

## ST. DOMINIC AND DANTE

WAS there ever such a year as 1921 for centenaries—centenaries, that is, of events which loom large in the history of the Christian Church? We have just celebrated in this country the seventh centenary of the Third Order of St. Francis; we are about to celebrate that of the passing of St. Dominic; almost simultaneously occurs the sixth centenary of the “Sommo Poeta,” Dante Alighieri, so intimately connected, spiritually and intellectually, with both the great Founders and their Orders. The Dominican Order celebrates this year the seventh centenary of its arrival in England. And attention was recently called to the fact that this same year sees the centenary of the conversion of St. Ignatius Loyola.

These coincidences lend interest to a Conference given by the eminent Italian publicist, the Marchese Crispolti, at Florence, on May 28th, in the Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella. The distinguished orator pointed out to his hearers that Dante after having in his youth learnt grammar and the art of “composing rhymes in the vulgar tongue” and of writing Latin epistles in the schools of the Friars Minor at Santa Croce—where also he imbibed from the Franciscan surroundings and spirit his admiration for the life of the Poverello and his inclination towards mysticism—went forth at the age of eighteen to enter upon his public life. It was after the death of Beatrice, when already many other influences were partly drawing him aside from the pure influence of her memory, that the Poet, then about twenty-five years of age, felt attracted to more solid and more regular studies. He attended the schools in Santa Maria Novella, which had been founded and made famous by two great Dominicans, Aldobrandino Cavalcanti and Remigio Girolami. Here he probably began with

## *Blackfriars*

the study of logic, the first step in the philosophical course. Here he was initiated into a knowledge of Albert the Great and of the "buon frate Tommaso d'Aquino," from whose *Summa* he was to derive the whole substance of the moral, psychological, and theological doctrine of the *Divina Commedia*. Indeed traces of the great Dominican philosophers are already to be found in his *Vita Nuova* and his *Convito*. Here, in the life of St. Dominic, written in 1290 by Teodorico d'Appoldia, he learnt of that vision of the Saint in which Christ, in wrath against the proud, the avaricious, and the carnal—"the lion, the she-wolf, and the panther" of the poem)—which had devastated the whole world, making of it a "selva selvaggia," and on the point of destroying it, is appeased by His Virgin Mother, "la Donna gentil nel ciel che duro giusuzio lassu frange." She has two faithful servants, Dominic and Francis, the two champions whose works and words shall convert the nations. This vision Dante never forgot; we find it again in the *Divina Commedia* when the Blessed Virgin, who has made herself the mediatrix between Dante and the Divine wrath, will send Lucia, and by means of Lucia, Beatrice, to secure his salvation.

How, the orator asked, did Dante repay these inspirations which he owed to St. Dominic? And he points to the tribute which the Poet paid to the Saint in the twelfth canto of the *Paradiso*, wherein the Franciscan Doctor St. Bonaventure tells the life-story of St. Dominic, as the Dominican St. Thomas Aquinas had in the preceding canto narrated that of St. Francis. Crispolti notes the divergence between the two cantos. The life of the Poverello of Assisi is more full of episode, more plastic it may be called, than that of the "Santo Atleta," and hence lends itself better to poetry. In fact those verses of the second of the two cantos which rise to the level of those in the first, are just the

## *St. Dominic and Dante*

ones which refer to Dominic's birth and infancy, precisely because these formed the most striking and the most original period of his life. But the greatest diversity, not hitherto sufficiently noticed by commentators, consists in the fact that Dante did not illustrate either the whole of St. Francis or the whole of St. Dominic: the former he contemplated rather in himself than in his effects, the latter more in his effects than in himself. Of the former, he exalted especially the great example, of the latter the great work, and it is just this difference of viewpoint that renders the apotheosis of the second, although less lyrical, of a special character and of greatest value. Dante, moreover, has rendered a further service to St. Dominic, particularly valuable in our times, by his implicit defence against the ill-treatment which the latter has received from certain historians. This does not refer to the charges of cruelty against the Albigensians, nor to that of having been the founder of the Inquisition. That office and the tremendous use which he is said to have made of it, are nowadays quite discredited by the best scholars. Dominic was "cruel to his enemies (*ai nemici crudo*)," by the power of the arguments with which he refuted them; but few men have so strongly hated error, precisely through love of those who have erred. There are other accusations, more modern and milder, though more specious. St. Francis has been made use of as a model in opposition to St. Dominic. This was a part of the attempt to exalt in Christianity the ardour and spontaneity of conscience at the expense of faith and authority. Thus St. Francis was represented as the symbol of joyfulness, ardour, Christian liberty, whilst in Dominic were figured dogmatism and controversy, whilst Pope Innocent was represented as the figure of domination and repression. Now the testimony of Dante not only declares how precious are the two reformers, with the

## *Blackfriars*

approbation by means of which the Popes incardinated their Orders into the perpetual life of the Church, but also recognizes that Francis and Dominic had a concordant mission and equal importance in the Christian reconstruction of the world. The twin cantos of the *Paradiso* insist upon nothing so much as upon this joint and equal mission. Certain recent and distinguished commentators, yielding involuntarily to these prejudices of the detractors of St. Dominic, say that Dante, whilst expressly putting him on a level with St. Francis, still makes it clear how much the latter is superior to him. Crispolti, after remarking that a judgment of this character belongs rather to our own time than to that of Dante, combats the arguments of these commentators, the principal of which is that in Canto XXII of the *Paradiso* Dante does not mention Dominic among the elect of the "candida rosa," though he has already mentioned St. Francis with St. Benedict and St. Augustine. He points out that amongst the three greatest Founders of Orders St. Dominic was in a certain manner absorbed in and represented by St. Augustine, since the Rule of the Friar Preachers was, as is known, an adaptation of the Rule of St. Augustine. Hence St. Dominic could, naturally not find a place among these Founders, whilst St. Francis could do so, as he was subject to no preceding Rule and had derived his own Rule directly from the Law of Poverty in the Gospel.

But more than this, according to the Lecturer, the soul of Dante, which was attracted above all things by doctrine and controversy, must have felt itself nearer to the "Cherubic light," which is the Dominican virtue, than to the "Seraphic ardour," the Franciscan virtue. It is certain that no joy was to him equal to that of having been able to converse in Heaven with the Dominican St. Thomas and to have been by him "cotanto gloriosamente accolto." And his Beatrice

### *St. Dominic and Dante*

herself, in whose ardent spiritualization Franciscan influence may be recognized, was adapted by him to the purely Dominican office of becoming the symbol of theological science.

“ I imagine that if Dante had been able to return to Florence, to receive the laurel crown in his own ‘ *bel San Giovanni*,’ ‘ where the espousals were completed at the sacred font between himself and the Faith,’ I imagine that he would have come to kneel once more in *Santa Maria Novella*, where he had to a certain extent in his turn obtained from *Dominic Guzman* and his followers ‘ licence to combat for the Truth against the erring world.’ So great was his gratitude to the Masters who had taught him, so great, amidst his proud partisanship, the final and complete humility which made him rejoice in feeling inferior to the saints. Nor did he ever compare his own glory, human glory—‘ a breath of wind that cometh, now from here and now from there, and changes its name because it changes its direction,’ with the glory of the Blessed in Heaven, for whom ‘ the light with which your substance is clothed will remain with you eternally as now it is.’ ”

“ Oh for another *della Robbia* like to him, who so inimitably represented the actual embrace of *St. Francis* and *St. Dominic* ! He should represent the symbolical embrace between *St. Dominic* and *Dante*, both benefited and benefiting. . . . ”

LOUIS CHARLES, BISHOP OF SALFORD.