

The Seventh Vial Chapter X. The Western Witnesses, or The Waldenses



Waldenses martyred by the Church of Rome for holding fast to the truth of the Gospel.

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THE growing light of historical research makes it everyday more probable, if not, indeed, certain, that the "Church of the Valleys" dates from Apostolic times. The refugees from pagan persecution were its first founders. Then it was that this lamp was kindled, and ever and anon, as the ages pass by, we catch sight of its ray streaming down from the mountain-tops, where Providence found for it an asylum. This Church is seen in the third century by the light of its martyr-fires. It comes before us in the fourth, in connection with the zeal and diligence of some of its pastors, and again, in the fifth, by the refuge which it offered to the confessors, whom persecution compelled to flee from Africa. In the ninth century, its existence is attested by Claude of Turin, whose oversight it enjoyed. Nay, onward to the tenth century, we can trace its existence, for it is a well-established fact that even in this century there were Churches of comparatively pure creed, not in the valleys of the Alps only, but also on the great plains of Piedmont and Lombardy at their feet.

And when at length Rome had established her dominion over the north of Italy, and the whole peninsula was subject to the Pope, not utterly extinct was this Church. In the center of the thick darkness, which lay wide upon the face of Europe there was a little speck of light. God did not leave Himself without a witness. Entering into her "chambers," and shutting the "doors" of the eternal hills about her, this Church kept alive her lamp. True, its light was enjoyed only by those favoured few "redeemed from the earth," who dwelt here, in the very midst of their enemies, yet defended from them by bulwarks of impregnable rock and eternal ice; but that light was as a "bow" set in "the cloud," which gave assurance that God had not forgotten His covenant with His Church.

Would the reader like to see those famous valleys, where abode this venerable and Apostolic Church, and where she endured her great fight of afflictions,

let him, in fancy, accompany us thither. Advancing from the south, he is traversing, we shall suppose, the plain of Piedmont. Right in front of him is the great chain of the Alps. The sight is one of the most glorious on earth. From where day opens to where it sets, the mountains run on in a line of continuous towering grandeur. Of the summits which form this goodly rampart, some shoot up spiky as needles, others rise strong and massy as castles, crowned with the snows of a thousand winters, and when the rising or setting sun strikes full upon them, they show like torches, and burn like a wall of fire along the sky.

This region, of more than historic renown, we enter by a long, low gorge—its portal. The valleys open before us, carpeted with meadows, and walled in by rocks and great mountains, whose sides are clothed with vineyards, and great forests of the chestnut tree. Thickly sprinkled over their surface are the villages and chalets of some twenty thousand vine dressers and herdsmen. Simple in their manners, and industrious in their habits, of pure morals and evangelical faith, they are here dwelling amid the hills which their fathers glorified by their deeds, hallowed by their prayers, and watered with the blood of martyrdom.

The valleys are seven in number, and are placed, as regards one another, so as to make the region unique; in fact, a network of fortresses, lying enclosed within a common wall of mountains, and accessible only by a common door, which a handful of men could shut against thousands. It is impossible to survey the region, and fail to perceive the traces of design and plan so manifestly stamped upon it.

The great Architect reared it for a moral end. He sank deep its foundations in the earth, He reared high its bulwarks, He stored it with corn, and wine, and oil; and, placing there the ark of His Truth, He gave it to the Waldenses, and bade them be brave, and keep their mountain citadel inviolate, and their lamp unquenched against a world in arms.

And nobly did they discharge their trust. The darkness gathered; one furious tempest after another burst upon them, but they watched around their Lamp, and there it burned, while the rest of the world lay buried in night.

Wide Christendom around was desecrated by idolatrous temples and pagan rites; in the valleys of the Waldenses mass was never sung, and in the churches of the Waldenses no image was ever set up. Knowing that God is a Spirit, they worshipped Him in spirit and in truth. Their territory was reserved, like the inner temple, for the worship of the Lamb, when the outer court was cast out to be trodden under foot of the Gentiles. The period of their active war against Rome was not less than five centuries. They endured not fewer than thirty persecutions. These were inflicted by the swords of the kings of France and Savoy, but always at the instigation of the Pope. Never did tempest burst over their mountains, but it had its rise in the Vatican.

