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ITALY

AND THE

WALDENSIAN CHURCH

BY

AMBROISE PARÉ BROWN



PALERMO

TIPOGRAFIA FRATELLI VENA

1896

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Torre Pellice, Torino

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No scheme formed against God's faithful people can prosper. The wicked are often taken in the nets which they lay for the good, and the plots which they contrive for the ruin of others, frequently lead to their own.

At certain periods of the Church's History, the overthrow of Christianity has appeared inevitable; but at the very moment when the machinations of its adversaries reached their zenith, and when all hope of deliverance had faded away, the Divine Arm was outstretched to save, joy filled the habitations of the righteous, while the tents of the wicked were covered with confusion.

Many such instances of God's powerful intervention have been recorded, so that from each "sweet Ebenezer we have in review we may learn to trust more implicitly in our Heavenly Father's care for us, and to rely more firmly upon the veracity of his promises, which are yea and Amen at all times, even when we seem to be traversing a "land of darkness... and of the shadow of death... where light is as darkness „.

The battle is waxing hot and furious — the forces of evil are ever to be confronted, and the call to act was never louder than now. The population

of the land increases, but the Gospel-tree has spread but few roots abroad comparatively. Truly “the harvest is plenteous but the labourers are few „.

Earnest workers there are, but they need to increase their numbers, for their task is arduous, and obstacles are continually put in their path. Nevertheless we believe that there are signs of a visitation of grace from on High; an influence pervades our spiritual meetings which warrants our expecting “showers of blessing „ from above.

God’s Word leads us to hope, not for a few drops, but for abundant outpourings of his Holy Spirit, if we only look for them with expectancy and faith.

We want the slumbering ones to awake, the timid to become bold for Christ, the weak to become strong, the indolent to become active, the indifferent to feel the kindling of the fires of Heaven in their breasts.

Oh that conversions might become the rule, not the exception! We want sinners to be brought to the Light of the glorious Gospel in great numbers. We long “for the fire from Heaven to fall and all our sins consume „.

We do not want to see only a skeleton here and there stand forth in the Valley of dry bones,—though God be praised even for these signs of life. How beautiful would it be, to see a general rising in the Valley, of workers for God’s harvest fields.

But though there have been periods in the Church's History, when apostacy has seemed to be universal, a chosen few have still been found who held the banner of Salvation high, with whom religion had not sunk into a form and withered into a name; they formed no part of the petrified mass which still bore the name of "Church of Christ, though so unworthily. Through God's strengthening power may many such arise now; and they will arise, for God will not let the fire he has lighted die out, nor the lamp be extinguished. There is a living ministry still, the prayers of the believers still plead at the Mercy-Seat. Tears of penitence will yet be seen, and the Hallelujahs of the ransomed shall rise to His Throne yet.

The Waldenses still proceed in their glorious work of calling sinners to the banqueting Hall of the King of kings. For twenty years have I seen their noble efforts for God's cause in this Italy, so beautiful, and yet so much to be pitied for the spiritual darkness in which she lies. The Spirit which animates them to-day is the same as when the stakes were raised, the fires blazed and the blood of the Martyrs was spilt.

The same as when the noble group of faithful followers of Christ, 200 years since, was driven from its corner, and compelled to take refuge in a distant land. They have ever been constant and firm, and are classed among the men of thought and character and action in Italy. Even those men of

business, who do not profess religion, universally acknowledge that the Waldenses are men to be relied upon, men who take the serious side of life, who fear nothing but sin, and who work and speak, and think with one object, that of giving glory to God and raising the character of their country.

With courage, sympathy, deep faith and growing hope they unfurl the Banner of the Cross and seek to promote that "righteousness which exalteth a nation." There can be no higher aim than the consecration of talents in seeking to reveal Christ to perishing souls, and this is the pure steadfast object of the Waldensian workers. The hope of ultimate victory nerves their energies amidst untold difficulties, and inspires and sustains them under bitter discouragements and unholy opposition.

The following appeared in a Geneva Paper last November, and I can fully endorse the writer's statements.

Protestantism in Italy : The Waldenses

(Translated from the " *Journal de Genève* „ of 13th
November, 1895.)

