

## DANTE, THE POET OF THE LITURGY

BY MARY MANLEY

It has been said of the Divine Comedy that it is like the Bible in this respect: every man finds within its pages that which answers to his need. The poet lingers over the lyricism and the exquisite imagery: the historian delves into a philosophy of history modelled on that which St. Augustine has outlined in the "City of God." The statesman studies the tangled politics of Florentine factions. The scientist and the philosopher find a wealth of material concerning the natural and the supernatural order. And to this we must add that for the Catholic the spirit of the liturgy is the golden thread of the splendid fabric into which is woven the whole culture of mediaeval Christianity. Following this thread through the three canticles of Dante's vision we see it as the motif which sets off the design of the masterpiece, throwing into relief the gloom of the infernal regions, the peace and hope of the serene Mount of Purgatory, the joy and light and love of the celestial spheres. For the supreme place in this architectonic marvel is assigned to Theology, and Dante is not out of place today in a symposium of Catholic historians when we consider the *Commedia* as a history of religion, — not merely of religious thought in the Middle Ages, but of religion as the manifestation of Divine Providence and the story of Christian Piety.

The liturgical element in the Divine Comedy is not only the clue to a better understanding of the poem, but a key to the story of Dante's life as a layman. For the sake of perspective we should glance at his childhood and note the influences that made a lasting impression on mind and heart. His first teachers were the Benedictines of the Badia, the old Florentine Church to which he affectionately alludes twice in the *Paradiso* (xv, 97-98; xvi, 128-129). In this monastery school he learned to follow the liturgy in the solemn ritual and melodious chant which has ever been the especial care of the sons of St. Benedict. Later, Dante attended the public school of the Franciscans in the little cloister of Santa Croce, built by Brother Bernard who accompanied St. Francis to Florence on two occasions, in 1211 and in 1221. In this school, according to the Italian scholar Salvadori, Dante learned to read and meditate on the Scriptures and the lives of the saints, especially the legends of the Poverello of Assisi. The beauty of the Franciscan ideal led the youthful Dante to become a Tertiary, as we infer from a passage in the *Inferno* (xvi, 106-108). Then, in early manhood, he sought the austere consolations

of philosophy "in the schools of religious", as he tells us in the *Convito*. With the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella he studied philosophy and theology, a pupil of the famous Fra Remigio Girolami, who was at that time expounding the works of St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas in the renowned monastery of Florence. In these early associations with Benedictine, Franciscan, and Dominican teachers we see the sowing of the seed which was to bear fruit in the liturgical overtones, the mystic idealism, and the structural perfection of the *Divine Comedy*.

A second phase of his life which we must briefly consider is the visit to Rome at Eastertide of 1300. This centennial year was momentous in the history of the Church and in the life of the poet. It marked the first Universal Jubilee or Holy Year, instituted by Pope Boniface VIII in a Bull dated February 21st, 1300. This fact is of historical significance today when the Catholic world enjoys the spiritual benefits of the twenty-fourth Holy Year, recently prolonged by Our Holy Father to commemorate the nineteenth centenary of the Crucifixion.

At a moment when his heart was heavy with personal grief and political reverses Dante made the pilgrimage to Rome, as we infer from passages in the Poem. These allusions have the savour of devout recollection, and, for us, a certain historical interest in the references to the vast concourse of pilgrims, to the impression made on the visitors by the sight of the great and ancient monuments of Rome, and to the piety of the faithful as they venerated the holy relics.

The assignment of his Mystic Voyage to the ideal date of Eastertide in the year 1300 points to the crystallization of his purpose to write the Sacred Poem on which he had been meditating for ten years, and it implies his conversion from an active worldly life to the consideration of things "sub specie aeternitatis".

In a letter to his benefactor, Can Grande della Scala, to whom he dedicated the *Divine Comedy*, Dante explains the meaning of his Poem and the fourfold sense in which it is to be interpreted. He tells us that "the subject of the whole work, taken according to the letter alone, is simply a consideration of the state of souls after death... But if the work is considered according to the allegorical meaning, the subject is man, liable to the reward or punishment of Justice, according as through the freedom of the will he is deserving or undeserving." He declares that the aim of the Poem "is to remove those living in this life from a state of misery and to guide them to a state of happiness".

It is to this end, because the *Divine Comedy* was undertaken "not for the sake of speculative philosophy but for the sake of practical needs" that Dante made Church doctrine and practice the woof of his fabric. He used the sacred

words of Scripture and the inspired teaching of the Church, her sacraments and sacramentals, her Divine Office, melodies and sacred art, her orderly ritual and pious practices, blending all that dogma and tradition had taught him into a living whole that has the austere and subduing beauty of a liturgical ceremony.

