

TRUTH TRIUMPHANT: CHAPTER 6

Vigilantius, Leader of the Waldenses

The paganism which so soon began to avenge itself by creeping into the doctrines and practices of the early church has never been altogether eradicated, and has always been ready to become the nucleus of heresy or corruption when faith declined or ardor cooled. 1

THE earliest leader of prominence among the noble Waldenses in northern Italy and southern France is Vigilantius (A.D. 364-408). By some he has been accounted the first supreme director of the church of the Waldenses. 2 In his time the protests against the introduction of pagan practices into primitive Christianity swelled into a revolution. Then it was that the throngs who desired to maintain the faith once delivered to the saints in northern Italy and southwestern France were welded into an organized system. Desiring truth based on the Bible only, those who refused to follow the superstitious novelties being brought into the church were greatly influenced by the clear-cut scriptural teachings of Vigilantius. Undoubtedly Patrick of Ireland, who was at that same time enlarging the Irish Church, was stirred by the reforms taking place in south central Europe.

Vigilantius was born in southern France near the Pyrenees Mountains. 3 His father was the proprietor of a relay post, a "mansio," one of those many traveling stations throughout the Roman Empire. The early home of the reformer was a relay center where change of horses could be secured for travelers who, perchance, were merchants, ambassadors, illustrious personages, bishops, ordinary tourists, or imperial couriers. The business offered to the growing youth abundant opportunity to obtain information on all topics from those who tarried at his father's mountain abode.

As Vigilantius ranged through the solitudes tending the flocks, pursuing the chase, or guiding travelers through the mountain defiles, he increased in stature and wisdom. Sometime while in contact with Christian travelers he accepted Christ as his Savior. Near by were the estates of the famous historian Sulpicius Severus. This renowned writer was the idol of the learned class. In his mansion he was at some time host for practically all the distinguished men of his day. He invited Vigilantius to enter his employ, first probably in ordinary service, but later as the collector of rents and the manager of his estates.

While Vigilantius was employed in the services of this historian, a great change came over Sulpicius Severus. He was carded off his feet by the wave of asceticism and monasticism which was sweeping westward. Vigilantius early learned to love his employer. He admired greatly the brilliant intellect of this man who could feed the hungry, clothe the poor, and visit the sick, while engaged in many literary labors.

The Struggle Against Monasticism

Now, not far to the north dwelt Martin, bishop of Tours. Near the banks of the Loire River this prelate had founded the first monastery in France. The extreme austerities of asceticism to which he had subjected himself, coupled with the flaming reports of his so-called miracles, enabled him to set loose in the West the passion for monastic life. Sulpicius Severus, accompanied by Vigilantius, his Celtic financier, set out to visit Martin. That conference produced a profound change in the life of both Sulpicius and Vigilantius, but in opposite directions. The fanaticism of Martin, bishop of Tours, drew

Sulpicius and his brilliant talents into the monastic life.

Such were the scenes related to Vigilantius by Sulpicius, if not actually witnessed by him; and he could not remain blind to the fact that his patron was neither happier nor better for his visit to the bishop of Tours. After his return home, the image of Martin haunted the sensitive historian: he was pursued by the recollection of the ascetic prelate sleeping on the cold earth, with nothing but ashes strewed beneath him, and covered with sackcloth only; refusing a softer bed, or warmer clothing, even in severe illness; declaring that a Christian ought to die on ashes; feeding on the most unwholesome food, and denying himself every indulgence; praying in the most irksome posture, forcing sleep from his eyes, and exposing himself to the extremes of heat and cold, hunger and thirst. The imagination of Sulpicius dwelt on what he had seen and heard at Marmoutier, until he believed that heaven would be closed upon him, unless he should practice the same austerities." 4

The love of the marvelous, the habit of dwelling upon tales of wonders and of practicing ascetic austerities, had seized the employer of Vigilantius. On the other hand, Vigilantius saw in the system a form of religion without the simplicity of the gospel of Christ.

Thus Vigilantius saw on one side vainglorious exaltation, spiritual pride, and pretension to miraculous power; and on the other side, a false humility and prostration of the understanding, both growing out of the same mistaken system of asceticism: a system which undermined the doctrine of Christ's full and sufficient sacrifice, and assigned an undue value to the inflictions and performances of men like Martin of Tours: and which he probably foresaw would in the end elevate them in the minds of weak brethren, to mediatorial thrones, and render them little less than objects of divine worship. Consequently we must attribute to impressions first received in the household of Sulpicius, the efforts, which Vigilantius afterwards made, to expose the errors of asceticism, and to check the progress of hagiolatry." 5

The gulf between Vigilantius and Sulpicius which was formed by their visit to Martin was widened when Sulpicius employed him as the messenger to Paulinus of Nola, Italy. This excellent man had also gone to a retreat where he could give his time "to those beguiling practices, which afterwards became the characteristics of the Latin Church; and proved so fatal in the end to the simplicity of the gospel.... Religious observances, transferred from pagan altars to Christian shrines, were dignified with the name of honors due to the memory of a departed saint: and as the heroes of old were invoked by the ancestors of Paulinus, so did he himself substitute the name of Felix for that of Hercules or Quirinus, and implore the aid of a dead martyr, when no other name in prayer ought to have been upon his lips, than that of the one Mediator between God and man." 6 Furthermore we are told that Pope Gelasius, in the fifth century, introduced into the West the Purification festival, coupled with a Procession of Lights, to supplement the heathen feast Lupercalia. 7

What must have been the effect upon our simple mountaineer when he beheld in Italy gorgeous shrines erected to commemorate a hermit? Through divine grace Vigilantius escaped the infatuation which descends almost irresistibly upon those who yield themselves to practices designed to supplant the simplicity of the gospel.

