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Ecclesiastical Libraries: Public History, Educational Communities and Use of the BeWeb Portal

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The General Library of the Barnabite Fathers Historical Studies Centre is an Ecclesiastical Cultural Institute, registered in the Registry of Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage, in the Registry of Italian Libraries, and adheres to the PBE Pole of the National Library Service (SBN) through the CeiBib project [1].

The Congregation of the Clerics Regular of Saint Paul, called Barnabites, in the rediscovery and valorization of its own “spiritual gifts”, which are properly educational, has decided, concerning the Study Centre - General Library and General Historical Archive - to broaden its mission by also opening up to “younger” users, in particular for the Library - which is a library of conservation and specialized research. The starting point was, therefore, precisely the charisma of the Congregation and the awareness of how libraries are called today to recognise their centrality as an active part of the Educating Community, to combat educational poverty and broaden the horizons of children and young people. Therefore, the

[1] The project was dedicated to ecclesiastical libraries with the aim of responding to the needs of sharing and cooperation in the library and management fields.

General Library, through community engagement and sustainable initiatives, collaborates with schools of all levels up to the university, with institutions, the local community, and professional associations, experimenting with new, more engaging and effective teaching and learning strategies for religious history, in accessible ways for all.

It organises educational activities and research labs and carries out cultural promotional activities and public history initiatives that can bring different audiences closer to the history of their institution and to the valuable documentary collections preserved in the library and archive. Our intention: to contribute, in our own small way, to the achievement of the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for sustainable development goals. Specifically, our activities tend to pursue the 4th goal: Quality Education, and the 10th: Reduction of Inequalities, aiming to provide quality, fair and inclusive education, and lifelong learning opportunities for all. We are convinced that education can truly provide the tools to build the new skills, values, and behaviours necessary to change lifestyles and transform ways of thinking and acting.

A strategic tool that allows for wider sharing of these activities is the portal offered to ecclesiastical institutions, BeWeb (CEI 2025). The portal aims to increasingly be the expression of a distributed editorial team that involves Italian ecclesiastical realities, in order to bring out, alongside traditional ones, new keys to interpreting their cultural heritage. At the same time, it becomes a useful tool for facilitating and disseminating historical and religious outreach, giving ecclesiastical cultural institutions the opportunity to share research, communication, and enhancement activities with different audiences as active and vital parts of Educating Communities.

Among the successful examples of the various activities shared in this sense on the BeWeb portal, we decided to present, as emblematic, the video or performance of *Giovanni Alighieri, son of Dante*, conceived as a true public history project. For the Historical Studies Centre, this was a real starting point, an experience so rich that it led to the development of new paths to offer to schools or in the library as educational and training activities, always using BeWeb to enhance and promote the various projects realised. The various initiatives carried out in these years are documented on the portal BeWeb. The project culminating in the video or

performance of *Giovanni Alighieri, son of Dante* – was created on the occasion of the celebrations for the 700th anniversary of Dante's death and is closely connected to the Festival Dantesco – a cultural event organized and promoted by the Xenia cultural association – in which the General Library has been participating as a collaborating, supporting, and sponsoring entity since 2020.

The Festival Dantesco is a cultural event started in 2010, of national scope but with international significance, that aims to enhance the meeting between history, performing arts, and Dante's work. It offers conversations, book presentations, educational workshops, informal and interactive lessons, previews, performances, curiosities, as well as traditional Competitions: theatrical, short films, and photography (Xenia 2025).

In addition to the constant patronage of the Dante Alighieri Society, in 2021, the patronage and funding of the National Dante 2021 Committee were added, established by the Minister of Heritage on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of Dante's death. In this context, the project 'Public History Giovanni Alighieri, son of Dante' was born, which gave life to the video/performance – funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, under the "Living the Italian Way on Stage" call for proposals – coproduced by the Dante Festival, with Massimo Popolizio, directed by Paolo Pasquini and Enzo Aronica, which is among the twenty national theater projects currently on the "ITALIANA" portal, the showcase of live Italian theater, established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2021). For *Giovanni Alighieri, son of Dante*, the General Library not only hosted the video performance screenings, turning into a theatre of books, voices, sounds, lights, and colours to pay tribute to the Poet, but also supported and endorsed the project. In particular, the researching librarian contributed to the cultural framework of the script and filming.

