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BERNARDINO OCHINO OF SIENA : CAPUCHIN AND REFORMER (1487—1564).

BY JOHN KNIPE.

“ False Christians desire a Christ after their manner, rich, proud and magnificent.”—OCHINO.

OCHINO THE FRANCISCAN.

FOR thirty years the most famous of Italian preachers, the personality of Bernardino Ochino has been compared to a defaced portrait in the gallery of the great men of the Later Renaissance. His name has been blotted out for centuries by the deliberate malice of an unforgiving Church.

It is a local nickname. Siena was divided into *Contrada* (Quarters). One was called “ Oca ” (Goose). It extended from the Dominican Church to Dante’s Fonte Branda, and here there stands to this day the house of the Dyer’s daughter, Caterina. We know his father’s name by an item in the Account Book of the Cathedral Treasury: “ January 1540. Was paid 32 Lire to Fra Bernardino son of Domenico Tommasini called Ochino.” It is the preacher’s modest fee.

He was still a lad when he joined the Observants, a Reformed Order of the Franciscans, whose monastery was some two miles from the City Gate, and it is quite possible that he had been influenced by Savonarola’s preaching. Ochino declared in later life that he never regretted his decision, which had kept him from many temptations and sins of the world, and given him the opportunity to study the Scriptures and contemplative theology. Bible-study was then only permissible in the Cloister. He took the cowl, hoping thus “ to gain Paradise, though not without the aid of Divine Grace,” and he concluded “ that the Observant Rule, being the most austere, should best represent the example of Christ.”

There is a doubtful statement that he left the Order for some years to study medicine in Perugia. He rose to high office, being elected first Provincial (1524) and later a General, and he distinguished himself by his natural gifts of acute reasoning and persuasive eloquence. We have his own account of his spiritual experience: “ I remained until the Capuchins arose. When I saw the severity of their life I put on their dress, yet not without a severe struggle. And I well remember that I turned to Christ with: ‘ Lord, if I do not now save my soul I know not what more I can do!’ ”

He begged the Pope to let him join the Capuchins as a simple brother. Clement VII, ever a vacillator, hesitated, unwilling to offend the Observants. The zealous young Order was provoking much jealousy among the older branches of the Friars Minor. Finally the papal consent was given, and the triumphant Capuchins rejoiced to receive so important a secession into their Community.

OCHINO PREACHES IN ROME. LENT, 1534.

He was then thirty-seven, and the Capuchins, hoping to attract public notice, appointed him Lenten Preacher in S. Lorenzo in Damaso. "Brother Bernardino," ex-General of the Observants, drew crowded congregations. No such preaching had ever been heard in Rome. The unworldly and ascetic lives of the Capuchins rebuked the corrupt splendour of Rome. They were revered by the people as "the Soul of Saint Francis."

The hierarchy as a whole disliked their zeal, and the bishops listened to the envious attacks of the Observant General, who hinted at fanaticism and heretical tendencies.

One spring morning Rome was startled by the coming of the Capuchins in a body. They walked barefoot, in procession, one hundred and fifty strong, lean, burning-eyed and eager, in coarse brown habit and white cord girdle and leather sandals, wearing the distinctive *Capuccino* (pointed cowl), and they visited devoutly the Seven Churches, St. Peter's, St. John the Lateran, St. Paul beyond the Walls, St. Maria Maggiore, the Franciscan Ara Coeli, and the ancient churches of St. Clemente and St. Prassede. But their enemies wrote letters from all over Italy, and the wily General of the Observants plotted that these should be put into the Pope's hands, together with his own, on the same day. "Holy Father," he concluded, "rather dissolve the little Order than allow it to undermine the great one."

