

IN PRAECLARA SUMMORUM

On Dante

Encyclical of Pope Benedict XV promulgated on April 30, 1921.

To Professors and Students of Literature and Learning in the Catholic World.

Beloved Children, Health and the Apostolic Benediction.

1. Among the many celebrated geniuses of whom the Catholic faith can boast who have left undying fruits in literature and art especially, besides other fields of learning, and to whom civilization and religion are ever in debt, highest stands the name of Dante Alighieri, the sixth centenary of whose death will soon be recorded. Never perhaps has his supreme position been recognized as it is today. Not only Italy, justly proud of having given him birth, but all the civil nations are preparing with special committees of learned men to celebrate his memory that the whole world may pay honour to that noble figure, pride and glory of humanity.
2. And surely we cannot be absent from this universal consensus of good men; rather should We take the lead in it as the Church has special right to call Alighieri hers.
3. So, just as at the beginning of Our Pontificate by a Letter to the Archbishop of Ravenna We promoted the restoration of the temple where the ashes of the poet lie, so now, to initiate the cycle of the centenary celebrations, it has seemed most opportune to Us to speak to you all, beloved children, who cultivate letters under the maternal vigilance of the Church, to show even more clearly than before the intimate union of Dante with this Chair of Peter, and how the praises showered on that distinguished name necessarily redound in no small measure to the honour of the Catholic Church.
4. And first of all, inasmuch as the divine poet throughout his whole life professed in exemplary manner the Catholic religion, he would surely desire that this solemn commemoration should take place, as indeed will be the case, under the auspices of religion, and if it is carried out in San Francesco in Ravenna it should begin in San Giovanni in Florence to which his thoughts turned during the last years of his life with the desire of being crowned poet at the very font where he had received Baptism. Dante lived in an age which inherited the most glorious fruits of philosophical and theological teaching and thought, and handed them on to the succeeding ages with the imprint of the strict scholastic method. Amid the various currents of thought diffused then too among learned men Dante ranged himself as disciple of that Prince of the school so distinguished for angelic temper of intellect, Saint Thomas Aquinas. From him he gained nearly all his philosophical and theological knowledge, and while he did not neglect any branch of human learning, at the same time he drank deeply at the fountains of Sacred Scripture and the Fathers. Thus he learned almost all that could be known in his time, and nourished specially by Christian knowledge, it was on that field of religion he drew when he set himself to treat in verse of things so vast and deep. So that while we admire the greatness and keenness of his genius, we have to recognize, too, the measure in which he drew inspiration from the Divine Faith by means of which he could beautify his immortal poems with all the lights of revealed truths as well as with the splendours of art. Indeed, his *Commedia*, which deservedly earned the title of *Divina*, while it uses various symbolic images and records the lives of mortals on earth, has for its true aim the

glorification of the justice and providence of God who rules the world through time and all eternity and punishes and rewards the actions of individuals and human society. It is thus that, according to the Divine Revelation, in this poem shines out the majesty of God One and Three, the Redemption of the human race operated by the Word of God made Man, the supreme loving-kindness and charity of Mary, Virgin and Mother, Queen of Heaven, and lastly the glory on high of Angels, Saints and men; then the terrible contrast to this, the pains of the impious in Hell; then the middle world, so to speak, between Heaven and Hell, Purgatory, the Ladder of souls destined after expiation to supreme beatitude. It is indeed marvellous how he was able to weave into all three poems these three dogmas with truly wrought design. If the progress of science showed later that that conception of the world rested on no sure foundation, that the spheres imagined by our ancestors did not exist, that nature, the number and course of the planets and stars, are not indeed as they were then thought to be, still the fundamental principle remained that the universe, whatever be the order that sustains it in its parts, is the work of the creating and preserving sign of Omnipotent God, who moves and governs all, and whose glory risplende in una parte piu e meno altrove; and though this earth on which we live may not be the centre of the universe as at one time was thought, it was the scene of the original happiness of our first ancestors, witness of their unhappy fall, as too of the Redemption of mankind through the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ. Therefore the divine poet depicted the triple life of souls as he imagined it in a such way as to illuminate with the light of the true doctrine of the faith the condemnation of the impious, the purgation of the good spirits and the eternal happiness of the blessed before the final judgment.

