

## CHAPTER 6

### Synod in the Waldensian Valleys

**The Old Vine seems Dying—New Life—The Reformation—Tidings Reach the Waldenses—They Send Deputies into Germany and Switzerland to Inquire—Joy of OEccolampadius—His Admonitory Letter—Waldensian Deputies at Strasburg—The Two Churches a Wonder to each other—Martyrdom of One of the Deputies, Resolution to Call a Synod in the Valleys—Its Catholic Character—Spot where it Met—Confession of Faith framed—The Spirit of the Vaudois Revives—They Rebuild their Churches, &c.—Journey of Farel and Saunier to the Synod.**

The Duke of Savoy was sincere in the promise that the Vaudois should not be disturbed, but fully to make it good was not altogether in his power. He could take care that such armies of crusaders as that which mustered under the standard of Cataneo should not invade their Valleys, but he could not guard them from the secret machinations of the priesthood. In the absence of the armed crusader, the missionary and the inquisitor assailed them. Some were seduced, others were kidnapped, and carried off to the Holy Office. To these annoyances was added the yet greater evil of a decaying piety. A desire for repose made many conform outwardly to the Romish Church. "In order to be shielded from all interruption in their journeys on business, they obtained from the priests, who were settled in the Valleys, certificates or testimonials of their being Papists" [Monastier, Hist. of the Vaudois, p. 138]. To obtain this credential it was necessary to attend the Romish chapel, to confess, to go to mass, and to have their children baptised by the priests. For this shameful and criminal dissimulation they fancied they made amends by muttering to themselves when they entered the Romish temples, "Cave of robbers, may God confound thee!" [Monastier, Hist. of the Vaudois, p. 138]. At the same time they continued to attend the preaching of the Vaudois pastors, and to submit themselves to their censures. But beyond all question the men who practised these deceits, and the Church that tolerated them, had greatly declined. That old vine seemed to be dying. A little while and it would disappear from off those mountains which it had so long covered with the shadow of its boughs.

But He who had planted it "looked down from heaven and visited it." It was now that the Reformation broke out. The river of the Water of Life was opened a second time, and began to flow through Christendom. The old and dying stock in the Alps, drinking of the celestial stream, lived anew; its boughs began to be covered with blossoms and fruit as of old.

The Reformation had begun its career, and had already stirred most of the countries of Europe to their depths before tidings of the mighty change reached these secluded mountains. When at last the great news was announced, the Vaudois "were as men who dreamed." Eager to have them confirmed, and to know to what extent the yoke of Rome had been cast off by the nations of Europe, they sent forth Pastor Martin, of the valley of Lucerna, on a mission of inquiry. In 1526 he returned with the amazing intelligence that the light of the old Evangel had broken on Germany, on Switzerland, on France, and that every day was adding to the number of those who openly professed the same doctrines to which the Vaudois had borne witness from ancient times. To attest what he said, he produced the books he had received in Germany containing the views of the Reformers [Gilles, p. 30. Monastier, p. 141].

The remnant of the Vaudois on the north of the Alps also sent out men to collect information respecting that great spiritual revolution which had so surprised and gladdened them. In 1530 the Churches of Provence and Dauphine commissioned George Morel, of Merindol, and Pierre Masson, of Bergundy, to visit the Reformers of Switzerland and Germany, and bring them word touching their doctrine and manner of life. The deputies met in conference with the members of the Protestant Churches of Neuchatel, Morat, and Bern. They had also interviews with Berthold Haller and William Farel. Going on to Basle they presented to OEcolampadius, in October, 1530, a document in Latin, containing a complete account of their ecclesiastical discipline, worship, doctrine, and manners. They begged in return that EOcolampadius would say whether he approved of the order and doctrine of their Church, and if he held it to be defective, to specify in what points, and to what extent. The elder Church submitted itself to the younger.

The visit of these two pastors of this ancient Church gave unspeakable joy to the Reformer of Basle. He heard in them the voice of the primitive and apostolic Church speaking to the Christians of the sixteenth century, and bidding them welcome within the gates of the City of God. What a miracle was before him! For ages had this Church been in the fires, yet she had not been consumed. Was not this encouragement to those who were just entering into persecutions not less terrific? "We render thanks," said OEcolampadius in his letter, October 13th, 1530, to the Churches of Provence, "to our most gracious Father that he has called you into such marvellous light, during ages in which such thick darkness has covered almost the whole world under the empire of Antichrist. We love you as brethren."

But his affection for them did not blind him to their declensions, nor make him withhold those admonitions which he saw to be needed. "As we approve

of many things among you," he wrote, "so there are several which we wish to see amended. We are informed that the fear of persecution has caused you to dissemble and to conceal your faith ... There is no concord between Christ and Belial. You commune with unbelievers; you take part in their abominable masses, in which the death and passion of Christ are blasphemed. ... I know your weakness, but it becomes those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ to be more courageous. It is better for us to die than to be overcome by temptation." It was thus that OEcolampadius, speaking in the name of the Church of the Reformation, repaid the Church of the Alps for the services she had rendered to the world in former ages. By sharp, faithful, brotherly rebuke, he sought to restore to her the purity and glory which she had lost.