We know how Clement's vacillations galled our Henry VIII, and the Pope was loth to dissolve the Order which he had so recently confirmed. But the Curia was hostile. On April 25th, St. Mark's Day, Clement exclaimed in exasperation, "We command that the Capuchins, one and all, shall leave the city this day, before the taper that we now kindle shall have burned down." The papal messenger found the friars silently eating their scanty noontide meal in St. Euphemia. They took nothing but their breviaries as they followed the tall wooden cross on their way to the Convent of St. Lorenzo. Here they were hospitably received and remained. But Rome rebelled against the unjust expulsion; the citizens thronged the streets clamouring for their return. The Princes Colonna and Orsini, hereditary enemies, petitioned the Pope, while Duchess Vittoria Colonna hurried from her Villa on the Alban hills, and Duchess Caterina Cibo came from Tuscany.

Pope Clement tried to save his face. He said the decree was only provisional and he let the Capuchins return as individuals, though not as a Community.

DEATH OF CLEMENT VII, SEPTEMBER, 1534.

On September 26th Clement died and the new Pope, Paul III, showed himself favourable to the Capuchins.

Ochino had been among the first to return, since from this time there is recorded the beginning of his long personal friendship with Vittoria Colonna, the great Roman Lady. At the request of his

Order Ochino asked her to persuade the stubborn Vicar-General, Lodovico, to convene the General Chapter, which he refused to call together. Lodovico declined a pressing invitation to Vittoria's beautiful Villa, but she secured the ear of the new Pope, by whose command the delayed Chapter was held, November, 1535.

OCHINO ELECTED ONE OF THE FOUR GENERALS.

The Capuchins chose Bernard of Asti, a gentle and pious man, as Vicar-General, and Ochino a General, for, in spite of the fact that he was a recent adherent, he had distinguished himself greatly by his preaching. The Pope heard him with unfeigned pleasure, and the Cardinals admitted the beauty, learning and force of the Capuchin's sermons. Preaching was little esteemed in Rome. The Humanists mocked the ignorance of the pulpit, and as Antonio Bandini neatly observed: "No one was then considered in Rome a gentleman or good courtier who did not hold, besides the clerical doctrines, his own little erroneous opinion."

Monsignor Bembo, later Cardinal, said to a friend, "What am I to do at sermons? One hears nothing but the *doctor subtilis* (Duns Scotus, Francis:) inveigh against the *doctor angelicus* (Aquinas, Domin:) and then comes in Aristotle as a third and ends the dispute."

REVIVAL OF RELIGION IN ITALY. "THE ORATORY OF DIVINE LOVE."

The Reformation stirred the dead bones of Medievalism. In Rome there was founded in 1523 on the Janiculum a pious society, both clerical and lay, called "The Oratory of Divine Love." It was strictly orthodox in its rules, but it did aim at the revival of personal religion, by devout religious observance and private prayer.

Under Leo X the members were first enrolled in the rectory of Giuliano Dati, and these included famous names, such as Giberti, and Antonio Bruccioli the Florentine who translated the Vulgate; Caraffa, and the great Contarini. When Alva's troops (1527) sacked Rome the Oratory was dispersed. Its influence was not great, but it is an instance of the widespread acknowledged feeling that the Paganism of the Renaissance had destroyed the spiritual power of the Catholic Church.

JUAN VALDEZ, "THE KNIGHT OF CHRIST."

In 1536 Paul III gave Ochino a signal mark of his favour by appointing him Lenten Preacher to Naples. Ochino little dreamed that his mission to Naples was to be the turning-point of his life. The whole city flocked to hear the renowned Capuchin who preached a Course of Sermons in the pulpit of St. Giovanni Maggiore. The Emperor Charles V deigned to hear him more than once and he spoke of the bold friar long years after. Among the Imperial suite in the nave there stood the Viceroy, Don Pedro of Toledo, and beside him his secretary, Don Juan Valdez, a Castilian nobleman of Cuenca.

Valdez listened in wonder and delight as Ochino preached simply the Gospel of Christ. The friar avoided controversy and legends, he made charitable appeals, he awoke consciences, he cheered and consoled and uplifted his hearers.

"Ochino preaches with such power!" exclaimed one. "He would move stones to weep."

