

Juan Valdéz and the Lost Reformation

By Barry McWilliams



The name “ Juan Valdéz “ usually brings to mind the humble coffee farmer and his burro appearing in TV kitchens advertising Columbian coffee. Or for some more sophisticated, it might bring to mind an artist, Juan de Valdez Leal (1622-1690), a Spanish painter in Seville noted for his religious moral subjects. But it probably does not bring to mind Italy’s “Martin Luther” and his reforming work in Naples in the mid 1500’s, a work in its onset seemingly more promising in its prospects than that of Calvin to the North in Geneva.

Roughly about the same time as Calvin was beginning his work in Geneva there arose a talented and promising group of Christians committed to the doctrine of justification by faith. Juan de Valdéz was the father of this group that arose in Naples. Two significant followers, Bernardino Ochino and Peter Martyr Vermigli, would be forced out of Italy to become significant theologians and reformers elsewhere, in England, Switzerland, and Poland. Many others paid a severe price for their faith at the hands of the Inquisition in Italy.

Juan de Valdéz (1500?-1545) was born in Spain. His father, Fernando, was the Regidor of Cuenca in Castile.

His twin brother, **Alfonso de Valdéz** (1500?-1532) would become the Secretary for Emperor Charles V. Alfonso accompanied Charles V to the Diet of Worms in 1521. Enthusiastic for the ideas of Erasmus of Rotterdam, from his protected Imperial position, Alfonso became a strong critic of the papacy of Clement VII; after the sack of Rome (1527) he called the pope “a disturber of the public peace, and instigator of war, and a perfidious deceiver.” In 1529 he accompanied the Emperor to Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, and he attended the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 where he negotiated with Melancthon and the Protestants in a pacific and conciliatory spirit. He did not however share their views or understand their motives as his twin brother did. He congratulated the Catholics of Switzerland at the death of Zwingli in 1531. He died in Vienna in 1532.

Juan studied at the University of Alcala, and first appears as the author of an anonymous politico-religious tract in 1528 attacking the corruptions of the Roman church. In fear of the Spanish Inquisition, he left Spain for Naples in 1530. Because he had upheld the validity of Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon, his criticisms were condoned. His house in on an island in the Bay of Naples became a place of retreat and the center of a literary and religious circle that desired the spiritual reformation of the Roman church. Juan began to write a series of treatises and commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, including Matthew, Romans and Corinthians. Part of his work was translating portions of the Psalms and Paul’s Letters from Hebrew and Greek into Spanish, with commentary. And though his focus was in part on the devout life and a semi-mystical spirituality – it is clear that he also had adopted the Evangelical doctrine of Justification by Faith. Into this circle was drawn a distinguished and talented group of religious leaders and powerful men and women. Juan de Valdéz has a powerful influence upon them. Antonio Caracciolo reckons the number of Valdés' adherents at over three thousand, of whom many were leading men. This is doubtless only a

guess, but the number was certainly large. Wyrle thought this group showed even greater promise for reform at the moment than the work begun by Calvin at the same time in Switzerland. Valdéz' disciples were won by himself rather than by his doctrines ; and even the element of his teaching which others seized upon most eagerly - Justification by Faith alone - was not to him what it was to the Lutherans, the corner-stone of a whole system. To him it was the expression of the fact that only by self-abnegation could men receive the divine illumination, and thus conform to the image of God in which they were made. He was not interested in revolt, nor was he an organizer – his writings only found their way outside his circle through his friends, in particular, Giulia Gonzaga, the duchess of Traetto.

Following Valdéz's death in 1545, this group of potential reformers were either driven into exile or systematically persecuted to extinction through the the Jesuits (who were recognized by Rome in 1540) and the imposition of the Inquisition in the Italian States by a bull issued by Paul III. Beginning in 1542, led by Cardinal Caraffa, (who became Pope Paul IV in 1555), the tribunal utilized the entire political influence of the Curia to scatter or destroy by dungeon, torture, fire and water, the protestant movement in Italy. Continuing until 1570, a series of vicious inquisitors, a number of whom, like Ghislieri (who became Pope Pius V) carried on this trial by fire.