In the video performance of *Giovanni Alighieri, son of Dante*, Dante's work and life are revisited from a specific perspective: that of a scholarly man, surrounded by the books of his own library – the ancient collection kept in our splendid Sala dei Venti – who addresses, in an imaginary dialogue, Giovanni, Dante's firstborn and Gemma, the older brother of the better-known Pietro and Jacopo, renowned

commentators of their father's work, and of Antonia, a nun in Ravenna with the name Sister Beatrice. Giovanni's biography for now consists solely of a few words from two notarial documents from 1308 and 1314, which emerged from the archives during the last hundred years of Dante studies. There is nothing else known about him. Giovanni is therefore still "paper man," a child of the Twentieth Century. The scholar – protagonist of the performance, played by Massimo Popolizio – feels a deep historical-literary interest but above all an emotional one for Giovanni Alighieri and reconstructs his biographical profile along with the Alighieri family history, Dante's work, and the possible relationship between such an illustrious father and son with incomplete identity. To delve into the facts, the scholar – in a way akin to Beckett's Krapp – has only the "tapes" of his own archive at his disposal and especially of his splendid library, where manuscripts, contemporary and ancient books, period objects, audio fragments and video testimonials recreate the past of the Alighieri family and selected verses from the Comedy.

It is worth pausing for a moment on the "tapes," reels of a 1970s tape recorder that recall the archival documents that have attested, over the twentieth century Dante studies, the real existence of Giovanni, ultimately proven in 1972, with the discovery of a notarial deed that mentions him as Dante's son beyond any reasonable doubt. Moreover, the reels also contain other information about Giovanni and the historical-literary debate about his controversial existence, still seemingly "on paper". The scholar, in an imaginary dialogue with Giovanni that sometimes verges on a transfer of identification, fulfils his desire to serve as a meeting point between a son with an almost evanescent, and somewhat denied, existence and one of the most illustrious fathers one could have. The work touches on many themes: educational, theological, historical, library science, archival, artistic (including visual and performing arts), cultural, and existential:

1. It brings the Divina Commedia of Dante closer to the public,
2. It emphasises the value of memory through the role of books and documents
3. It reaffirms the importance of Libraries and Archives, the preservation and use of books and documentary materials as the memory of the community and therefore its identity
4. It highlights the work of 'the historian.'
5. It also serves as an existential reflection on paths of fame and glory as well as the father and son relationship.

The reels, which for Beckett's Krapp certify the illusoriness of glory dreams, here become the measure of the tragic distance between a man, one of the most illustrious in world history, and a son who likely disappeared prematurely, who had that glory, so to speak, at home, within reach, and instead met a possibly insignificant fate. Within the library, choreographic interventions also develop, led by two dancers from the Spell-bound Contemporary Ballet, animated presences belonging to the secret world of books, interacting with Dante's text and with pictorial images emerging from the video projections: dancers as additional books that, when taken from the shelf and opened, reveal the life contained within.

The original music by Marco Schiavoni triggers six choreographic moments, linked to the six Dante extracts, two from the Inferno, two from Purgatory, two from Paradise, chosen in connection with the relationship between Dante and Giovanni as well as the evolving imaginary dialogue, from afar, between the scholar protagonist of the performance and the firstborn "paper" son.

The seventeenth-century library of the Sala dei Venti also witnessed the emergence in video projection – thanks to the videography of Marco Schiavoni – of some rare pages from sixteenth-century editions of the Commedia, of pictorial works, and of places connected to the Poet. The underlying intention was to make the book the protagonist, giving a visible material body to all – specialists, adults, teens, children – to history, literature, art, culture and thus to the identity of the human community preserved in the library and documentary heritage. In other words, the videos projected on the library walls of the Sala dei Venti gave life, through the images, to the content and history stored in the books, which came alive, emerged, dominating the surrounding environment.

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