Having finished with OEcolampadius, the deputies went on to Strasburg. There they had interviews with Bucer and Capito. A similar statement of their faith to the Reformers of that city drew forth similar congratulations and counsels. In the clear light of her morning the Reformation Church saw many things which had grown dim in the evening of the Vaudois Church; and the Reformers willingly permitted their elder sister the benefit of their own wider views. If the men of the sixteenth century recognised the voice of primitive Christianity speaking in the Vaudois, the latter heard the voice of the Bible, or rather of God himself, speaking in the Reformers, and submitted themselves with modesty and docility to their reproofs. The last had become first.

A manifold interest belongs to the meeting of these two Churches. Each is a miracle to the other. The preservation of the Vaudois Church for so many ages, amid the fires of persecution, made her a wonder to the Church of the sixteenth century. The bringing up of the latter from the dead made her a yet greater wonder to the Church of the first century. These two Churches compare their respective beliefs: they find that their creeds are not twain, but one. They compare the sources of their knowledge: they find that they have both of them drawn their doctrine from the Word of God; they are not two Churches, they are one. They are the elder and younger members of the same glorious family, the children of the same Father. What a magnificent monument of the true antiquity and genuine catholicity of Protestantism!

Only one of the two Provence deputies returned from their visit to the Reformers of Switzerland. On their way back, at Dijon, suspicion, from some cause or other, fell on Pierre Masson. He was thrown into prison, and ultimately condemned and burned. His fellow-deputy was allowed to go on his way. George Morel, bearing the answers of the Reformers, and especially the letters of OEcolampadius, happily arrived in safety in Provence.

The documents he brought with him were much canvassed. Their contents caused these two ancient Churches mingled joy and sorrow; the former, however, greatly predominating. The news touching the numerous body of Christians, now appearing in many lands, so full of knowledge, and faith, and courage, was literally astounding. The confessors of the Alps thought that they were alone in the world; every successive century saw their numbers thinning, and their spirit growing less resolute; their ancient enemy, on the the other hand, was steadfastly widening her dominion and strengthening her sway. A little longer, they imagined, and all public faithful profession of the Gospel would cease. It was at that moment they were told that a new army of champions had arisen to maintain the old battle. This announcement explained and justified the past to them, for now they beheld the fruits of their fathers' blood. They who had fought the battle were not to have the honour of the victory. That was reserved for combatants who had newly come into the field. They had forfeited this reward, they painfully felt, by their defections; hence the regret that mingled with their joy.

They proceeded to discuss the answers that should be made to the Churches of the Protestant faith, considering especially whether they should adopt the reforms urged upon them in the communications which their deputies had brought back from the Swiss and German Reformers. The great majority of the Vaudois barbes were of opinion that they ought. A small minority, however, were opposed to this, because they thought that it did not become the new disciples to dictate to the old, or because they themselves were secretly inclined to the Roman superstitions. They went back again to the Reformers for advice; and, after repeated interchange of views, it was finally resolved to convene a synod in the Valleys, at which all the questions between the two Churches might be debated, and the relations which they were to sustain towards each other in time to come, determined. If the Church of the Alps was to continue apart, as before the Reformation, she felt that she must justify her position by proving the existence of great and substantial differences in doctrine between herself and the newly-arisen Church. But if no such differences existed, she would not, and dared not, remain separate and alone; she must unite with the Church of the Reformation.

It was resolved that the coming synod should be a truly oecumenical one—a general assembly of all the children of the Protestant faith. A hearty invitation was sent forth, and it was cordially and generally responded to. All the Waldensian Churches in the bosom of the Alps were represented in this synod. The Albigensian communities on the north of the chain, and the Vaudois Churches in Calabria, sent deputies to it. The Churches of French Switzerland chose William Farel and Anthony Saunier to attend it [Ruchat,

tom. iii., pp. 176,557.] From even more distant lands, as Bohemia, came men to deliberate and vote in this famous convention.

The representatives assembled on the 12th of October, 1532. Two years earlier the Augsburg Confession had been given to the world, marking the culmination of the German Reformation. A year before, Zwingli had died on the field of Cappel. In France, the Reformation was beginning to be illustrated by the heroic deaths of its children. Calvin had not taken his prominent place at Geneva, but he was already enrolled under the Protestant banner. The princes of the Schmalkald League were standing at bay in the presence of Charles V. It was a critical yet glorious era in the annals of Protestantism which saw this assembly convened. It met at the town of Chamforans, in the heart of the Valley of Angrogna. There are few grander or stronger positions in all that valley than the site occupied by this little town. The approach to it was defended by the heights of Rocomaneot and La Serre, and by defiles which now contract, now widen, but are everywhere overhung by great rocks and mighty chestnut trees, behind and above which rise the taller peaks, some of them snow-clad. A little beyond La Serre is the plateau on which the town stood, overlooking the grassy bosom of the valley, which is watered by the crystal torrent, dotted by numerous chalets, and runs on for about two miles, till shut in by the steep, naked precipices of the Barricade, which, stretching from side to side of Angrogna, leaves only the long, dark chasm we have already described, as the pathway to the Pra del Tor, whose majestic mountains here rise on the sight and suggest to the traveller the idea that he is drawing nigh some city of celestial magnificence. The town of Chamforans does not now exist; its only representative at this day is a solitary farmhouse.