5. But among the truths that shine out in the triple poem of Alighieri as in his other works We think that these things may serve as teaching for men of our times. That Christians should pay highest reverence to the Sacred Scripture and accept what it contains with perfect docility he proclaims when he says that "Though many are the writers of the Divine Word nevertheless there is but one Dictator, God, Who has deigned to show us His goodwill through the pens of many" (Mon. III, 4). Glorious expression of a great truth. Again, when he says that "The Old and the New Testament, prescribed for eternity, as the Prophet says, contain 'spiritual teachings transcending human reason,' given 'by the Holy Ghost who by means of the Prophets and sacred writings, through Jesus Christ coeternal Son of God and through His disciples revealed the supernatural truth necessary for us'" (Mon. III, 3, 16). And therefore regarding the life to come "It is assured by the true doctrine of Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life: the Way because by that way we advance without hindrance to the happiness of that immortality; the Truth because He is free from all error; the Light because He enlightens us in the darkness of ignorance of this world" (Conv. II, 9). And no less reverence he pays to "those venerable Great Councils the presence of Christ in which no one of the faithful doubts"; and great is his esteem for "writings of the Doctors, Augustine and the others, and if any one doubt that they were aided by the Holy Ghost either he has not seen their fruits or if he has seen he has not tasted" (Mon. III, 3).

6. No need to recall Alighieri's great reverence for the authority of the Catholic Church, the account in which he holds the power of the Roman Pontiff as the base of every law and institution of that Church. Hence the outspoken warning to Christians: You have the Old and the New Testament: the Pastor of the Church as Guide; Let that suffice for your salvation. He felt the troubles of the Church as his own, and while he deplored and condemned all rebellion against its Supreme Head he wrote as follows to the Italian Cardinals during the stay at Avignon: "To us who confess the same Father and Son, the same God and Man, the same Mother and Virgin; to us for whom and for whose salvation the message was given, after the triple Lovest thou Me? Feed

My sacred sheepfold; to us, driven to mourn with Jeremias-but not over things to come but over things that are-for Rome-that Rome on which Christ, after all the old pomp and triumph, confirmed by word and work the empire of the world, and which Peter, too, and Paul the Apostle of the Nations consecrated with their very blood as Apostolic See-now widowed and desolate; to us it is as terrible grief to see this as to see the tragedy of heresy" (Epist. VIII). For him the Roman Church is The Most Holy Mother, Bride of Him Crucified and to Peter, infallible judge of revealed truths, is owing perfect submission in matters of faith and morals. Hence, however much he may hold that the dignity of the Emperor is derived immediately from God, still he asserts that this truth "must not be understood so strictly as to mean that the Roman Prince is not subject to the Roman Pontiff in anything, because this mortal happiness is subjected in certain measure to immortal happiness" (Mon. III, 16). Excellent and wise principle indeed which, if it were observed today as it ought to be, would bring to States abundant fruits of civil prosperity. But, it will be said, he inveighs with terrible bitterness against the Supreme Pontiffs of his times. True; but it was against those who differed from him in politics and he thought were on the side of those who had driven him from his country. One can feel for a man so beaten down by fortune, if with lacerated mind he breaks out sometimes into words of excessive blame, the more so that, to increase his feeling, false statements were being made by his political enemies ready, as always happens, to give an evil interpretation to everything. And indeed, since, through mortal infirmity, "by worldly dust even religious hearts must needs be soiled" (St. Leo M. S. IV de Quadrag), it cannot be denied that at that time there were matters on which the clergy might be reprov'd, and a mind as devoted to the Church as was that of Dante could not but feel disgust while we know, too, that reproof came also from men of conspicuous holiness. But, however he might inveigh, rightly or wrongly, against ecclesiastical personages, never did he fail in respect due to the Church and reverence for the "Supreme Keys"; and on the political side he laid down as rule for his views "the reverence which a good son should show towards his father, a dutiful son to his mother, to Christ, to the Church, to the Supreme Pastor, to all who profess the Christian religion, for the safeguarding of truth" (Mon. III, 3).

