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On the Meaning of "Almus" in Dante's "Letter to the Princes and Peoples of Italy" (Epist. V)

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ON THE MEANING OF 'ALMUS' IN DANTE'S 'LETTER TO THE  
PRINCES AND PEOPLES OF ITALY' (*EPIST.* V).

In the title of this letter Dante applies the epithet *almus* to the city of Rome—'universis et singulis Italiae regibus, et senatoribus almæ urbis.' Of the two English translators of the letter, one (Latham) renders the word by 'fair,' the other (Wicksteed) by 'fostering.' The meaning of the word in classical Latin, of course, is not in doubt, and is familiar to everyone in the term *alma mater*, 'nursing mother,' applied to the Universities. But in mediaeval Latin the word bore a sense which seems somewhat remote from its etymology. By mediaeval writers it is commonly used as a synonym of *sanctus*. This, for instance, is the first meaning assigned to it in the dictionaries of Papias and Giovanni da Genova. In a mediaeval chronicle quoted by Du Cange the Emperor Ludovicus Pius is spoken of as 'Ludovicus Imperator qui cognominatus est Almus vel Sanctus.' I have come across another interesting instance in the colophons of two MSS. in the Bodleian, one of the early fourteenth century (MS. no. 11519), the other of the fifteenth (MS. no. 24436), in each of which the phrase 'gratia Pneumatis almi' occurs as the metrical equivalent of 'gratia Spiritus Sancti.'

I have little doubt that it is in this sense of *sanctus* that Dante uses the word in the title of this letter, *alma urbs* here, meaning Rome, being the exact equivalent of *urbs sancta* in *De Monarchia* II, 5, l. 106, and of *santa città* in *Convivio* IV, 5, ll. 53, 179.

Dante only uses the Latin word *almus* this once, but he twice in the *Commedia* uses *almo*, and each time in this same sense of *santo*, though modern commentators and translators for the most part give it the meaning of the classical *almus*. The first instance occurs in *Inferno* II, 20, here again applied to Rome: 'ei (i.e. Aeneas) fu dell' alma Roma e di suo impero...per padre eletto,' where Benvenuto da Imola comments: 'Roma dicitur alma urbs, idest sancta.' The second instance is in *Paradiso* XXIV, 138: 'l' ardente Spirto vi fece almi,' 'idest,' says Benvenuto, 'fecit vos sanctos.'

PAGET TOYNBEE.

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