

THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF ITALY.

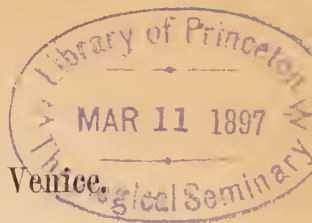
BY THE

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THE great need of Italy is the gospel. Twenty or twenty-five millions of its thirty millions of inhabitants have long ago ceased to believe in the Papal Church, and their connection with it is merely a matter of birth and name. Not only have they ceased to believe in it as a Christian Church, but they have come to regard it as an institution hostile to Christ and to the gospel. "*Egli porta troppo l'evangelo*" (He carries too much of the gospel) was the judgment a theological canon in St. Mark's Church, Venice, pronounced upon a friend of mine who was in training to become a priest, and accordingly he was cast aside as an unfit instrument. And yet the Papal Church stands sorely in need of Italian priests. Her native priesthood is dying out. Enough priests cannot be obtained to fill the Churches, and so they have to import them in large numbers from other countries, and especially, I am sorry to say, from Protestant England. But, say the Papal authorities, better an empty parish than a priest who knows the gospel. Such an one is utterly disqualified for the priestly office, and, indeed, I have never known nor read of a priest becoming a Christian man who did not suffer persecution at the hands of his Church.

But it is the gospel, and only the gospel, that brings real and lasting blessings to men and to nations. It is the reception of the glad tidings of a free and full salvation in Jesus Christ that recreates unto good works the children of men. The Papacy pretends to give salvation in sin, and wherever it goes it destroys all right thinking and obliterates all moral distinctions. The Pope claims the power—and exercises it—of making right wrong and wrong right, hence the Government of Italy has had to make marriage a civil rite, as the Pope would sanction any kind of marriages if only he were paid enough to do so. And he delegates that power to the priests. I was once asked by an Italian young lady if a thing could be right and wrong at the same time; for, she said: "My priest has offered to make wrong right for me." What



Italy, then, wants is the gospel of Jesus Christ, who saves not in sin but from it. And the Italians to a large extent realise this. They want something to make them better, not worse. They have cast off the Papal lie, and now they want to know the truth. Hence the remarkable and annually increasing sale of the Scriptures, both those produced by the British and Foreign Bible Society and those printed and published by native publishers, like the illustrated family Bible of Sonzogno, of Milan. Hence the number of religious books, like Bovio's "Christ at the Feast of Purim" and his "St. Paul," which are having an extraordinary circulation. Hence, too, the recognition by Italians in general of Protestants as Christians, whilst Clericals are put in opposition to both, and hence, too, the readiness with which they attend Protestant services.

Every Church, then, that has for its object the evangelisation of Italy ought to receive our cordial sympathy and support. It is a matter of thankfulness that there are many such. Some lament that this is the case, and wish that there were only one. There ought to be only one so far as aim and spirit are concerned, but we must remember that differences of belief and of government and operation are the necessary accompaniments of life. There can be no growth where there are no diversities. Outward unity, about which we hear so much at the present time, would be for the Church of Christ, I believe, a great calamity, ending in torpitude and death. The Papal Church is one, but it is a dead Church—spiritually dead, utterly without faith and without life. As Professor Bovio, himself within its pale, has described it, "It is a rotten bough on the tree of Christianity." The fact, then, that there are several evangelical Churches in Italy is not to be regretted, so long as they are occupied, not in advancing their own party ends, but that of the evangelisation of Italy.

I wish I could say that they all did this, but as it was in the Apostle Paul's day, so it is still, "Some preach Christ from contention and strife." A Church, however, which has never been guilty of such conduct and which keeps steadily in view the good of Italy, is the one that heads this paper—the Evangelical Church of Italy. Its very name declares the evangelisation of the country to be its aim and object; but its name tells more—it tells of self-denial and self-sacrifice for the general good. Self-denial, manifested in the giving up of names, entered into the making of the Kingdom of Italy. Piedmont, Lombardy, Venetia, Tuscany—all merged themselves in the one United Kingdom of Italy, and so in 1889 this Church gave up the special name it received at its birth and had borne for nearly twenty years, namely, "The Free Italian Church," for the more general one it now bears, in the hope that other Churches would do the same, and so put an end to provincialism in evangelistic as well as in political matters. In this hope it was disappointed: some Churches would not make the sacrifice the petty

kingdoms of Italy had made, but the name, "Evangelical Church of Italy," witnesses to the fact that one Church at least put the evangelisation of Italy before its own individual interests.

