

Beatrice

When Dante was nine years old he first met Beatrice, the subject of his poems, who was then beginning her ninth year, and his young, affectionate, and guileless heart was captivated by her childish charms. She was clothed—he tells us in his *Vita Nuova*—in a most noble color, a subdued and decorous crimson, girdled and adorned in such wise as was suitable to her most youthful age. Thenceforth love swayed his soul and often times commanded him to seek to behold this youngest angel: “Wherefore,” he says, “I, in my boyhood, many times sought her out, and saw her so noble and laudable in bearing that she appeared the offspring not of mortal man but of a god.” His love for Beatrice continued throughout his life, but it was a love purified, idealised, transfigured, spiritualised. She was to him the embodiment of all that is pure, tender, and noble in woman, and she exercised over him an influence for good as he himself admits. The sight of Beatrice praying in church awakened Dante’s fervor. He would stand by the way awaiting her, but, though, he saw her and was satisfied they never actually met. On one occasion and one only did she deign to recognise him and to salute him when his joy knew no bounds.

“When she appeared a sudden flame of charity was enkindled within me which made me pardon all and have no more enemies. When she was about to salute me a spirit of love annihilated all other sensitive spirits, leaving strength to those of sight alone. And one who wished to know what it is to love, would have learned by seeing all my limbs tremble. Then,—(and here’s his happy moment)—then, at the moment when that noble lady bowed her head to greet me, nothing could veil the dazzling brightness which filled my sight: I stood as if stricken by an unendurable beatitude.”

In his *Vita Nuova* he has sung of Beatrice and her many virtues, thus:

“Now will I tell you of her excellence.
I say then that the lady who would show
True gentleness should walk with her; for when
She moves, love casts o’er vulgar hearts a chill,
Which freezes and destroys their every thought,
And he whom love permits to see her long
A thing ennobled will become, or die.

He never seems to have sought her in marriage nor is there any reason to believe that she was aware of the pure deep love she had inspired in the heart of our poet. She married another: Dante married too. Beatrice died at the early age of 24. In various sonnets he sings of her death and in his own self-confidence, and with a conviction of his own ability he resolves, if he be spared, to sing of her in such a manner as has yet never been sung of any other woman. He fulfilled his resolution in the *Divina Commedia*. The *Vita Nuova* was the work of his unripe years, but after the death of Beatrice he applied himself seriously to study and especially to the study of philosophy of which he becomes enamoured, and which he studies as he tells us himself “in the schools of the religious” from the clergy. This philosophy he personifies: She is a lady, the noble daughter of the universe to whom Pythagoras gave the name of Philosophy. This study now became his joy and consolation. It was the comfort of his soul and he found in it a remedy for his tears, so that every other thought was expelled and destroyed.

Dante’s Pride

At long last, after many years of exile the Florentine authorities decided to permit him to return to the city of his heart and earnest longings, but only on condition of the payment of a fine and an admission of guilt, but the proud Alighieri, noble in his praise-worthy pride refused these base stipulations—and he reminds us forcibly of another noble soul across the Tasman sea—he, too, banished from the land of his birth by autocratic ascendancy, and who spurned the conditions laid down for his entry into Ireland, preferring “not to see Ireland rather than to sell

her.” “If by no honorable means,” says Dante, “an entrance be found into Florence, then I will never return”—“*Nunquam revertar*—what!—Can I not from any corner of the earth behold the sun and star.” He died, as I said before, at Ravenna of fever, in his 57th year, after having received all the Sacraments of the Church with humility and devotion as his biographer Boccaccio tells: *Ogni Ecclesiastico Sacramento umilmente e con devozione ricevuto.* His ashes lie at Ravenna safe-guarded for centuries by the humble followers of the gentle Francis of Assisi of whom he so sweetly sings in Paradise.

Florence has endeavored as late as 1864 to gain possession of Dante’s remains, but in vain—ungrateful Florence, Dante sleeps afar.

These simple Latin lines are inscribed upon his tomb:

*Hic claudor Dante’s patriis extorris ab oris
Quem genuit parvi Florentia mater amoris.*

Here I am enclosed, Dante, exiled from my native land
Whom Florence bore, the mother that did little love him.

But in the church of Santa Croce, the mausoleum of Florence’s greatest sons, a monument stands to Dante’s memory, with the inscription impressive in its simplicity:

Onorate l’altissimo poeta.

“Do honor to the all high poet.”

A True Catholic

We may now inquire what Dante’s attitude was towards religion. Of course he professed to be a Catholic, he died a Catholic with all the rites of the Church, but was he orthodox in his beliefs? Did he sincerely hold to the doctrines as taught by the Catholic Church? There are those who, jealous of his greatness, endeavor to wrest and twist passages of his writings as they do the scriptures to make his words fit in with their own prejudiced and preconceived opinions, but apart from the more obscure and difficult passages which bear various interpretations we are fortunate in numerous and unambiguous verses which unquestionably prove not only his orthodoxy, but his sincere, devout childlike spirit of Catholicity and his unwavering attachment to the See of Peter and to Peter’s successors. If he sees blemishes in the ecclesiastics of his day, and no one doubts that these existed even in high places, Dante deplores and condemns them, but he is careful always to distinguish between the office the individual holds and the person occupying that office. He respects the Ecclesiastical office, above all the chair of Peter, but he scathingly rebukes the one who would degrade it. Much of his denunciation owes its origin to political differences, for, as he disliked the French, so he strongly disapproved of the friendly relations that existed, at times, between the Popes and the French kings. Much, again, of his invective may be traced to a wrong understanding of history, as when he condemns Pope Anastasius II as guilty of heresy but whose orthodoxy is recognised now by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Dante was an Irishman in this sense at least, that while he unhesitatingly took his religion from Rome, he as uncompromisingly refused to take his politics.

He shows little sympathy for those who deny the teachings of the Church in matters of faith, for he places them very early in his poem in hell’s sixth circle buried there in red-hot ovens. A few of these heretics he mentions by name, and the dogmas they denied, such as the immortality of the soul. He had held heresy in such horror that if he saw it even in a Pope, in his private capacity of course, he would not hesitate to place him among the damned.

Let us now take the teaching of the Church in detail and as expounded by Dante. Adam was created by God, formed by Him out of the slime of the earth. He is to Dante the man who was never born, our first father. He was created and endowed with original justice, and his soul was so beautiful and rich in grace that God was enamored with the work his hands had formed. This



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