With regard to their claim to rank as one of the two Apocalyptic witnesses, we may quote the following passages from the "Horae Apocalypticae" (pp. 350–355, Third Ed., 1847):—

"With regard to the *doctrine* of the Waldenses, their own writings offer us, of course, the best evidence. In the former" (the Noble Lesson) "written, as it has appeared, within some twenty years of 1170, the following doctrines are drawn out with much simplicity and beauty. The origin of sin in the fall of Adam, its transmission to all men, and the offered redemption from it through the death of Jesus Christ; the union and co-operation of the three Persons of the blessed Trinity in man's salvation; the obligation and spirituality of the moral law under the gospel; the duties of prayer, watchfulness, self-denial, unworldliness, humility, love, as 'the way of Jesus Christ;' their enforcement by the prospect of death, and judgment, and the world's near ending, by the narrowness, too, of the way of life, and the fewness of those that find it, as also by the hope of coming glory at the judgment and revelation of Jesus Christ;—all these points, I say, of Christian doctrine are drawn out in the Noble Lesson very simply and beautifully. Besides which, we find in it a protest against the Romish system generally, as one of soul-destroying idolatry, against masses for the dead, and therein against the whole doctrine of purgatory, against the system of the confessional, and asserted power of the priesthood to absolve from sin; this last point being insisted on as the most deadly point of heresy; its origin referred to the mercenariness of the priesthood, and their love of money; the iniquity further noticed of the Romish persecutions of good men, and teachers that wished to teach the way of Jesus Christ; and the suspicion half hinted, and apparently formed, that though a *personal Antichrist might be expected, yet Popery itself might very possibly be one form of Antichrist.* Such is the doctrine of the Noble Lesson.

In the Treatise of Antichrist, we advance to an admirable and direct identification of the *antichristian* system of the *Papacy*, which, though written after the period we are passing under review—perhaps in the last quarter of the fourteenth century—may yet be fairly presumed to exhibit the opinions of the Vaudois of the thirteenth century on the subject; they having embraced, as we know, at the least as early as that period, the view of the Papacy and Roman Church being the very Babylon and harlot of the Apocalypse."

The following is an outline of the views held on this subject by the Waldensian Church:—

"That the *Papal* or *Romish* system was that of *Antichrist*, which, from infancy in apostolic times, had grown gradually, by the increase of its constituent parts, to the stature of a full grown man; that its prominent characteristics were, to defraud God of the worship due to him, rendering it to creatures, whether departed saints, relics, images, or Antichrist, i.e. the antichristian body itself; to defraud Christ, by attributing justification and forgiveness to Antichrist's authority and works, to saints' intercessions, to the merit of men's own performances, and to the fire of purgatory; to defraud the Holy Spirit, by attributing regeneration and sanctification to the *opus operatum* (I borrow the Tridentine term used afterwards) of the two sacraments; that the origin of this antichristian religion was the covetousness of the priesthood; its tendency, to lead men away from Christ; its essence, a vain ceremonial; its foundation, the false notions of grace and forgiveness."

Such was the noble testimony of the Waldenses; and how nobly they maintained it, history testifies. How marvelous the ways of God! How astonishing His power and faithfulness in preserving His truth in the worst of times! When all the dwellers on the plains and in the cities of the Roman world were bowing the knee, and saying, "Who is like unto the Beast," in the midst of the earth—in the very center of Europe—rose a temple not made with hands, in which the true God was worshipped. In the midst of their myriad foes an asylum was opened, where the witnesses prophesied a thousand two hundred and threescore days. At the heart of the great Apostasy a Tabernacle was pitched, within which, kindled by no human hand, and fed by no earthly oil, there burned a Lamp of blessed light, from one dark century to another, till its rays melted at last into the morning of the Reformation.

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