It may have been Carnesecchi the Florentine, a mutual friend, who presented Valdez to the Capuchin. Good men who met Juan Valdez were drawn to love him. He had the face of a saint, "in which was reflected the invisible world," the charm of a scholar and the courtesy of a gentleman. "He seemed appointed by God as a teacher of noble and distinguished men, although he was so good that he served the humblest" (Curione). He had started in his own house the Reading Circle named after him. At first the Circle consisted only of his personal friends, who introduced others, but Valdez extended the membership and encouraged frank discussion. The best account of these Italian Reformers is in the Inquisition Report of the Trial of Carnesecchi, the Papal Protonotary, martyred in his old age. "All his (Valdez) thoughts and deeds," he said, "were merged in the study of Holy Scripture and a Christian life. But what attracted me to him and won my entire confidence was that Bernardino Ochino, who was at that time preaching to admiring crowds, held him in such high esteem." The Circle was unique in that it met avowedly to study the Bible. Valdez was a mystic, one who cared little for forms. It was Ochino, with another monk, who gave the meetings a more intellectual and logical character. This other, who became his greatest friend, was Peter Martyr Vermigli, the Prior of the Augustinians in Naples. Martyr took the cowl as a youth against his father's will. He was very learned and an acute reasoner. He was presented to the Circle by his old friend and fellow-student at Padua University, Gusano. Others were the Don Benedetto of Mantua, who was the real author of the first Italian tract on Justification by Faith, "Of the Benefits of Christ's Death," and Mollio, a Minorite Friar, expelled from Bologna on suspicion of heresy, now lector and preacher in St. Lorenzo, Naples. There came also Ragnone of Siena, Aonio Paleario the Humanist, Giulio Terenziano of Milan, and the gentle, pensive dreamer and poet, Flaminio, who joined his dear friends Carnesecchi and Paleario.

Of the notable ladies Vittoria Colonna was a Patroness, for while not really devout she was much interested in religion. She brought her sister-in-law, Duchess Giulia Gonzaga, a famous beauty, and her friend, Duchess Caterina Cibo. The most faithful of them was Donna Isabella Manriquez, who, in persecution days, preferred flight and exile to the surrender of her faith. And she was a Cardinal's sister.

The Circle thus began among scholars, for the ladies were as intellectual as any of the later Renaissance, and Calvin's *Institutions*, Bucer's *Commentary on St. Matthew*, and Luther's *On the Psalms* were discussed, while Valdez expounded St. Paul's Epistles and wrote in Spanish his *Commentaries on Romans and I Corinthians*, besides

his mystical treatise, *The Hundred and Ten Divine Considerations*, which were translated into Italian by his friends. His most remarkable book was *The Christian Alphabet*, which was based on a conversation with Caterina Cibo over a sermon of Ochino's which they had both heard. "You were convinced by Ochino's words," Valdez told her, "that you cannot attain the goal without being mocked, misunderstood and despised by the world. It is only self-love which makes you so restless."

Did Caterina treasure the warning? We know how she remained true when many denied.

The Circle was beautifully free from jealousies or dissension. It grew until its influence touched the world without. "There were so many who sympathized, and among these especially were many schoolmasters, that the total number included three thousand persons" (Caracciolo).

Not "three thousand schoolmasters," as Ranke mistranslated it.

The growth of the Circle was certainly encouraged by the popular interest excited by Ochino's sermons, "which were discussed as the most important daily event," and as Valdez sometimes suggested in writing the next subject, by degrees disputes arose over "Faith and Works, Purgatory, the Authority of the Bible and of the Pope," for the artisans talked in the wineshops and the women at the doorsteps.

Charles V had left Naples, and Don Pedro the Viceroy "favoured the schoolmen." Rival preachers among them suddenly denounced Ochino "for spreading Lutheran opinions secretly," contrary to the recent Imperial edict. The Governor was charged to inquire into the matter. He must have thought it a delicate question for a layman to declare the Pope's Missioner a heretic! However, he suspended Ochino until he replied clearly to certain points. "But the friar, being a learned and eloquent man, defended himself so stubbornly that he was permitted to continue his Course of Sermons undisturbed. And not only was all suspicion silenced . . . he even gained in repute and the number of his adherents increased. These continued secretly to spread his doctrines after his departure" (Giannone).

