiming him as one of the greatest creative artists that the world has seen.

Dante was born in Florence in May, 1265, and studied at Bologna, Padua and Naples. He is believed also to have studied at Paris and at Oxford, but this belief has no strong confirmation. He was a musician, a painter, a theologian and a good linguist. At the age of nine, he saw and fell in love with Beatrice Portinari, his inspiration for his *Divine Comedy*. His love for her endured, and found its expression in his *Vita Nuova*, and in his sonnets, some of which are beautiful, and others dull and heavy. Beatrice died in 1290.

In 1291 he married Gemma dei Donati, a daughter of

one of the most powerful families of the state. Florence was at this time divided into two factions, the Guelfs or Papal party, to which Dante belonged, and the Ghibellines or Imperial party, which were at war with each other. The struggle ended with the expulsion in 1302 from Florence by his enemies, of Dante and the heads of his party. From that time till his death at Ravenna, in 1321, he never returned to his native city, although in 1316 Florence promulgated a decree permitting the exiles to return on condition of fine and penance, both of which Dante indignantly refused.

It was during his exile that he wrote his masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, called the "Apocalypse of the Middle Ages." The Italian language had hitherto consisted of rough dialects with limited vocabularies. Dante himself had upheld the supremacy of Latin for its stateliness, purity and conciseness. It was in Latin that he had written his *De Monarchia* and *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and in which he had even begun his *Divina Commedia*. Instead of continuing his work in this language, however, Dante became the father of the Italian tongue by changing his first plans, and writing it in his own language—a signal proof of his love for everything Italian. It was Dante who made the language what it is today, as it has come down almost unvaried through the centuries. His style is the standard of Italian composition and versification. He writes with a vigor and purity that all famous Italian poets and prose writers from Boccaccio and Petrarch down to D'Annunzio and Croce have striven to acquire. In his masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, his poetry is lofty, stately and grand. It is like the music of a church-organ. It peals out majestically in its portrayal of the sublime, the terrible, the awesome and the sad. It is the outpouring of the emotions of a noble soul.

Dante shows in his *Divine Comedy* how greatly he was

influenced on the one hand by St. Thomas Aquinas, and on the other by Sts. Bonaventure, Bernard and Augustine. His poem is an epitome of the dogmatism of St. Thomas and of the mysticism of the others. Of the thirty-three cantos which he devoted to "Paradise," Dante makes the praises of St. Thomas the argument of four. The fact that he omits to mention in his poem the names of such famous philosophers of his day as Duns Scotus, Ockham and Raymond Lully, proves conclusively that he considered St. Thomas "the master of those who know," although at that time, St. Thomas' word was not accepted as final in theology. Opposed to his doctrine of the superiority of the intellect over the will was the teaching of the mystic school—the preeminence of the will over the intellect. In his epic, Dante taught both, but by placing Thomas, as leader of the twelve Doctors in the first crown, nearer to Beatrice, who represents Revelation, and St. Bonaventure in the second crown, he shows that dogmatism should be followed rather than mysticism. By this harmonious fusion of the two doctrines, and his vivid setting forth of the profound mysteries of his religion, Dante demonstrates his consummate art and gives his poem its unique character.

Because at one time his work, *De Monarchia*, was placed on the Index, and because he consigns Popes Anastasius II, Hadrian V, Martin IV, and several others to Hell, Dante has been accused of unorthodoxy. Catholics who know him but superficially believe that he teaches heresy. The first ground for this belief is the condemnation of his *De Monarchia*. In this he claims that the authority of the Church should be confined to purely spiritual matters, and denies the Pope's primacy in temporalities, not, however, in the restricted sense of his government of the Papal States. Dante's argument to support this claim is based upon unsound history; hence his inferences are false.

The book was placed upon the Index, and ordered to be burned, not because it was heretical, but because it would be a powerful weapon in the hands of the enemies of the Church.