FLORENCE 9th Nov.

LAST Tuesday, here in Florence, the Waldensian Theological College re-opened its session with a simple and impressive ceremony.

This College does not attract much attention. It only possesses three professors, Geymonat, Comba, and Bosio; yet, in the days of Calvin, you could not boast of more. There are only about ten students, but they are earnest, attentive, and studious. And if its modest and pious work is not published in the papers, it is none the less interesting: it represents the Waldenses, not the least living and characteristic portion of that Italy which it is my place to talk to you about.

The Waldenses are a race, honest and staunch "dour", and true to their beliefs. They are like the pine which grows on the cliff's edge; there are trees more beautiful but none more hardy. It defies storm and winter.

It is centuries since their little torch was lighted, and it has not yet ceased to shine in the darkness. You helped to prevent its extinction, and for that they regard you with a lively feeling of gratitude.

Their king loves them : spontaneously and suddenly he came to visit them at Torre Pellice. He was seen with uncovered head in their church, which he insisted on visiting. "Why not," he said to them. He visited their hospitals, their schools, and their synod. They and he spoke the dialect of the Valleys : they felt themselves one in spirit and in descent.

The nation loves them, knowing the many noble examples in their religious history of austere creed, of jealously guarded liberty. On the 20th of last September, when their banner passed in the procession after many others, it was greeted by the crowd with triple applause. It was felt that it was the representative of uprightness and of conscience that was passing.

They on their side are Italian to the backbone. And how could they be otherwise, when it is they who have taught their fellow-countrymen how to fight, how to live, how to die for an opinion? Their history is Italian history anticipated. They are the first-born and the ancestors of the patriots of the Italian Risorgimento.

Then, when in the month of February 1848, the decree of Charles Albert allowed them civil and religious liberty, they turned naturally to the nation of which they formed a part, and they loved it because its history was so like their own. They determined to carry to it the Word of Life, which had given them birth and being.

Italian Protestantism is their work: a work still young, in its infancy indeed, which has a future before it, and is pushing bravely towards its goal.

The Waldensian Mission outside the Valleys numbers to-day, from Turin to “the heel of the boot,” as they call it—50 pastors, 7 unordained evangelists, schoolmasters, Bible readers, and colporteurs—in all 132 faithful and devoted workers in the harvest field. Their sphere of action is divided into five Presbyteries, and extends over the whole peninsula; into the Marches, into Calabria, into Sicily and still further, wherever there are Italians; into America, into Basutoland, and as far as the Zambesi. It has a Theological Faculty resident in Florence, which every year ordains ministers; and a printing-press which has been at work for forty years, and publishes not only evangelical literature but also scientific and philosophical works. A new Italian translation of the Bible is needed, and meanwhile that of Diodati is still in use, but it intends to publish one of its own, revised according to modern exegesis, and suited to the needs of Italy as it now is.

It possesses newspapers, journals, periodicals, hospitals, soup kitchens, and medical dispensaries.—In particular, it has schools where the children receive a religious training and an elementary education on the system prescribed by the State. Those in Florence contain 186 scholars, 150 of whom are Catholics.

Thanks to these powerful means of propaganda, thanks especially to the hearty and vigorous energy of these men of the Valleys, Protestantism is gaining ground in Italy.

Their rugged and so to speak rustic faith everywhere arouses the callous, and inspires good-will to the work. Five thousand catechumens have rallied to their church; if the adherents are included the number is doubled. From the mission field 80,000 francs (L. 3200) are contributed annually, and this is all Italian money, money which comes from meagre pockets, already drained by taxes.

Truly this is already a good result. It could be greater still, but when one thinks of the innumerable difficulties with which a work of Italian evangelisation has to contend, there is reason to rejoice. And then, if progress is slow, it is continuous. It advances with sure and certain pace, the pace of a Waldensian.

Italy has no national religion. It has only a state religion. The Waldensians wish to give to their country an acceptable religion in sympathy with the State and with the principles of Liberalism and of Liberty. They are far from their goal, doubtless, but they are pressing on. Their joyful eagerness, joined to a burning patriotism, is calculated to win and to retain universal sympathy and good-will.