From 1536-41 Ochino made brief and valued visits to the Circle, which met either at Valdez' house, or at Vittoria Colonna's magnificent Villa on the Island of Ischia, or at Caserta, and probably it should be identified with the Group in Rome of which she was the patroness at St. Silvestro (Quirinal). At this time Ochino did not dispute the accepted dogmas. He objected to religious observances which had grown rigid. 1536 was a year of hope for devout souls. Pope Paul III appointed a "Church Reform Commission of Nine Dignitaries," including Cardinals Pole, Caraffa and Contarini. Many clergy agreed with Ochino in his bold plea for a more spiritual meaning in worship, with "faith, love and gratitude" defined as necessary to the devout reception of the Holy Communion.

OCHINO MADE APOSTOLIC MISSIONER AND CHOSEN VICAR-GENERAL.
1538-42.

Ochino may have been in Rome when the Report of the Nine was signed and presented to the Pope (1537). ("Consilium de Emendanda Ecclesia.") Paul III hesitated. He disliked the idea of reforming abuses in the Church, but he was proud of Ochino's success in reforming souls, and about this time the Pope appointed him "Apostolic Missioner to All Italy," reserving to himself the decision of the eager claims of the cities for Lent, and later also for Advent. One reason for the Capuchin's fame was that he knew the Vulgate by heart—his memory was marvellous—and he made extempore translations from the Latin into fresh, vigorous and simple Italian. Other preachers used the popular Repertory called *Aurea Biblia* of Rampegolo, a work so inaccurate that it was afterwards put on the Index!

A pause sometimes gave effect to Ochino's words, but above all he was amazingly human. "I am not deprived of the sweet ties of love of country," he wrote to "my own Siena."

In 1538 Ochino was Lent Preacher to Venice. With the consent of the Vicar-General he founded the first Capuchin Convent in the city and his friars served Venice nobly in an epidemic the same year. Bernard of Asti fell ill and in September he resigned his office at a special Chapter. "Bernardino was a wise, prudent and experienced man. Gifted and magnanimous . . . undeterred by the most difficult undertakings. His appearance and pure life lent belief to his saintly repute. . . . Nearly all votes were for him" (Boverio).

The Pope approved highly of the election and he dispensed Ochino from observance of the Canonical Hours. A brother warned the new Vicar-General: "If you rule the Order without prayer you are as one who rides without stirrups."

"To do good is to pray," Ochino replied. "He who does not cease from doing good does not cease from prayer."

He always travelled on foot and he crossed the frontier to visit the Shrine of Baume by Marseilles. He founded several new houses. Monsignor Bembo wrote to Vittoria Colonna a year ahead to secure Ochino for Venice the next Lent. The letter is somewhat condescending: "At the wish of several citizens I appeal to your kindness to induce our worthy Fra Bernardino Ochino to come and preach. . . . I myself should count it as great happiness to listen to that man and make his acquaintance."

OCHINO DELIVERS HIS "NINE SERMONS." LENT. VENICE. 1539.

By his very first sermon the Capuchin startled the pleasure-loving Venetians. "Thou, my city!" he cried in the ringing voice which could be heard on neighbouring house-tops so that men often lined the roofs to listen: "Alas! Thou remainest ever as thou wast. . . . I am persuaded that had I spoken so much

in Germany or in England I should have found more fruit than here." Next time he pleaded: "I am grieved, my city, because thou wilt not turn from thy wicked ways. Weeping, I implore Christ for thy sake because I love thee with my whole heart."

Monsignor Bembo declared himself a convert, at least for a time. "I opened my heart and mind to him," he wrote to Vittoria, "just as I should have done in the presence of Jesus Christ" (March). In April, in a second letter to the same lady: "Our Fra Bernardino—from this time I shall call him my own in conversation with you—is literally adored here." Again he wrote: "Bernardino expresses himself quite differently and in a far more Christian manner than any others . . . he speaks with much more real sympathy and love. . . . When he leaves us he will carry all hearts with him."