We shall now consider the Divine Comedy as a mosaic of Christian doctrine and discipline, and follow the ritual and worship of the Church as Dante traces it in the steps of a pilgrimage that led him, as he devoutly hoped it would lead others, from the slavery of sin to the liberty of the City of God.

The epoch of the Poem is Eastertide of the year 1300 and the chronology follows the drama of the Paschal cycle as it comes to a climax in the Death and Resurrection of Our Lord. The night of Holy Thursday, anniversary of the vigil which the Saviour made in the Garden of Gethsemane in sadness and grief of heart over the sins of the world, Dante has spent in a Dark Wood overwhelmed with bitterness and remorse for the sins which had brought his soul near to the point of death. The dawn of Good Friday brings a ray of hope as the Sun, which "leads men straight on every road", shines from a hilltop, foreshadowing the light brought to the world by the Victory of the Cross on Calvary. His efforts to climb the hill are frustrated by three beasts who threaten to destroy him, and all but thrust him back to the depths of the valley from which he had just escaped. The voice of reason, in the person of Virgil, counsels him to seek "another way" of ascending the hill. Under the guidance of Reason he must first go through an eternal place and hear "the hopeless shrieks of the spirits in pain", then into the region of those who are contented in the fire, for they hope to come among the blessed. At this point he will have reached the summit of the Sunlit Hill which he could not ascend solely by his own effort. If he wishes to mount still higher, another guide, a worthier spirit, will lead him to the court of the Emperor, into whose City Reason alone may not take the soul, which has need, of Divine Revelation, in those lofty matters that are beyond the scope of human understanding. Dante begs Virgil to lead him to the Gate of St. Peter, and prepares to follow the Mystic Guide into the realm of darkness, where he remains from sundown of Good Friday until dawn of Easter Sunday, for his sojourn in the "place void of all light" synchronizes with the interlude of darkness and desolation which the Church prescribes in commemoration of the time Our Lord spent in the tomb.

The first canto of the Inferno, the prelude to the whole poem, is filled with the accents of woe that sound in the Lenten liturgy, especially that portion of the Scriptures assigned to the latter part of Holy Week. There are echoes of the Vesper Antiphons of Holy Thursday, of the Penitential Psalms and of the prophecies read in the Mass of the Pre-Sanctified. The opening line

of the Divine Comedy is a literal transcription of a verse in the prophecy of Habacuc which forms the Tract of the Mass. The prophet cries: "O Lord, thy work, in the midst of the years bring it to life. In the midst of the years Thou shalt make it known: when Thou art angry Thou wilt remember mercy" (Hab. 3). The Poem opens with the verse: "In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself." In the literal sense this refers to his thirty-fifth year, for the days of our life according to the Psalmist, are "three-score years and ten" (Ps. 89, 10), and Dante was born in 1265. In the moral sense, the allusion is to the period when calamities overwhelmed him, for that year marked a crisis in his private and his political life. In the *Convito*, Dante compares man's life to an arch the peak of which is reached in the thirty-fifth year, therefore Christ died in His thirty-fourth year, since it was not fitting that Divinity should suffer a decline (*Conv. IV*, 24). Dante, well-versed in the Scriptures, and familiar with this prophecy as part of the Mass, knew that by "thy work" the prophet meant the great work of the redemption of man, which the Lord will bring to life and light in the midst of the years, that is, when calamities and miseries shall be at their height.

As he descends from circle to circle of the infernal abyss Dante views the havoc wrought by sin in the soul of man, and hears the wailing and gnashing of teeth of those upon whom their sin recoils as punishment. This illustrates the principle of *contrapasso*, the structural idea of the *Inferno*, according to the Psalmist: "His sorrow shall be turned upon his own head: and his iniquity shall come down upon his crown" (Ps. VII, 17). The name of Christ is never pronounced in the *Inferno*, the Saviour being there referred to by means of periphrasis, such as "the Highest Wisdom" (*III*, 6), or "the Man Who lived and died without sin" (*XXXIV*, 15). The Biblical warrant for this concept is found in the first penitential psalm: "For there is no one in death that is mindful of thee; and who shall confess to thee in hell?" (Ps. VI, 6). Nor is there any reference to the events of Our Lord's life save His descent into Limbo (*Inf IV*, 52-61), and the allusions to those who suffer punishment for their infamous share in His death. That Hell was branded with the mark of ruin in the earthquake at the moment of the Crucifixion we learn from the demon Malacoda, in charge of the circle where Barterers are punished, who points to the pathway cleft through the abyss and tells the pilgrims: "Yesterday, five hours later than this hour completed a thousand two hundred and sixty-six years since the way here was broken" (*Inf XXI*, 112-113).

