
THE PAST

The Poor Men of Lyons

The Waldensian Church of today has its origins in the Middle Ages. It is named after Valdo, a merchant from Lyons. In 1170 Valdo was converted and decided he had to preach the Gospel and teach the word of God to his fellow citizens, just like Francesco d'Assisi did, some years later. He sold all he had and worked as an itinerant preacher trying to bring to the Church of his day a sense of the Church as it was at the time of the Apostles. The Roman Catholic Church reacted to these facts by excommunicating Valdo because he was preaching and was not a priest. The "Poor Men of Lyons", continued to form little communities which were forced by opposition from Rome to lead an underground life. Their faith was based on the fundamental demands of the Sermon on the Mount and they completely rejected the violence, oaths and compromises of the wealthy Roman Catholic Church with the political powers of their day.

The Waldensians managed to keep their faith alive throughout the Middle Ages.

The Reformation

When the Reformation arose in Europe the Waldensians joined in, seeing that at last they were not alone in their convictions. From then on groups of Waldensians became more open and organised public worship, services, sacraments and elected preachers - offering people an alternative to the Roman Catholic Church.

From 1550-1700 the Waldensian Valleys inhabited by the Waldensians were an outpost of European Protestantism and therefore suffered the continual oppressions and attacks of the governing family of Savoy, encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church, to reconquer this area in the name of Catholicism.

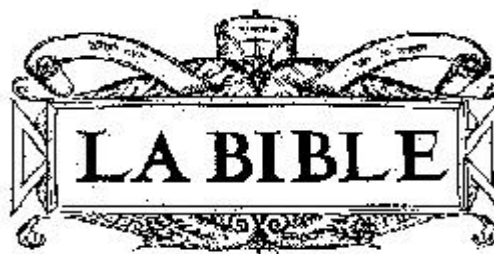
One of the sadly most renowned attacks was the military expedition of 1655, known as the "Piedmontese Easter" - which arose protests around Europe and the intervention of England under Oliver Cromwell; it also inspired the well known poem by Milton "On the late massacre in Piedmont". In 1686, after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in France, the communities of Waldensians were destroyed and only a few thousand escaped to Switzerland alive. They came back after three years in a memorable trek over the Mess.

The Spread of Italian Protestantism

On the 17th February 1848 an Edict by King Carlo Alberto gave civil but not religious rights to the Waldensians (and to this day the 17th February is celebrated by a festival in the Valleys). The Roman Catholic religion remained the religion of the State. Therefore the conquest for full liberty was a long battle which lasted until the 1980's. The Waldensians have participated very actively, working for the civil and political renewal of the country. They took an active part in the Risorgimento (the movement for national unity after 1848) and in all the battles for the democratic renewal of society.

In the second half of the nineteenth Century the Waldensians devoted most of their time to the spreading of Evangelical faith. To evangelise means preaching the Gospel to all - whether in or outside the Christian Church and to bring back the Spirit of Christ, just as the Apostles, Valdo and many other believers throughout history have done, by encouraging the reading of Scripture. This work of witness not only involves preaching and teaching but should be expressed in actions too. The Waldensian Church felt a particular obligation in the areas of education and welfare. As well as schools and boarding schools they also founded children's homes and training centres. It is worth noting here that the work of the Waldensians in the field of education owes a lot to Charles Beckwith, an English General who came to live in the Valleys amongst the Waldensians after being wounded at the Battle of Waterloo. Equally as strong were the obligations felt to welfare and health and the Waldensians have founded hospitals, old peoples homes and homes for those with special needs.

As a result emigration there are now Waldensian communities in most parts of Italy from Piedmont in the north, to Sicily in the south.