To the Rector of the SS. Apostoli in Rome, Bembo, a practical man, addressed an appeal that he would influence Ochino to relax his "severe abstinence, which always causes him stomach disorder." It was Ochino's "Thorn in the flesh" throughout his life.

Turning from the friendly account we find Ochino described by an envious critic, Bishop Graziani, then secretary to Cardinal Commendone; he noted that Ochino had every attraction for the multitude; "his famed eloquence, ingratiating manner, advanced years, austere life, rough Capuchin habit, long beard . . . grey hair, thin pale face" (now comes the touch of envy), "feigned appearance of frail health (!); lastly, the repute of a holy life. Wherever he was to speak no church was large enough . . . men were as numerous as women. . . . Ochino was honoured . . . by princes . . . everywhere offered hospitality; met at his arrival and escorted at his departure by local dignitaries. He knew how to increase the longing to hear him and the reverence paid him. He was never seen to ride, though his health was delicate and he was growing old. . . . As the guest of nobles—an honour he could not always refuse—he could never be persuaded to alter his rule of life. . . . He ate of one simple dish and he drank little wine, if a soft bed was ready for him he begged to rest more comfortably and lay down on his cloak spread on the floor" (*Life of Cardinal Commendone*).

The "Nine Sermons" were printed in Venice the same year. Their tone is evangelical but not aggressive. They show the influence of Valdez on his mind.

Ochino visited Siena in June where he founded a new Convent.

The Magnificent Signori passed a Council Resolution inviting "Fra Bernardino, who preached this morning in the Great Council-Chamber before all the people, to remain some days and preach in the Duomo or Town Hall."

Siena was very proud of her illustrious son, and carefully preserved his letters in her Town Archives.

Ochino proceeded to Rome, and after a brief stay he went to Naples.

SECOND VISIT TO NAPLES. JULY, 1539. THEATINE SPIES
SUSPECT HIM.

The Valdez Circle had grown, and Ochino was warmly welcomed back in their midst. But a new heresy-hunting Order, the Theatine Monks, were established. They spied on Ochino in the church and when he entered Valdez' house. Caracciolo, the Theatine biographer, wrote: "Our fathers discovered the heresies in Naples. . . . Gualante and Cappone by their intercourse with Ochino and Valdez had themselves become somewhat defiled with their pitch, but *in confession our fathers led them on to relate everything that they knew concerning these secret heresies.* By these means our people became aware that Valdez and Ochino were sowing tares in the assemblies of men and women which they were in the habit of holding." (*Life of Paul IV.*)

The Theatines sent black reports to Caraffa in Rome. He remained silent, waiting a more propitious time to attack the heretic Friar.

From Perugia University Professor Nelli of Siena wrote to Aretino the humanist: "Last Advent we had our Fra Bernardino here. He is now preaching at Naples" (February, 1540).

The "Seven Dialogues" appeared at this time. They mark a distinct change in Ochino's doctrine. They treat "Of Love to God" and "The Pilgrimage to Paradise." Like many of his writings they are conversations between himself and another; it is Caterina Cibo who enters "the Order of Christ for noble souls" and takes the Vow of Surrender and Faith in the Merits of the Crucified. Ochino was at Modena also. "Ah!" muttered some of the hearers. "He does not preach as he did. He preaches too much of Christ and now he never mentions St. Geminiano."

After visiting Lucca and quieting local feuds at Perugia, Ochino spent September in Rome. Siena begged him to promise for next Lent. He replied cordially, referring them to the Pope and offering to come in Advent. There is mention of his personal friend Monsignor Ghinucci, who was the ex-titular Bishop of Worcester (Hugh Latimer's predecessor), a prelate who never had set foot in England, and was deposed for absenteeism by Henry VIII.

Siena was in trouble from internal quarrels, threatened war, unsafe roads and a bad harvest. Ochino wrote to the Dominicans recommending the sick in the City Hospital to their daily care, and advising the "Forty Hours' Prayer," a celebrated Capuchin devotion.

His friends of the Circle, Paleario, afterwards a martyr, and Ragnone met him.

Next year he was at Modena and in Milan for Lent, where the Imperial Governor Del Vasto was his friend.

(To be continued).