On the 20th of September, 1870, a breach was made in the walls of Rome at the Porta Pia, and the temporal power of the Pope was gone for ever. The year of young Italy's birth was also that of this Evangelical Church. They came into being together, and were both the offspring of the refusal of the Italians longer to be enslaved materially, intellectually, and spiritually by the Papal Power. And thus the Evangelical Church has, more perhaps than any other, been in full sympathy with Italy's rise and progress. It came into being unhampered by traditions. It had no historic past to bind it to a conservative policy. It was not a foreign corporation introduced into the country. It was of Italy, and it was free to run its course. If it obtained pastors and teachers, members and adherents, they had to be Italians. It could not call in help from without; it had to go down into the depths of Papal ignorance and superstition, vice and crime, and bring up into truth and purity those who were to be its clergy and its laity. All its members were to be found within the pale of Popery.

In its mission it has succeeded. It has abundantly justified its existence and its name. It has at the present time 29 leading congregations, 47 smaller groups of believers, and 132 other preaching stations where evangelistic work is carried on. Ex-priests and monks as well as young civilians are offering themselves for training in its theological hall at Florence, and whole villages, like Roccapietra, are desirous of being formed into new congregations.

On the 20th of September last the Kingdom of Italy celebrated its semi-jubilee. It was then twenty-five years old, and could boast of having done not a little in the work of undoing the mischief wrought by the Papacy. Roads had been made, cities lighted, schools and colleges opened, life and property made safe, public confidence restored, commerce increased, dishonesty, fraud, brigandage, murder, and all similar fruits of the Papacy lessened, if not banished from the realm. The Government could even point to the Church of the Pope itself as having been purified by the strong arm of the law. And so on that same auspicious date the Evangelical Church of Italy celebrated its semi-jubilee. Honour was done to the Rev. Dr. M'Dougall, of Florence, who from its birth and cradle to its manhood had been a foster-father to it. A deputation was appointed to wait upon King Humbert, and present him with an address—for the freedom of Church and State go hand in hand. King Humbert graciously received the deputation, and charged its members to thank the Church, and assure it of his gratitude for its kindness and for its constant sympathy and loyalty to his person and throne.

Since then both Italy and the Evangelical Church have had trials to endure. The Papal party, backed by Englishmen—members of our aristocracy and of our Government—and helped lavishly by their money—which had far better have been thrown into the sea—has put forth all its cunning and power to destroy the kingdom. Its efforts were doomed to failure, although by bribery and corruption exercised amongst the lowest of the people it has been able to do what Englishmen at home seem to do with their eyes open—put clericals into positions of trust and power in certain municipalities and in the Government, where all local and Imperial interests are made subservient to the advancement of the ends of the Papacy. Already, however, in Italy a reaction has set in, and the time is not far distant when every Papist will be swept from office and power as a disloyal subject.

In the same way a hostile force made war last winter upon the Evangelical Church of Italy. Some, of whom better things were to be expected, boasted that they would destroy it. Their efforts were also futile, and in God's providence their very hostility has been overruled for good. They have brought to the Evangelical Church the blessings that a struggle for life never fails to bring to those who have to face it. Its pastors and people, forced to stand shoulder to shoulder in the fight, have let drop secondary interests, and now more than ever "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." And to the example it manifested of patience and meekness under persecution may be attributed in part the accessions that have lately taken place to its ranks. Many, seeing that to it had been given "in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake," joined themselves to its communion.

The Rev. Dr. M'Dougall, of Florence, has just issued his annual letter and appeal on behalf of the Evangelical Church of Italy. In it he speaks of its struggles and triumphs. He says little of his own, but friends know that in all its afflictions he was afflicted. Apart altogether from the crisis the Evangelical Church and its honorary treasurer and its ministers and people have passed through, it well deserves the sympathy and support of the Christian public. But just at this time these are doubly wanted. The young Church is entering upon a new epoch of its life and history, and it is for those interested in the cause of Jesus Christ and in its advancement in Italy, so long cursed by the Papacy, and now free and united, to so befriend and help it that its record at the close of another twenty-five years may be even more splendid than that just concluded. The Rev. Dr. M'Dougall's address is the Scottish Church, Florence.

