

Locarno after 1555: loss, memory and the return of the Reformed

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The departure of 1555 solved the confessional problem of the ruling cantons in Locarno. It did so at a cost that fell on the town. The historical dictionary records a strong decline of Locarno's population in the sixteenth century, caused by the religious exile and by the plague of 1576 and 1577, and a recovery only in the seventeenth century.¹ The departure removed from a small town several of its leading families, a number of its physicians, lawyers and merchants, and the capital they had been able to realize. The plague two decades later, which Carlo Borromeo's pastoral visits and charitable measures in the diocese of Milan made famous, struck a town already weakened.²

1 The economic cost to Locarno

The economic loss is difficult to measure, since no figures exist for the capital that left with the emigrants or for the value of the property they sold. Its nature is nevertheless clear. The emigrants belonged to the part of the population that held mobile wealth and commercial connections, and that was able to use them in a new environment. Those who stayed were, on the whole, those whose wealth was tied to land and local office. In a town whose prosperity depended on trade along the lake and on transit between Lombardy and the passes, the departure of merchants and professionals with contacts in Zurich, Basel and the Grisons reduced the town's commercial reach for a generation. The Ticinese writer Piero Bianconi later described the Locarno of the following centuries as a place that seemed "come di una cosa morta e triste, senza quella tragica grandezza delle città sbagliate" (like something dead and sad, without the tragic grandeur of failed cities), a judgement quoted in the volume that marked the 450th anniversary of the exile in 2005.³

Zurich gained what Locarno lost. The Locarnese families became, over the following two centuries, leading figures in Zurich's silk industry, its trade and eventually its banking and publishing, as Chapter B.II describes. A modern newspaper report on a visit of the Zurich city government to Locarno in May 2026 summarized the episode in a sentence that local historians have repeated in various forms: perhaps an opportunity for the German-Swiss city, but certainly a great loss for Locarno.⁴

2 Memory in Zurich and in Locarno

The exile became a founding story of the Zurich Reformed identity. A painting of 1655 commemorated the emigration.⁵ Family histories kept the memory alive, among them the idealized biography of Aloisio Orelli of more than 500 pages that Salomon von Orelli composed in 1797.⁶ The historical dictionary observes that the exile shaped the identity of the Swiss Reformed and turned its protagonists into models of faith and sacrifice, and that Barbara Muralto's role in particular was emphasized from the seventeenth century onwards.⁷ Ferdinand Meyer's history of 1836 gave the story its scholarly form. The Italian translation of 2005 made it accessible again in the region from which the exiles had come.⁸

In Locarno the episode long received less attention. The Catholic reform of the following decades, which Chapter B.III treats, made the town and the bailiwick a model of post-Tridentine Catholicism. The episode was recovered as part of local history only in the twentieth century, through the work of Ticinese historians and the anniversary publications of 2005.⁹ The town now presents the exile as a chapter of its own history. In May 2026 the municipal government of Locarno received the newly elected government of the City of Zurich at the Palazzo Marcacci, an occasion that the local press connected with 1555 and with the Locarno Pact of 1925, which the town treats as part of a tradition of dialogue and peaceful settlement.¹⁰

3 The return of the Reformed to Ticino

Protestant worship returned to Ticino three centuries after the exile. The first Reformed communities formed from around 1860, among them communities founded by German-speaking Swiss who came south with the railway and with tourism. In 1885 an evangelical church and school were built at Biasca under Pastor Paolo Calvino.¹¹ The Federal Constitution of 1848 had guaranteed freedom of establishment to Swiss citizens of the Christian confessions. The revised Constitution of 1874 extended freedom of belief and worship, so that Reformed Swiss could settle in Ticino and

practise their faith there.¹² Legal equality between the Reformed and the Catholic Church in the cantonal constitution came only with the constitutional reform of 1975.