Dante reaches the lowest Pit of Hell during the night of Holy Saturday, the time which the early Church spent in vigil, the ceremonies of the blessing of the fire, the blessing of the fonts and the water for baptism being then performed after sundown of Saturday. At this moment when the Church prepares to celebrate the triumph of Christ as the Son of God, Dante beholds

Satan as the incarnation of blasphemous majesty. The Arch-traitor bears on a single torso the heads of three traitors, Judas, Brutus and Cassius. The concept underlying this grotesque imagery can be traced to St. Augustine, who states in his work on the Trinity that the greatest sin is homicide, of which Judas, Brutus and Cassius were guilty, because it is opposed to the greatest love which is to give life (De Trin. IV, P.L. 42, col. 9)0). Dante illustrates this concept by a terrifying travesty in the frozen marsh of Hell. Lucifer's triumph over the souls of unrepentant sinners is accompanied by a grim parody of the "Vexilla Regis", the hymn of Fortunatus which is sung on Good Friday as the Blessed Sacrament is taken from the Repository. It is the liturgical hymn for Vespers of Passion Week in which the Church, secure in victory over the enemies of salvation, celebrates the Triumph of the Cross. From this view of the Prime of Darkness, "the creature which was once so fair", Dante is carried through the centre of the Pit by his Mystic Guide and led into the bright world.

The glorious dawn of Easter finds him at the base of the Sunlit Mount which he could not ascend until he had realized the nature and the appalling consequences of sin and had understood the meaning of Divine Justice.

He is now ready for the remedial discipline which the Church teaches is necessary in this life or in the next, whereby the traces of sin are washed from the soul by prayer and penance, and it regains the innocence of our first parents before the Fall. In the literal sense, the second, realm is a vision of the state of souls who died in faith and repentance, but who must render satisfaction to Divine Justice for the full penalty due to sin. And Dante states explicitly the penal nature of Purgatory: "I would not, reader, that thou be scared from a good purpose through hearing how God wills that the debt be paid. Heed not the form of the pain; think what followed, that at worst beyond the great judgment it cannot go". (X, 106-111). And again we learn from the life story of one of the souls expiating pride, "such coin he paid back in satisfaction who yonder is too daring" (XI, 125). The longing of the souls for prayers from those on earth is one of the most touching features of the Purgatorio. One of the Late-Repentant, still outside the Gate of Purgatory, tells the poet that he is due for a long delay of penance, "unless before, a prayer aids me, which may rise up from a heart that lives in grace" (IV, 133). Another asks that Dante will remind his fellow-citizens to be gracious of their prayers "that I may purge away my heavy offences" (V, 70). Of all these souls, whose delay in beginning the penance they long to perform is in proportion to the delay of repentance while on earth, the poet says, "whose one desire was that others pray, we that their way to blessedness be sped" (VI, 25).

In the allegorical sense the Purgatories is the story of the real life of a man on earth, painfully treading the path of contrition and self-reformation in

preparation for the life of eternal blessedness. In the Poet's words, it is "that second realm where the human spirit purifies itself and becomes worthy to rise to heaven" (I, 4-6). In the arrangement of the Purgatorio in this sense Dante has combined the prayers and hymns, the practices and devotions of the Church into an orderly ritual designed to aid the soul in the acquisition of virtue. The moral basis of the Purgatorio rests upon St Augustine's definition of virtue as "the right-ordering of love".

At the moment when the Church lights the Paschal candle to signify the glory of the Risen Christ, "the Light of the World", the Poet issues forth to behold again the stars. In this radiance of Easter dawn we have a felicitous association with the words of the Mass on Easter Sunday. The Introit is the psalm of thanksgiving for God's special providence over His servants; the Gradual and Vesper Antiphons express praise and gratitude for delivery from sin: "This is the day which the Lord hath made; let us be glad and rejoice therein" (Ps. 117, 74). In the prayer of the Mass the words of the priest are that "God may open the door of eternity". In the Epistle, St. Paul admonishes, "purify yourselves from the old leaven". (1 Cor. 5).

