

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

CHRISTIAN WORK IN TUSCANY.

FLORENCE AND SIENA.

From Venetia we went to Florence, passing Padua, famous during the middle ages for its University, founded in 1238, and as the home of Dante whose house is still shown, with the sarcophagus in front of it, containing—travellers are told—the bones of Trojan Antenor, who, according to Virgil, was the founder of this city. After that, Ferrara with its broad silent streets and crumbling palaces, in one of which was born in 1452, Savonarolo, the noble prior to San Marco, whose powerful denunciations of tyrants, brought him to the stake at the early age of forty-six. Here lived also Arlosto whose statue, since 1833, adorns the lofty column erected in the fifteenth century, and which from 1810 to 1814 bore a statue of Napoleon. Lastly Bologna, with its colonnaded streets, leaning towers, museums and picture galleries. But, on this occasion, we did not stop at any of those cities, interesting though they all are. From Bologna to Florence is a charming ride in good weather, the road over the Apennines affording delightful views of the valleys and ravines on either side.

FLORENCE.

Of the "flowery" city of the Medici on the Arno, with its priceless treasures of art, it is not my purpose to write at present. My object is rather to tell of some Christian work which is being done here, and in a neighbouring Tuscan city by Dr. Comandi and his fellow labourers. Ten years ago—in 1873—Dr. G. Comandi, acting on an impulse given by an enterprising artisan, commenced a small orphanage in Florence where five or six orphan boys were supplied with food and shelter, and found employment in the workshop. Dr. Comandi, his family and friends gave the necessary funds for the undertaking. The person charged with carrying out the wishes of the originators, having been removed after a time, the whole management was left on the hands of the Doctor. He, himself had been led to embrace the doctrines of the Protestant faith in a time of great personal affliction, which had prepared him for work having for its aim the leading of souls to Christ. Thus the

ASILO PROFESSIONALE EVANGELICO

sprung into life and has since become the means of widespread blessing, and the centre of evangelistic work in Florence. In 1876 the orphanage was removed to its present premises—6 Via Aretina—and organized anew. The boys received, varying in age from five to eighteen years, are all orphans, and are admitted free of charge, though persons wishing to send a boy at their own expense can do so for the small sum of thirty francs per month. The average number of lads in the orphanage is about eighty, Dr. Comandi not feeling it his duty to increase the number, except his pecuniary means justify him in doing so.

The boys are divided, according to their ages, into three divisions or "families," each under the direction of a female superintendent or "mother" who has the entire physical care of her family, the boys of the different households only meeting at prayers, at school and in the workshops. The elder boys who give most satisfaction, are entrusted with the care of two or three of the younger ones for the purpose of assisting the "mother" and of accustoming the boys to a feeling of responsibility. The entire direction of the institution is in the hands of Dr. Comandi, who is assisted by two devoted young men—Signor Luzzi and Signor Bianchiardi. The former aids him in the evangelistic part of the work, conducts cottage meetings, etc., while the latter has charge of the department of education. There are also four paid teachers who give lessons in the various classes.

The system pursued is that of teaching the boys a profession at the same time as they are receiving an elementary school education. For this purpose workshops, built on the premises, are sublet to artisans who employ the boys in their various trades, such as cabinet-makers, carpenters, wood-carvers, turners, blacksmiths, tailors, shoemakers and printers. If any desire to prepare themselves for the office of teachers or for entering on a mercantile career, opportunities are given for doing so. Following the example of Dr. Widichern of Hamburg, Dr. Comandi keeps sight of the boys after they leave the orphanage, and find em-

ployment elsewhere. In this way the pupils continue to regard him as occupying the place of the parents they have lost. We were pleased to hear that in almost every case the boys have turned out industrious and independent, and with one exception have adhered to the evangelical faith.

The right of admission does not depend on the religious denomination of the boys; Roman Catholics, Protestants and Jews being equally welcome. The greater number, of course, are by baptism Roman Catholic. The religious instruction given by Dr. Comandi and his assistants, is in accordance with the doctrines of the Protestant faith, but all points of controversy are carefully avoided. No confession of faith is required beyond the attendance at Protestant worship; and admission to the Lord's supper is only given to such as manifest decided evidence of being converted.

The institution has no capital or any regular subscriptions which can be relied on from year to year. Dr. Comandi, like Mr. Müller of Bristol, depends largely on means supplied in answer to continual and persevering prayer. His reports, which are published about every three years, relate many remarkable instances of wonderful deliverances in times of great distress from lack of funds to pay the monthly accounts. In 1878 free

EVENING SCHOOLS

were opened for adults and children of both sexes who were occupied in work during the day, and instruction given in reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as Bible history. In this way fathers and mothers of families are found sitting in the lowest class, while their own children perhaps, are occupying seats in a higher one. In the same year a Sunday school was begun with some poor children picked up in the streets. It now includes 300 scholars, embracing grey headed men and women and children of all sizes and ages. It is a touching and novel sight to one accustomed to Sunday schools in Canada, to see such an assemblage of eager, restless and intelligent Italians, and to hear them singing in the sweet Tuscan tongue. In conducting the