The present Constitution of the Canton of Ticino of 14 December 1997 confers public-law personality on both the Catholic and the Evangelical Reformed Church in Article 24. The relationship with each church is regulated by a separate statute: the *Legge sulla Chiesa evangelica riformata nel Cantone Ticino* of 14 April 1997 and the *Legge sulla Chiesa cattolica* of 16 December 2002.¹³ In 2025 the municipal government of Locarno itself set out this legal framework in its response to a council motion calling for a clearer separation of church and state. Four and a half centuries after the expulsion, the descendants of the confession that the twelve cantons would not tolerate in Locarno enjoy the same public-law status as the Catholic Church in the canton of which Locarno is part.

4 Notes

1. Janke and Huber, "Locarno (comune)" (above). ↩
2. Janke and Huber, "Locarno (comune)" (above) (decline of population in the sixteenth century through the exile and the plague of 1576–1577); "Charles Borromeo", Wikipedia (English), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Borromeo (Borromeo remained in Milan during the plague of 1576 and organized relief), used for want of an accessible scholarly source. See also Chapter B.III and Ceschi (ed.), *Storia della Svizzera italiana dal Cinquecento al Settecento* (above). ↩
3. Review of Simona Canevascini and Piero Bianconi, *L'esilio dei protestanti locarnesi*, introduction by Rodolfo Huber (Locarno: Armando Dadò, 2005), *Scuola ticinese* no. 271, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.271/ST_271_esilio_dei_protestanti_locarnesi.pdf. ↩
4. "Il Municipio di Zurigo ospite a Locarno", *Ticinonline*, 22 May 2026, <https://www.tio.ch/ticino/attualita/1927373/il-municipio-di-zurigo-ospite-a-locarno> ("Forse un'opportunità per la città della Svizzera tedesca, ma sicuramente una grande perdita per Locarno"). ↩
5. Tosato-Rigo, "Protestantische Glaubensflüchtlinge" (above). ↩
6. "Aloisio Orelli", Wikipedia (English) (above) (biography by Salomon von Orelli, 1797), used for want of an accessible scholarly source; Illi, "Orelli, Aloisio" (above); Hans Schulthess, *Die von Orelli von Locarno und Zürich* (Zurich 1941). ↩

7. Nicoli, "Muralto, Barbara" (above). ↩
8. Meyer, *La comunità riformata di Locarno* (2005) (above). ↩
9. Review in *Scuola ticinese* no. 271 (above); Emidio Campi, Brigitte Schwarz and Paolo Tognina (eds), *Ticino e protestanti* (Locarno: Armando Dadò, 2004), reviewed by Daniele Campoli in *Scuola ticinese* no. 266, https://m4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.266/ST_266_Campoli_Ticino_e_protestanti.pdf. ↩
10. "Il Municipio di Zurigo ospite a Locarno" (above) (visit of 14 May 2026 at Palazzo Marcacci). ↩
11. Campoli, review of *Ticino e protestanti* (above). Role of German-speaking Swiss settlers and of the railway. ↩
12. Municipio di Locarno, Preavviso sul contenuto della mozione Cavalli "Per una chiara divisione tra Stato e Chiesa", 13 March 2025, https://www.locarno.ch/files/documenti/Preavviso_contenuto_mozione_Cavalli_per_una_chiara_divisione_tra_stato_e_chiesa.pdf (1848 and freedom of domicile). Federal Constitution of 12 September 1848, Art. 41 (establishment limited to Swiss of the Christian confessions), the extension to Jewish Swiss in 1866 and Federal Constitution of 29 May 1874, Art. 49 and 50. ↩
13. Municipio di Locarno, Preavviso (above) (Art. 24 of the cantonal constitution "conferisce personalità di diritto pubblico alle due principali Chiese, quella Cattolica e quella Evangelica Riformata"; dates of the two statutes). Date of the cantonal constitution (14 December 1997). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/lugano-locarno-after-1555-loss-memory-and-the-return-of-the-reformed