Dante takes the first step in the cleansing of his soul when Virgil girds him with a rush, a symbol of humility, and bathes his face with dew, to signify a prayer for purity of heart. The rush is the mystical counterpart of hyssop, and we must note here the association of Dante's preliminary rite of purification with certain features of the Paschal solemnity under the Old Law, where the Israelites dipped a bunch of hyssop in the blood of the paschal lamb and girded the loins in celebrating the Passover (Ex. XII, 11, 22). Dante commemorates the rite in its spiritual sense, that is, an expression of instant willingness to do the will of God. He heard in the Tract of Good Friday the prophet's words, "That I may go up girded to our people that are girded" (Hab. 3, 16), which signified in the Jewish rite the preparation for the journey to join the happy company in the bosom of Abraham. And the celebration of the new Pasch requires the same purification and preparation by the pilgrim who is about to begin the journey to the Heavenly Jerusalem.

In the Ante-purgatory, where he spends Easter day, Dante sees the first of the glorious band of angels who guard the holy mount and guide the souls at every turn. For in the words of the Psalmist, quoted by Satan in the Temptation (Matt. IV, 6) : "He hath given his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways" (Ps. XC, 11).

The Celestial Pilot who guides an oarless, sailless barque of happy souls from the shore of time to that of eternity, is as dazzling in his radiant whiteness as the angelic witnesses of the Resurrection, described in the Gospel of the Mass of Easter. The Guardian Angels of the Mount, clad in green, fanned and smitten by green wings, bear two blunted swords with

which they put to flight the serpent that thrusts its head into the Valley of Princes at sunset. The Priest-Angel at the Gate of Purgatory is the confessor in ash-coloured garment who holds the keys of judgement and authority, by virtue of which he will absolve the penitent Dante, and he engraves on his brow seven P's, each signifying a peccatum to be cleansed in successive terraces. The seven ministering angels are each in charge of a terrace to encourage the souls by the gentle repetition of a beatitude.

Of these seven angels in their successive apparitions, the German Dantist Witte has said: "They are among the divinest things of beauty in the Divine Comedy".

As Purgatory, whether in this life or in the next, is not only a period of prayer and penance, but also an educative discipline in virtue, the souls are encouraged to set love in order by meditating on episodes in the life of the Blessed Virgin. The exquisite beauty of the sculptured scenes on the wall of each terrace makes the second canticle a commentary on sacred art as Dante knew it from the Catacombs, the Churches and the works of his contemporaries.

In representing Our Lady as the type of virtues opposed to the Seven Deadly Sins, Dante must have been inspired by the Gospel of St. John in the Mass of Monday of Holy Week. It is the story of the generosity of Mary Magdalene in pouring the precious ointment on the Master's feet, contrasted with the avarice of Judas who begrudged the waste, "not because he loved the poor but because he was a thief, and carrying the purse he had all that was therein" (John XII, 1-9).

The name of Mary, like the Name of Jesus, is never heard in the Inferno. She is alluded to there as the "donna gentile", type of the Divine Mercy, who obtains the initial grace for a soul in peril. In the realm of penance, where the soul has need of her example and influence, Dante dramatizes with all the embellishments of art and song the rôle which the Church assigns to the Mother of God. To the once-proud souls a marble sculpture of the scene of the Annunciation presents Mary as the Model of Humility in her answer to the Angel's message, "Ecce ancilla Dei." In the terrace of the Envious she is an example of Love as voices of unseen spirits chant "Vinum non habent", recalling her loving care of the unprovided guests at the marriage feast of Cana. In the terrace of the Wrathful, Our Lady is a model of Meekness, as Dante sees in a vision "many persons in a temple, and a woman about to enter, with the tender attitude of a mother, saying: 'My, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us?'" In the terrace of the Slothful, Mary is an example of Zeal to souls who now run to and fro, incited to activity by the contemplation of her haste into the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth. To the Avaricious and Prodigal she is the type of Poverty, the Mother whose son was born in

a manger. To the Gluttonous souls a hidden voice recalls the Temperance of Mary whose action at the marriage feast was for the wants of others, not for her own gratification. She is an example of Chastity to the once-lustful souls who pass through the purifying flames reciting her words to the Angel Gabriel, "Virum non cognosco." In this sevenfold representation of her lofty virtues on earth Dante gives us a study in miniature of Our lady's life.

