

Sixth Centenary of Dante's Death

LECTURE BY REV. D. BUCKLEY

On the evening of September 21, the sixth centenary of Dante's death, a large audience assembled in St. Joseph's Hall, Dunedin, to honor the great Catholic poet whose life and works were to be the subject of Father Buckley's address. Amongst those present were his Lordship Dr. Whyte, the Cathedral, South Dunedin, and Mosgiel clergy, students of Holy Cross College, of St. Philomena's, St. Dominic's, and the Christian Brothers' Schools. The lecture was illustrated by fine limelight views taken from Doré's famous pictures of the scenes in the *Divine Comedy*. The atmosphere of the whole evening received its final perfection from the Italian songs sung at intervals by Miss Ursula Lunden, who sang *Caro Mio Ben*, and Messrs. Heley and Fogarty, who gave an artistic rendering of the duet, *Solenne in Quest' Ora*.

The reason we are gathered in this hall to-night (said Father Buckley) is to do honor to the genius and the memory of a great Catholic poet who has sung in lofty strains the mysteries and the doctrines of the Christian religion and who is known to the world as Dante Alighieri, or simply Dante.

On the occasion of the 6th anniversary of Dante's death, which occurred this month (September 14) throughout the world of culture and learning assemblies of this nature are being held—and in many places of far greater impressiveness—to recall the memory of Dante, to eulogise and explain the works of his poetic genius, and to create if possible a task, nay a love, for his poems which are so instructive, so sweet, so awe-inspiring, so transcendent.

Long before the war, in the year 1913, preparations were begun in Ravenna, where the poet's ashes lie, for world-wide celebrations this year, but the war interfered with the arrangements. On the cessation of hostilities preparations were again feverishly pushed on, so that today, in every country of the civilised world and in every city of importance, resound the name and fame of Dante, the foremost of Christian poets. And of these world-wide celebrations the chief promoter is Pope Benedict happily reigning. He has given his approval and his encouragement to these centenary honors; he has done more—he has contributed a princely sum of money towards the restoration of the Church of St. Francis, near which the bones of our poet lie at Ravenna—and he has written a letter to the institutions of learning throughout the world eulogising Alighieri and exhorting their associates to the study of his works, so that it is in accordance with the express wish of the Sovereign Pontiff that we are gathered here to-night to talk of the life and glance through the writings of the great Florentine poet.

The Popes and Learning

It is a well-known fact that in every age the pontiffs of Rome have been the patrons of art and artists, and it is owing to the fostering care of the Catholic Church and her rulers that many a priceless gem of sculpture, painting, architecture, music, and literature, has been preserved to the world. Raphael, Michelangelo, Giotto, P'Angelico, Palestrina, and a host of others famous in the world of art, were the painters, sculptors, and musicians of the Church—not to speak of the zeal of the monasteries in saving the classic literature of pagan Rome and Greece we know that the Popes accumulated in their own Vatican home a mass of the most precious manuscripts of antiquity and made it rank the first among the foremost of the world's great libraries. Litterateurs were ever encouraged and befriended by the Church and the Popes: Iasso, the Italian Milton and author of "Jerusalem Delivered" died in the convent of Saint Onofrio under the protection of the Pope and the shadow of the Vatican Palace. Petrarch is patronised and assisted by the Cardinals in Curia—his merits are rewarded—and he is solemnly crowned as poet in the ancient capitol of Rome—the Popes' Cathedral City. Benedict XV

follows in the footsteps of his predecessors, and is faithful to ancient traditions. Like Maecenas of old—the minister of Augustus and admirer and friend of Horace and Virgil, Benedict XV calls our attention to the lofty genius and the polished unsurpassed writings of the great Florentine seer, Dante Alighieri, whose poems are impregnated with the noblest of Christian principles, both in faith and morals, and who has sung of things spiritual and heavenly as no other poet either before or after him.

So-Called Dark Ages

The ages before the so-called Reformation—or at least those before the taking of Constantinople in 1453 are looked upon as ages of ignorance and illiteracy: they are called dark and of course the darkness, the ignorance and the illiteracy are ascribed to the Catholic Church, the only church of Western Europe in those days. We must remember that those were ages long before the invention of the printing press—when manuscripts were rare and writing material not easy to procure. 'Tis true there were in these so-called dark ages no poison gasses, no submarines, no dreadnoughts, no Lewis guns, and similar instruments of destruction, but if darkness consists in the want of these—then welcome, a thousand times welcome again the darkness of the Middle Ages. But Dante Alighieri of this evenings' celebrations was an offshoot of those times. He belonged to the 13th century and he stands forth in his works convincing evidence to the erudition, the culture and to the lofty and noble ideas and ideals of those oft and much maligned times. Dante, too, is an argument to prove that the learning of those days was not confined to the clergy and the monasteries, but extended to the laity who had leisure and talent to acquire it. The knowledge he possessed—and it was of no mean order—he acquired not only from his contemporaries, but from the works of the great masters who had lived deeper down the centuries and closer than he to the middle of the Middle Ages. He was acquainted with and versed in the astronomy of his day. He had an understanding of music (and what Italian has not?) and had moreover learned to sketch and paint. We are told he was a perfect rhetorician and a very noble orator sent on many important diplomatic missions. He enjoyed a responsible position in his own Florence, having been one of the six priors elected to the government of the city.

He lived in centuries far different and distant from ours. He was born 200 years and more before Luther, 300 years before Shakespeare, 75 before Chaucer the father of English poetry, whose favorite poet he was in days when Merrie England was as Catholic as Dante's Italy is today. He lived long before the Renaissance began to spread the new learning throughout Europe and, child of the Middle Ages as he was, he has endowed the literature of the world with works that rightly entitle him to rank with the geniuses of the world's poets—Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare—the romantic singers of humanity, and to be classed as the father of the mellifluous Italian tongue. Dante drew the inspiration of his poems from Catholic philosophy and theology, and in his writings has embodied musically the doctrines and beliefs of the Catholic Church. So sweetly and religiously has he sung the theological teaching of the Church that he is deservedly called the "St. Thomas of Poetry." Albertus Magnus, Boethius, Bonaventure, Thomas of Aquin were a few of the masters he had studied and with whose teaching he became saturated, so much so that throughout his poems it is impossible to find him erring, even in one solitary instance, from the accepted teaching of the Church. He was familiar with the Fathers and Doctors of the Church—with Augustine, Gregory the Great, Anselm, Bernard, and others all of whom St. Thomas points out to him in the circle of the Sun in Paradise. So inti-