The synod sat for six consecutive days. All the points raised in the communications received from the Protestant Churches were freely discussed by the assembled barbes and elders. Their findings were embodied in a "Short Confession of Faith," which Monastier says "may be considered as a supplement to the ancient Confession of Faith of the year 1120, which it does not contradict in any point" [Hist. of the Vaud., p. 146.] It consists of seventeen articles,\*\* the chief of which are the Moral inability of man; election to eternal life; the will of God, as made known in the Bible, the only rule of duty; and the doctrine of two Sacraments only, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. [It is entitled, says Leger, "A Brief Confession of Faith made by the Pastors and Heads of the Families of the Valleys of Piedmont." "It is preserved," he adds, "with other documents in the Library of the University of Cambridge." (Hist. des Vaud., livr. i., p. 95.)]

The lamp which had been on the point of expiring began, after this synod, to burn with its former brightness. The ancient spirit of the Waldenses revived.

They no longer practised these dissimulations and cowardly concealments to which they had had recourse to avoid persecution. They no longer feared to confess their faith. Henceforward they were never seen at mass, or in the Popish churches. They refused to recognise the priests of Rome as ministers of Christ, and under no circumstances would they receive any spiritual benefit or service at their hands.

Another sign of the new life that now animated the Vaudois was their setting about the work of rebuilding their churches. For fifty years before, public worship may be said to have ceased in their Valleys. Their churches had been razed by the persecutor, and the Vaudois feared to rebuild them lest they should draw down upon themselves a new storm of violence and blood. A cave would serve at times as a place of meeting. In more peaceful years the house of their barbe, or of some of their chief men, would be converted into a church; and when the weather was fine, they would assemble on the mountain side, under the great boughs of their ancestral trees. But their old sanctuaries they dared not raise from the ruins into which the persecutor had cast them. They might say with the ancient Jews, "The holy and beautiful house in which our fathers praised Thee is burned with fire, and all our pleasant things are laid waste." but now, strengthened by the fellowship and counsels of their Protestant brethren, churches arose, and the worship of God was reinstated. Hard by the place where the synod met, at Lorenzo, namely, was the first of these post-Reformation churches set up; others speedily followed in the other valleys; pastors were multiplied; crowds flocked to their preaching, and not a few came from the plains of Piedmont, and from remote parts of their valleys, to drink of these living waters again flowing in their land.

Yet another token did this old Church give of the vigorous life that was now flowing in her veins. This was a translation of the Scriptures into the French tongue. At the synod, the resolution was taken to translate and print both the Old and New Testaments, and, as this was to be done at the sole charge of the Vaudois, it was considered as their gift to the Churches of the Reformation. A most appropriate and noble gift! That Book which the Waldenses had received from the primitive Church—which their fathers had preserved with their blood—which their barbes had laboriously transcribed and circulated—they now put into the hands of the Reformers, constituting them along with themselves the custodians of this, the ark of the world's hopes. Robert Olivetan, a near relative of Calvin, was asked to undertake the translation, and he executed it with the help of his great kinsman, it is believed. It was printed in folio, in black letter, at Neuchatel, in the year 1535, by Pierre de Wingle, commonly called Picard. The entire expense was defrayed by the Waldenses, who collected for this object 1,500 crowns of gold, a large sum for so poor a people. Thus did the Waldensian Church

emphatically proclaim, at the commencement of this new era in her existence, that the Word of God was her one sole foundation.

As has been already mentioned, a commission to attend the synod had been given by the Churches of French Switzerland to Farel and Saunier. Its fulfilment necessarily involved great toil and peril. One crosses the Alps at this day so easily, that it is difficult to conceive the toil and danger that attended the journey then. The deputies could not take the ordinary tracks across the mountains for fear of pursuit; they were compelled to travel by unfrequented paths. The way often led by the edge of precipices and abysses, up steep and dangerous ascents, and across fields of frozen snow. Nor were their pursuers the only dangers they had to fear; they were exposed to death from the blinding drifts and tempests of the hills. Nevertheless, they arrived in safety in the Valleys, and added by their presence and their counsels to the dignity of this the first great ecclesiastical assembly of modern times. Of this we have a somewhat remarkable proof. Three years thereafter, a Vaudois, Jean Peyrel, of Angrogna, being cast into prison, deposed on his trial that "he had kept guard for the ministers who taught the good law, who were assembled in the town of Chamforans, in the centre of Angrogna; and that amongst others present there was one called Farel, who had a red beard, and a beautiful white horse; and two others accompanied him, one of whom had a horse, almost black, and the other was very tall, and rather lame" [Gilles, p. 40. Monastier, p. 146].