The beautiful hymns and canticles of the Divine Office fill the Purgatorio with accents of calm and holy hope. The souls in the barque of the Celestial Pilot reach the Mount singing "In exitu Israel de Aegypto," the Psalm of the Exodus, which signifies their liberation from the bondage of sin. The late-Repentant and Violently-Slain cross the mountain slope chanting the Miserere, verse by verse alternately, a psalm which the Church includes at the Vespers of Holy Thursday. in the Valley of Princes, at the pensive hour of sunset, Dante is rapt out of his very self by the voice of a spirit intoning "Te Deum laudamus." The Church prescribes this hymn for Matins whenever the Gloria is said at mass, and for special occasions of praise and thanksgiving. Dante hears it as when the people are singing with an organ and now the words are clear and now are not" (Purg. IX, 139), and by this suggestive allusion he recalls the solemn occasions when it occurs in the liturgy.

On the evening of the third day Dante hears the beautiful Ambrosian hymn, "Sumnae Deus Clementiae," sung by the souls passing through the heart of the great burning in atonement for the sin of lust. It is the Matins hymn of Saturday and is wholly appropriate to the occupants of this terrace whose prayer and penance are epitomized in the third stanza. Dante, with Virgil and Statius, passes through the purifying flames, the final expiatory duty of Purgatory, and is welcomed by an angel with the words of Christ's promise: "Come, ye blessed of my Father," words from the Gospel of St. Matthew in the mass of that day.

Dante recognized the fact that an allusion gains half its power from its connection with the reader's memory and previous experience. In order to be forcible and effective it must be at least so familiar as to awaken a train of associations if the author touches the first note of well-known airs, then memory will supply the accompaniment to enrich his music. This is what Dante, with the instinct of true genius, has achieved. The Catholic heart is awakened and profoundly moved by the paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer on the lips of souls expiating the sin of pride; it is consoled as angelic voices repeat the Beatitudes; it responds with instant sympathy to the note of joy in the Gloria that goes up on all sides as a soul, cleansed from the sin of avarice, is released from Purgatory, and it responds again to the pathetic utterance of the once wrathful sons who can only repeat over and over, "Agnus Dei," as they strive to acquire the meekness of the Blessed Lamb. Or again, the hallowed

association with the common of the Mass adds to the solemn grandeur of the Mystic Pageant in the Earthly Paradise, as the holy elders chant "Hosanna, Benedletus qui venis", and a triumphant Alleluia sounds from a hundred voices, the "ministers and messengers of life eternal " And the intoning of the mystically beautiful "Veni Sponsa" in this region of innocence recalls the ceremony of religious profession.

At sunrise of Thursday of Easter Week, according to the Dantean schedule, the pilgrim enters the Earthly Paradise, where he views the sublime Pageant of the Church in multiform symbolism, reminiscent of the vision of Ezechiel and of the Revelation of St. John, as commentators point out. As Dante's heaven is still before us we can not linger with him in the delights of Eden. We would need the six hours he spent there to treat even with scant justice the wealth of apocalyptic imagery and the harmony of triumphant song that accompanies the Mystic Procession which is, we feel, the sensible sign of the suprasensible mystery of the divine guidance of the Church. The sweet strains of song that kindle the air are psalms of praise and thanksgiving. The Proper of the Mass for Thursday of Easter Week provides an illuminating commentary on the spiritual meaning of this sublime scene. Turning from the last five cantos of the Purgatorio to the Missal we realize that the Dantesque Eden is a dramatic and lyric version of the joyous Easter liturgy.

The Guardian Spirit of the Earthly Paradise is the serene and gracious Matilda, a figure, I think, of the maternal spirit of the Church. She leads Dante through the stream of Lethe which removes the memory of evil, and the "Asperges" sounds so sweetly that he cannot remember, much less describe it; then through the stream of Emoè, which fills his soul with benevolence. This signifies to water of life according to the words of Our Lord in the fourth chapter of St. John's Gospel: "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven" (John, IV, 13). Dante commemorates in the symbolism the liturgical practice of replacing the "Asperges" by the "Vidi aquam" during the Paschal season. With a purified conscience and a will rooted in charity, the pilgrim is ready to share in the spiritual treasures of Paradise.

Under the guidance of Beatrice, typifying the divine science of Theology, Dante rises to the celestial spheres at noon, commemorating the traditional moment of Our Lord's Ascension. If in the literal sense the theme of the Paradiso is the state of souls in eternal bliss in the allegorical sense its theme is "the nature of the religious life, in its dominant truths, its felicities, and its ultimate beatitude," as the Rev. Dr. Dinsmore has pointed out. It is a sublime description of the spiritual life in its meaning, development, and final glory, as the soul rises to the heights of contemplation in the unfolding vision of the Truth.