THE PRESENT

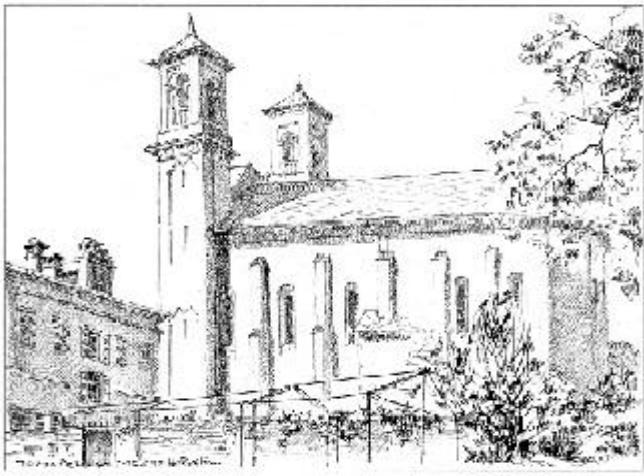
The Waldensian Church today

In 1979 the Waldensians united with the Methodist Church of Italy and now they have a united Synod. Today they have a joint membership of about 30,000. There are also 15,000 Waldensians in South America. Half of the Italian Waldensians live in the valleys of Piedmont. Pastoral care is in the hands of about 100 Pastors and 25 lay workers (Diaconi). Pastors are trained at the Theological College in Rome but also do part of their training abroad.

There are 5 Youth Centres and an internationally renowned ecumenical centre called "Agape". There are active Cultural Centres, a Waldensian History Society which publishes a journal, a weekly newspaper, and a publishing house in Turin. The organisation of the Waldensian Church is the Presbyterian system. Every Church is run by a regular assembly of its voting members, who are all confirmed over the age of 17. The Church as a whole has a General Assembly called a Synod, where representatives of the local assemblies and Pastors take part. The working commissions are made up both of Pastors and lay people.

To these strictly ecclesiastical activities are added those of service to the community: hospitals, old peoples homes, the Grammar School at Torre Pellice, "La Noce" a school complex at Palermo, and the elementary schools at Riesi.





Faith and the Bible

As far as beliefs are concerned, the Waldensians are part of the family of Reformed Churches which professes the fundamental principle of a living Christian faith based solely on the Gospel. Waldensians believe that the only true foundation of Christianity is the Bible, that it is only by the grace of God, through Christ, that we can be saved and become His children and that this salvation is a gift from God, and it is not dependent on "good works".

The Waldensians believe that the sense of Christianity lies in the fact that it is lived out in the lives of individuals. The Church is not a clerical organisation but a community of believers and it is not there to dictate on political, moral and social matters. The Waldensian involvement in the Red Cross, Amnesty International, the Reconciliation movement and European Federalism is a direct consequence of the application of a personal faith and sense of responsibility to society as a whole. Therefore Pastors are not distinct from other believers and have families. There are both men and women Pastors. The latter have had access to this role since 1967.

Ecumenism has always been important in Waldensian churches firstly in the area of world Protestantism and there are strong links with the Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist churches. The Waldensian Church is a member of the World Council of Churches and the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, that today represents Italian Protestantism.

The relations with the Roman Catholic Church were controversial until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Waldensians believe their faithfulness to the Gospels is more important than unity and ecumenism, it cannot be vague or sentimental, nor it must lead its believers to ignore the problems of faith today.

A free Church

Legally the Waldensian Church as a free church has always supported the idea of the definite separation of Church and State and has rejected every kind of Concordat like that between the Vatican and the State. The Agreements made with the State in 1984 (section 8 of the Constitution) became Law 449 but only define reciprocal relationships and do not legalise any privileges for the Church.

Tavola valdese

Via Firenze 38 - 00184 ROMA Tel. 06/4745537

Facoltà valdese di Teologia

Via Pietro Cossa, 42 - 00193 ROMA Tel. 06/3210789

Centro Culturale Valdese

Via Beckwith 3 - 10066 TORRE PELLICE (To) Tel. 0121/932179

Editrice Claudiana

Via Principe Tommaso, 1 - 10125 TORINO Tel. 011/6689804

Servizio cristiano

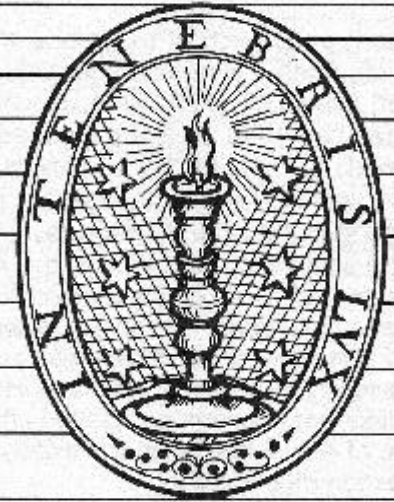
Via Monte degli Ulivi, 6 - 93016 RIESI (CI) Tel. 0934/928123

Agape Centro Ecumenico

10060 - PRALI (To) Tel. 0121/807514

www.chiesavaldese.org

www.fondazionevaldese.org



THE WALDENSIAN CHURCHES IN ITALY