

Bernardino Ochino and the Italian congregation of Zurich

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The Locarnese did not dissolve into the German-speaking Reformed church of Zurich. They formed their own congregation with worship in Italian, which the Zurich authorities allowed them to do so. This was a significant concession in a city whose church order placed all preaching under the control of the council and its ministers. It also created a problem that was to recur throughout the history of Protestant refugee churches, in Geneva, London, Frankfurt and the Netherlands as much as in Zurich: the question of who would preach to the refugees, in what language and under whose discipline. The answer that Zurich gave in 1555, and the crisis that followed eight years later, show how a host city could protect and control a foreign community at the same time.

1 The call of Ochino

The congregation needed a pastor who could preach in Italian, whose reputation would give it standing and whose orthodoxy the Zurich church could accept. In the summer of 1555 a delegation led by Lelio Sozzini went to Basel to ask Bernardino Ochino to move to Zurich and become pastor of the Italian refugee community from Locarno.¹ Sozzini, born in Siena in 1525 as a son of the jurist Mariano Sozzini the Younger, had left Italy for good around 1547. After years of travel he returned to Zurich towards the end of 1551, and the city remained the centre of his movements from then on, with Bullinger as his principal correspondent and protector among the Reformed theologians.² Pier Paolo Vergerio, the former bishop of Capodistria who had worked as a Reformed preacher in the Bregaglia, had served the Locarnese for a short time before Ochino's arrival.³

Ochino was the most famous Italian preacher of his generation. Born in Siena in 1487, he had entered the Franciscan order very young, moved to the Capuchins in 1534 and served as their vicar general from 1538 to 1542.⁴

Under the influence of the Spanish spiritual writer Juan de Valdés he had come to Reformed convictions. When the newly reorganized Roman Inquisition summoned him in 1542, he fled to Geneva, where he was pastor of the Italian-speaking congregation for three years. He then served Italian Protestants in Augsburg until 1547 and went with Pietro Martire Vermigli to England.⁵ After the accession of Mary I he returned to the continent. From 1555 to 1563 he was pastor of the congregation of the Locarnese exiles in Zurich.

2 A refugee church under the council

The Italian congregation of Zurich was a church within a church. Its pastor preached in Italian, administered the sacraments and catechized the young, but he did so under the supervision of the Zurich ministers and within the church order of the city. Beccaria assisted as catechist and deacon.⁶ Ochino wrote for his congregation, among other works, an Italian catechism in dialogue form, published in 1561.⁷ The council could withdraw its permission to preach at any time. The arrangement reflected the general principle of the Zurich Reformation that the civil authority was responsible for the purity of doctrine and for the discipline of the church in its territory.

For the Locarnese, the congregation was more than a place of worship. It was the institution through which the community kept its identity, its language and its internal solidarity in a foreign city. In the first generations its members did business with each other, as Martino Muralto's investment in the velvet and silk enterprise of his fellow exile Pariso Appiani shows, and the leading families were already bound to each other by marriage, as Martino Muralto's marriage to Lucia, the daughter of Aloisio Orelli, shows.⁸ Martino Muralto, who administered the community's common goods and represented it at the Diet, was a lay leader of the congregation as much as an investor in the silk trade.⁹ The congregation was thus also a social and economic network, a feature of refugee churches that the history of the Huguenot refuge in Geneva and elsewhere confirms (the Geneva volume).

3 Notes

1. Miguel Gotor, "Ochino, Bernardino", in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 79 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2013), online at Treccani, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bernardino-ochino_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bernardino-ochino_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) (delegation led by Lelio Sozzini in

- mid-1555 proposing that he "trasferirsi a Zurigo e diventare il pastore della comunità di rifugiati italiani di Locarno"). ↩
2. Mario Biagioni, "Sozzini, Lelio", in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 93 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2018), online at Treccani, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lelio-sozzini_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lelio-sozzini_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) ("Nacque a Siena nel 1525", "sesto dei tredici figli del giureconsulto Mariano il Giovane"; "Rientrò a Zurigo verso la fine del 1551"; Zurich "la città che rappresentò da allora il centro dei suoi spostamenti"). The English Wikipedia article gives May 1553 for his settlement in Zurich and 4 May 1562 for his death; the dictionary is followed here. ↩
 3. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. VIII, § 40 (above) (the congregation "was served for a short time by Vergerio"); Schaff, § 38 (above) (Vergerio pastor at Vicosoprano in the Bregaglia 1550– 1553). ↩
 4. Emidio Campi, "Ochino, Bernardino", DSS, version of 6 February 2008, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/010775/>. ↩
 5. Campi, "Ochino, Bernardino" (above) ("Dal 1555 al 1563 fu pastore della comunità degli esuli locarnesi a Zurigo"). ↩
 6. Campi, "Beccaria, Giovanni" (above). ↩
 7. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. VIII, § 40 (above). Title and printer of the catechism. ↩
 8. Pauli Falconi, "Muralto, Martino" (above) (investment in "l'impresa di tessitura dei velluti e tintura della seta di Pariso Appiani"; marriage with Lucia Orelli, daughter of Aloisio); Illi, "Orelli, Aloisio" (above). The pattern of business partnership among the Locarnese families in Zurich is developed in Chapter B.II. ↩
 9. Pauli Falconi, "Muralto, Martino" (above). ↩

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