So who were these Christians drawn into his circle? Two were outstanding theologians.

Bernardino Ochino (1487-1564) was born in Sienna and rose to be a general in the Franciscan Order of Friars, then transferred himself to the Capuchins, where he became Vicar-General in 1538. He was one of the outstanding orators of his day – Charles V said “That man is enough to make the stones weep.” Huge crowds would gather hours before he preached. In his sermons in Venice in 1539, he exhibited a decided tendency towards Justification by Faith. In 1542, he fled the Inquisition to Geneva where received by Calvin, he wrote tracts explaining his conversion. He became in 1545 the minister of the Italian Protestants Congregation in Augsburg. When the city was occupied by Imperial forces, Ochino fled to England and supported by a pension from Edward VI he did his major work against the Roman Papacy in 1549. His writings influenced Milton. With time, it became apparent though that his doctrines were leaning towards Socinianism. Fleeing the new queen, Mary in 1553, he went to Zurich to pastor another congregation of exiled Italians. In 1563, because of his doctrinal deviations he was banished and fled to Poland where he died of the Plague. It is said that he was both a fervent evangelist and speculative thinker with a passion for free inquiry – remarkable in his career for passing through all the phases of Protestant Theology from Luther to Calvin to Socinius.

Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562) was also a Roman Catholic theologian who became one of the leading Protestant Reformers of his day. Born in Florence, the son of a shoemaker, he was educated at Padua and ordained into the priesthood and received a doctorate in theology in 1526. His transformation came about in Naples while he was an abbot there between 1537 and 1540 through his contact with Valdéz. He read Bucer and Zwingli and became convinced in the doctrine of Justification by Faith. In 1541, he established another group of protestants in Lucca where he was the Prior. Fleeing the Inquisition in 1542, he fled North to become a theologian in Strasburg and Zurich where he had married a former nun. His most fruitful years were in England where he was invited



Peter Martyr Vermigli

in 1547 to work alongside of John Cranmer, and he became one of the key leaders in the Protestant reforms there. Calvin thought he had done the crowning work on the doctrine of the Eucharist. He fled “Bloody” Mary to Strasburg to teach Hebrew till his death in 1556. He into obscurity until rediscovered by British Scholars in 1949, and there has been considerable interest in him since. His wife died in England in 1553 and was buried in Christ Church Cathedral. Cardinal Pole (once a friend of Vermigli in Padua) had her corpse exhumed and tossed on a dung heap where it remained until 1561 when she was reinterred.

Bernard de Mantua, a Benedictine monk, should also be mentioned. He wrote a little book, *The Benefits of Christ’s Death*, which borrowed significantly from Calvin’s Institutes in its last three chapters. Marcantonio Flaminio would later polish the style this credo of the Italian Reformed and it was widely distributed in manuscript and print and made a deep impression wherever it went.

There were many illustrious and highborn Christians in Juan de Valdéz’ circle of Italian “Protestants.”

Giovanni Buzio (aka Mollio) was a renowned Bolognese professor who refused to join his fellow prisoners in their recantings of the evangelical faith and was sent to instant execution in 1553.

Galeazzo Caraccioli, son of the Marquis of Nice, embraced the Gospel with his whole heart and left behind his family including a wife and children, much wealth and position to live in humbly in Geneva – as Calvin says “content with our littleness and living frugally like us.”

Guilia Gonzaga (1512-1566), widow of the Duke of Trajetto and considered one of the most beautiful and sincere and humble women in Italy and one of the most powerful. So beautiful a Turkish pirate tried to kidnap her. She clearly held protestant teachings. She corresponded with the Swiss reformers. It is probable that only the death of Pius IV in 1565, saved her from being condemned; as it was, she remained in the safety of a convent the last years of her life till her death on in 1566. Correspondence seized following her death in 1556 was used against Carneseccchi and others to put them to death.