SUNDAY SCHOOL

the Doctor is assisted by a number of ladies of different nationalities—Swiss, British, American and German. This work has opened the door for carrying the Gospel into many homes. The teachers regularly visit the families of the scholars, and offer to read the Scriptures and to pray with them. An offer which is seldom refused. This district visiting brings the ladies into contact with such sad scenes of misery and destitution as are rarely to be found in northern lands; and a small common fund has been established for the alleviation of the worst cases, whose physical wants are overlooked by the municipality, as well as by the Church to which they nominally belong. In Florence—as in Italy generally—where occupation is difficult to find, where the constitutions of the poorer classes are undermined by "generations of starvation, and scrofula and Egyptian ophthalmia wield their frightful scourge—in Florence, where slow death by hunger is no uncommon occurrence, the work of evangelization must, as in the case of our Lord's own ministry, go hand in hand with the alleviation of physical need." This branch of the work has, it seems, been hitherto much blessed, unexpected contributions coming in when the fund was utterly exhausted, and thus, especially during the winter months, it is possible to give occupation to some, food and clothing and help in time of sickness to others. Dr. Comandi feels greatly the need of an establishment of some kind where the

PROTESTANT SICK

might be received and nursed. Those whose cases require surgical or other treatment impossible to be given in their own houses, have to be taken to the Roman Catholic hospitals, where it is alleged, their faith is subjected to great trials. It is at present a matter of prayer with these Christian workers, that an impulse may be given for the founding of a small hospital for the Italian Protestant sick.

We were much pleased with all we heard and saw during our visit to the orphanage of Dr. Comandi. He is evidently endowed with great administrative capacity, and is a man of faith and prayer. His meetings on Sunday afternoons in the Chapel of the "Asilo," where many people of the neighbourhood collect along with the boys, are calculated to do much good.

GIRL'S PROTESTANT ORPHANAGE.

There is also a girl's orphanage at 10 Via del Gigliolo—founded by Signor S. Ferretti, and directed by his wife. It contains at present thirty-two orphans, and has, until recently, been supported almost entirely by Americans. It was lately, however, handed over to the Waldensians, and will, in future, be carried on as part of their work in Florence. On this account it scarcely comes within the scope of the present series of letters which treat chiefly of work directed by individuals, and not by churches and similar organizations.

FLORENCE MEDICAL MISSION.

This mission was begun in December 1880 at 6 Piazza Cavour, and is now in the third year of its existence. The work, like that of all such missions, is of a two-fold kind—the care and healing of the souls, as well as of the bodies of the sick poor. On Tuesday and Friday, each week at eleven o'clock, patients of all ages from the baby in arms to the old man—a motley crowd—gather in a large room. A short religious service is first held, when they are told of their need of a greater Physician than the one whose advice they come to seek, and One who is certainly able and willing to heal them, if only they will ask a blessing at His hands. After this service, the singing of popular evangelical hymns is carried on for more than an hour, while the sufferers are called, one at a time, into an adjoining room to be seen by the medical man in attendance. In this way the children present learn the words as well as the tunes, and carry these to their homes to repeat them to others. Books and tracts are also handed round and carried away, and short but appropriate addresses are made from time to time.

The medical mission is thus the means of presenting the Gospel message to many who would otherwise not hear it. In many cases children who are forbidden by their parents to attend Sunday schools are allowed to come to this service. The attendance during last winter rose to over one hundred patients daily. Mrs. and Miss Roberts take charge of the mission. They are Russian ladies who reside in Florence on account of the health of Miss Roberts. They are assisted by other ladies of different nationalities. Dr. Carli, the physician, though not a Protestant sympathises with the work. The expenses from the 2nd November last to 24th April amounted to 3,400 francs, contributed chiefly by visitors to Florence and their friends.

WORK AT SIENA.

Sienna lies to the south-west of Florence, and has been noted for centuries as the stronghold of clericalism, and as being closed against the entrance of the Gospel. Many ages have passed since Catharine of Siena—one of the holiest of women—lived here and devoted herself to Christian work amongst the poor. Since then superstition of the darkest kind has held sway in the city of St. Dominic, until at length a few Gospel seeds, sown by Dr. Comandi, have sprung into life, and light has been shed which, it is to be hoped, may increase in brightness until that whole central part of Italy be illuminated. He had been in the habit of going to Siena from time to time and holding meetings in a private house, until the continued increase of hearers and the hunger and thirst of the people for spiritual food, made the erection of a place of worship an absolute necessity. And now, within the very sight of Saint Catharine's shrine, the first Protestant church ever erected in this city has been completed at a cost of more than 50,000 francs, and placed under the care and superintendence of the municipal authorities. The church is in the Gothic-Roman style, and holds about 300 persons. It was opened for service, free of debt, on the 24th May, when Dr. Comandi took for his text the words inscribed on the front of the temple "Repent and believe the Gospel." Prof. Geymonat, of the Waldensian College, next addressed the crowded meeting, and was followed by the Rev. J. R. MacDougall of the Free Church of Scotland, Florence. This is certainly another proof of the progress of religious liberty in Italy.

CEMETERY OF THE ALLORI.

I was glad to hear, during my visit to Florence, that the cemetery of the Allori, which was projected by Francesco Madiai, is prospering, and that the Italian Protestant Churches have an equal share in the ground. The act of sale stands in the name of the Waldensians and the Church of the Brethren, but