When Dante consigned the Popes to Hell, he was primarily a man. As one of the consequences of the fact that Boniface VIII had taken part in the politics at Florence, Dante and his associates were driven into exile. Who can blame a man of his passionate nature when, in his attempt to prove that Boniface's policy was wrong, he goes a bit too far? Again, the poet's antagonism to Boniface was added to by the misinformation he received of the Pope's political principles through pamphlets that were written in an age when historical criticism was yet undeveloped. Another reason for Dante's severe judgments is that his indignation was strongly aroused by the removal of the Holy See from Rome to Avignon under the Pontificate of Clement V, whom he regarded as a "new Jason." This is no heresy, but a resentment arising both from a strenuous antagonism to the political aims of the Popes of his day and from the sense of his own injuries, and a part of what he conceives to be his mission—"to profit the misguided world".

The orthodoxy of Dante has been ably vindicated by Dr. Moore, a non-Catholic, one of England's foremost Dantean scholars, who says that "there is no trace in his writings of doubt or dissatisfaction respecting any part of the teaching of the Church in matters of doctrine authoritatively laid down". In a recent Encyclical the Pope officially recognized Dante's fidelity to the Church. "Dante is ours", he says. ". The pangs of exile, the hardships of suffering and political prejudices may at times have turned him from equity of judgment, but he himself never deflected from the Christian doctrine". Dante's philosophy is that all things, all virtues and all vices pro-

ceed from love, and so far is he from being unorthodox that many serious-minded non-Catholics have, after reading his *Divine Comedy*, been induced to regard the Catholic religion from a viewpoint entirely different from their former one, and some have even become converts to the Faith.

Dante's main faults in his masterpiece are his absolute unreliability as a historian, which we have before touched upon, and the fact that he makes a hybrid of his epic by drawing too freely from Virgil. Dante makes a bad historical blunder by confounding Pope Anastasius II, whom he consigns to Hell as a heretic, with his namesake and contemporary, Emperor Anastasius I, who was led into heresy by Photinus, Bishop of Sirmium. In his estimate of Boniface VIII, who is also found in the "Inferno" he was influenced by slanderous oral tradition and erroneous written articles, and by the charges of heresy, blasphemy and immorality which were brought against Boniface, after his death, by Philip the Fair. The forged Bull "Deum time," represented as being issued by Boniface, was also in great measure responsible for Dante's inveighing so strongly against him. Again, he places Pope Nicholas III among the Simoniacs, in Hell, for conspiring to oust Charles of Anjou from Sicily in return for a monetary consideration, in proof of which charge there is no historical evidence. Dante was too strongly prejudiced to be an impartial historian. His sufferings, his utter detestation of the political policy of contemporary popes and, above all, his desire to correct what he considered abuses, combined with his passionate Italian temperament to make him impatient of verifying any reports that came to him; his carelessness in this respect is culpable.

Although Dante has, in his epic, borrowed only from the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, he made the mistake of borrowing too much. He introduces into a purely Christian

epic such mythical characters as Cerberus, Charon, Minos, Plutus, Hercules and the Minotaur. While it is true that he might reasonably have imagined in his vision historical, allegorical, and even pagan personages, nevertheless he is false to his theme when he includes mythological among Christian ideals. In everything but this, his epic is what he had intended it to be—an abridgment of the doctrine of Christ, written to “remove those living in this world from the state of misery, and to lead them to the state of happiness.”

Despite these faults, Dante is a great poet. He wrote the greatest of Christian epics in a tongue that until then had never been used in literature, thereby invoking the remonstrance of his contemporaries and the praise and gratitude of his successors. He is sincere beyond the shadow of doubt. He has no great love for humanity; but he has pity for the sufferings of the damned. He is a prophet and a teacher, and as such, no greater recommendation can be given him than the words of Pope Benedict XV to lovers of literature: “Love and hold dear this poet whom we do not hesitate to call the greatest extoller of Christian wisdom and the most eloquent of all its singers. The more you advance in love for him, the more perfectly will you open your minds to the splendor of truth, and the more constantly will you persevere in your obedience to our holy Faith, and in your zeal for it.”