The Paradiso is the canticle of joy and light and love. The glory of light fills the last portion of the Poem with ever-increasing splendour and ineffable radiance. As Dante progresses from sphere to sphere his mind is kindled by knowledge and love, as the spirits of the blessed reveal their joy in the vision of truth. He hears from Beatrice the exposition of the Atonement as an act of justice and mercy. He beholds, all "the holy soldiery of Christ", – Warrior-Saints, Just Rulers, Teachers and Doctors, and the great Contemplatives. He completes the progression through the first seven heavens in their astronomical framework, and enters the heaven of the Fixed Stars to view with rapturous awe the ascent of Christ to the highest heaven from the midst of a celestial garden, of which Mary is the Rose and the Apostles are lilies. He is rapt to ecstasy as the Virgin Mother is crowned Queen of Heaven by Gabriel, and the angelic choir chants the Easter Antiphon "Regina Coeli". Beatrice hymns the praise of the Apostles, "the fellowship elected to the supper of the Blessed Lamb" in words which recall the theme of the "Lauda Sion", the great Eucharistic hymn of St. Thomas. In answer to her plea that Dante be admitted to the City of God, the three Apostles of the Transfiguration examine him in the essentials of Christian Doctrine. When he has satisfied the Apostolic College that he is firm in faith, constant in hope and ardent in love, and has pronounced his "Credo in unum Deum", as the neophytes recited it at Confirmation, Dante hears a triple "Sanctus" resound in the Court of Heaven, followed by a triumphant "Gloria Patri". He rises to the Empyrean, the heaven of heavens, to behold the gathering together in the presence of God of all the blessed, in the form of a Mystic Rose, the petals of the Rose forming the ranks of the Saints. The sovereign place in the celestial amphitheatre is assigned to the Virgin Mother of God, whom the Church calls the "Mystic Rose". And it is fitting that the "blessed court" should take its form and nature from the symbolic figure attributed to the Queen who reigns there as in a Court of Love. And the Rose is not only the symposium of Saints but an image of the Virgin Mother herself. Hovering over all Dante sees more than a thousand angels, "with faces of living flame and wings of gold", and raiment whiter than the whitest snow. Beatrice leads him to gaze on "the face which is most likened unto Christ" for only the Queen of Angels and of Saints has power to fit him to see God. And here he passes from the guidance of Revelation to that of intuitive insight, of which St. Bernard is the supreme example. And the tender love of the Cistercian monk towards Our Lady, is reflected in the ardent aspirations of Dante, who was also a devoted servant of Mary, "that fair flower whom I ever invoke morning and evening" (Par. XXIII, 88). St. Bernard leads the pilgrim to the Divine Mother, uttering the most inspired prayer in the Sacred Poem, as he repeats for Dante "the holy orison," an echo of his own fervent utterances in the cloister of Clairvaux.

Dante draws near to the vision of God, guided by the Virgin Mother. With purified intellect he looks into the deep light of Divine Truth, and in a flash of exalted insight, a "moment of understanding," he beholds the revelation of the glory of the Trinity, and his desire and will are at rest in the sweetness of union with the Divine Will.

This is the consummation of the vision: contemplation of the truth in the Unchangeable Light, absorption of the will in an act of love, full enjoyment of the highest and truest Good in a breath of serenity and eternity.

I have called Dante the Poet of the Liturgy because the Divine Comedy, the epic of human regeneration, is the history of a soul and of all souls. It is a rich mosaic of the means by which the Church enables fallen man to co-operate in the redemptive work of the Messiah. The liturgy is the ideal philosophy of history, for it portrays the rôle of Divine Action in human destiny and unfolds the story of human effort towards divine perfection. Dante depicts this ideal projection of life against the background of eternity in a tricosmic vision which, in the allegorical sense, epitomizes the perennial struggle of spirit against flesh. He commemorates in a poetic structure the triumph of man's will moved by grace, strengthened and sustained by prayer and penance, in order that with a clean heart he might see God. "Thou hast made us for Thyself O Lord, and our heart is restless till it rests in Thee" is the burden of the Poem of Dante as it is of the Confessions of St. Augustine. As the Star led the Wise Men of old to find truth in the humility of the new-born King, Dante was guided by the light of faith to follow the teaching of the Church, which alone could show him the way to "become pure and ready to mount to the stars" (Purg XXXIII, 145): and the way to fuse his love with "the love that moves the Sun and the other stars" (Par. XXXIII, 145).