Giulia Gonzaga



Vittoria Colonna

Another beautiful noblewoman was her sister-in-law, **Vittoria Colonna**, (1490-1547) Marchioness of Pescara. A noted poet, she was a close friend and an inspiration for the artist, Michelangelo; and immensely rich, though she lived as an ascetic - she had a deep-seated need to find peace in a love which is not of this world and sought union with the new Christ, and His benefits. While she may not have embraced protestant teachings, her poetry reflects an interest in it. Ochino figured prominently as a spiritual advisor before and after his conversion. After he fled North, Cardinal Pole became a counselor and tempered her austerities. She doubtless would have come under suspicion had she not died in 1547.

Pietro Carnesecchi, a patrician of Florence, a former secretary of Clement VII, was a close associate of Guilia Gonzaga. For a time he avoided the summons of the Inquisition by a timely death of the pope in 1559, and the subsequent riot which burned the Holy Office and its records. But returning from six years in France, Pietro became a martyr for his evangelical faith at the hands of the Inquisition after a second trial in 1567 at the hands of Pius V who unleashed a storm of persecution from 1566-1572.

There were many common people as well in these protestant communities in Naples and Lucca and Venice. Wholesale murder was unleashed against some towns. New “suspects” were constantly being brought to trial. Many fled and sought refuge elsewhere – resulting in large protestant communities in Geneva and Strasburg of Italian refugees, whom Ochino and Vermigli would for a time pastor, even as Knox ministered to the English refugees among the Swiss during his exile. Many evangelical in Italy were sentenced to perpetual confinement, to the galleys, cruelly tortured or put to death. It would take twenty years for the Inquisition to root them out.

But it was not just the intense persecution that doomed these reformation efforts in Italy. There were a number of inherent weaknesses within the movement. Many of Valdéz’ circle showed an unwillingness to break with Roman’s authority. They were more like Erasmus than Martin Luther. Prior to the Council of Trent, believing in Justification by Faith was not heresy. The mystical tendencies of Valdéz and the Franciscans emphasized experiential knowledge over the Bible’s authority. And coming from Scholasticism’s skeptical roots there was a hodge podge of theology that opened the doors to eventual heresies – this can clearly be seen in Ochino’s gradual movement into Socinianism. The Anabaptists later tried to establish themselves in Northern Italy. And unlike the German, English and Swiss Reformers, who found allies in local political leaders – the Italian local governments sided consistently with the Roman Curia, providing no safe haven despite the powerful and influential disciples in the Valdéz circle.

Both J.A. Wylie and Philip Schaff have written on the efforts to bring the Reformation to Italy. Perhaps the most significant descriptions of the Reformation in Italy is Roland Bainton’s *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy*. Other helpful sources can be found on line. Links to these can be found at <http://www.eldrbarry.net/heidel/valdez.htm>.

The situation in Italy for Protestantism is little better today than it was in the waning days of the Reformation. Less than 2,000 of Italy’s 33,000 communities have an established evangelical witness. For example the Northeastern Veneto Region has four and a half million people, but less than 400 evangelical Christians. Most cities in the major Northern regions have no evangelical witness at all. For over 400 years Protestants have been consistently persecuted, and today evangelical workers still have to keep a low or clandestine profile.

Italy has no separation of church and state. Roman Catholic traditions and mindsets permeate every fiber of national life. Its political structures are chaotic – while there has been a constitutional democracy since 1946 – there has since been over 50 different governments. Nor is it unified – nine regional languages flourish. The wealthier North and the poorer South often clash. Occultism is wide-spread and Satanism is strong, especially in Turin. Many Roman Catholic churches in Italy have taken in much superstition, cults of relics and pilgrimages, and other “Christianized” idolatry.