7. Thus, as he based the whole structure of his poem on these sound religious principles, no wonder that we find in it a treasure of Catholic teaching; not only, that is, essence of Christian philosophy and theology, but the compendium of the divine laws which should govern the constitution and administration of States; for Dante Alighieri was not a man to maintain, for the purpose of giving greater glory to country or pleasure to ruler, that the State may neglect justice and right which he knew well to be the main foundation of civil nations.

8. Wonderful, therefore, is the intellectual enjoyment that we gain from the study of the great poet, and no less the profit for the student making more perfect his artistic taste and more keen his zeal for virtue, as long as he keeps his mind free from prejudice and open to accept truth. Indeed, while there is no lack of great Catholic poets who combine the useful with the enjoyable, Dante has the singular merit that while he fascinates the reader with wonderful variety of pictures, with marvellously lifelike colouring, with supreme expression and thought, he draws him also to the love of Christian knowledge, and all know how he said openly that he composed his poem to bring to all "vital nourishment." And we know now too how, through God's grace, even in recent times, many who were far from, though not averse to Jesus Christ, and studied with affection the *Divina Commedia*, began by admiring the truths of the Catholic Faith and finished by throwing themselves with enthusiasm into the arms of the Church.

9. What We have said above suffices to show how opportune it is that on the occasion of this

world centenary each should intensify his zeal for the preservation of that Faith shown by Dante pre-eminently as support of learning and the arts. For We admire in him not only supreme height of genius but also the immensity of the subject which holy religion put to his hand. If his genius was refined by meditation and long study of the great classics it was tempered even more gloriously, as We have said, by the writings of the Doctors and the Fathers which gave him the wings on which to rise to a higher atmosphere than that of restricted nature. And thus it comes that, though he is separated from us by centuries, he has still the freshness of a poet of our times: certainly more modern than some of those of recent days who have exhumed the Paganism banished forever by Christ's triumph on the Cross. There breathes in Alighieri the piety that we too feel; the Faith has the same meaning for us; it is covered with the same veil, "the truth given to us from on high, by which we are lifted so high." That is his great glory, to be the Christian poet, to have sung with Divine accents those Christian ideals which he so passionately loved in all the splendour of their beauty, feeling them intimately and making them his life. Such as dare to deny to Dante this award and reduce all the religious content of the Divina Commedia to a vague ideology without basis of truth fail to see the real characteristic of the poet, the foundation of all his other merits.

10. If then Dante owes so great part of his fame and greatness to the Catholic Faith, let that one example, to say nothing of others, suffice to show the falseness of the assertion that obedience of mind and heart to God is a hindrance to genius, whereas indeed it incites and elevates it. Let it show also the harm done to the cause of learning and civilization by such as desire to banish all idea of religion from public instruction. Deplorable indeed is the system prevalent today of educating young students as if God did not exist and without the least reference to the supernatural. In some places the "sacred poem" is not kept outside the schools, is indeed numbered among the books to be studied specially; but it does not bring to the young students that "vital nourishment" which it should do because through the principle of the "lay school" they are not disposed towards the truths of the Faith as they should be. Heaven grant that this may be the fruit of the Dante Centenary: that wherever literary instruction is given the great poet may be held in due honour and that he himself may be for the pupils the teacher of Christian doctrine, he whose one purpose in his poem was "to raise mortals from the state of misery," that is from the state of sin, "and lead them to the state of happiness," that is of divine grace (Epist. III, para. 15).

11. And you, beloved children, whose lot it is to promote learning under the magisterium of the Church, continue as you are doing to love and tend the noble poet whom We do not hesitate to call the most eloquent singer of the Christian idea. The more profit you draw from study of him the higher will be your culture, irradiated by the splendours of truth, and the stronger and more spontaneous your devotion to the Catholic Faith.

As pledge of celestial favours and witness of Our paternal benevolence we impart to you, beloved children, with all Our heart, the Apostolic benediction.

Given at Rome at St. Peter's, April 30, 1921, the seventh year of Our Pontificate.