The age of the apostles faded away into the age of the church fathers. Learning and argument were used to prove the verities of the gospel rather than the words "which the Holy Ghost teacheth." (1 Corinthians 2:13.) This was especially true of Europe and Africa.

Revolt Against Asceticism and Monasticism

As if the ransom of the Redeemer was not sufficient without their own sufferings, those who practiced asceticism imposed appalling torments upon themselves. They undermined the doctrine of Christ's full and sufficient atonement for sin. Processions were formed, relics displayed, and incense burned before the tomb of some exalted ascetic.

Monasticism followed on the heels of asceticism. Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) was prominent among the early apostates because of his perverted teachings.⁸ He was followed by his pupil Tatian, who in turn taught Clement (A.D. 190), a founder of the ecclesiastical school at Alexandria. Clement declared he would hand down the gospel mixed with heathen philosophy. But it remained for Origen, Clement's pupil, who mutilated himself, to start the glorification of celibacy.

Monasticism is not a product of Christianity. It was imported from non-Christian religions. Christianity saw it first introduced from Egypt, evidently coming from Buddhism. There were two classes of monks. The first, the anchorites, sought to live alone in the gloomiest and wildest spots in the wilderness. The second class, monks, evading the solitary life, gathered into communities called monasteries. Refusing obedience to any spiritual superior except the supreme head of the church, they placed at the command of the Papacy a vast mobile army of men not responsible to any congregation. Let it be remembered that the Bible training schools of Celtic and Syrian Christianity were not monasteries of this kind, although there are writers who would have it so. The inmates of the monasteries had a different program from the Bible training schools, whose pupils were there, not for life, but for a period of training, as the youth of today leaves home for four years in college.

The monks at certain times had pageantries, prostrations, and genuflexions. All these externals were symptoms of a growing ecclesiastical system, and they helped prepare the way for the union of the papal church with the state. Nevertheless, these and other departures from New Testament Christianity stirred deeply in all lands those who were to become leaders against the new perversions and who would demand a return "to the law and to the testimony." (Isaiah 8:20.)

The Forerunners of Vigilantius

The splendid city of Milan, in northern Italy, was the connecting link between Celtic Christianity in the West and Syrian Christianity in the East. ⁹ The missionaries from the early churches in Judea and Syria securely stamped upon the region around Milan the simple and apostolic religion. Milan was the rendezvous of numerous councils of clergy from the East, so that the early liturgies of Antioch, Milan, and Gaul were practically identical. ¹⁰ It is impossible to find a time throughout the centuries when there was not opposition in northern Italy to the Roman hierarchy, sometimes great, sometimes small, but always evangelical. Dr. Allix states this fact thus:

To this purpose it will be of use to set forth as well the constitution of the church, as the manner in which the diocese of Milan did continue independent until the midst of the eleventh century, at which time the Waldenses were obliged more openly to testify their aversion for the Church of Rome as an anti-Christian church. It will be easy enough for me to perform what I have proposed by myself, in following the history of the church. Before the Council of Nicaea, we find the diocese of Italy very distinct from that of Rome." ¹¹

Dr. Faber presents, in the following words, one way in which this gulf between the churches of the

Milan district and Rome originated:

Now this district, on the eastern side of the Cottian Alps, is the precise country of the Vallenses [Waldenses]. Hither their ancestors retired, during the persecutions of the second and third and fourth centuries: here, providentially secluded from the world, they retained the precise doctrines and practices of the primitive church endeared to them by suffering and exile; while the wealthy inhabitants of cities and fertile plains, corrupted by a now opulent and gorgeous and powerful clergy, were daily sinking deeper and deeper into that apostasy which has been so graphically foretold by the great apostle." 12

Opponents of Pagan Practices

First among those who protested against heathen practices in the church was Helvidius I (c. A.D. 250-420 [sic]). It is interesting to note that three of the outstanding opponents of the papal innovations in Latin Christianity were from northern Italy. These were Helvidius, Jovinian, and Vigilantius. As for Helvidius, all that was written by him and for him has been destroyed. Though he lived a century and a half after Justin Martyr and more than a century after Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, and Clement, their writings have been preserved, while his were destroyed. Helvidius belonged to the church which strove to hand down the doctrines of the Bible in the pure form. He is famous for his exposure of Jerome for using corrupted Greek manuscripts in bringing out the Vulgate, the Latin Bible of the Papacy. If the thunders of Jerome had not been turned against Helvidius, we would know less concerning him.

"Helvidius, a so-called heresiarch of the fourth century, a layman who opposed the growing superstitions of the church... He was a pupil of Auxentius, bishop of Milan, and the precursor of Jovinian." 13 Duchesne points out that Auxentius, for twenty years at the head of the diocese of Milan, was from Asia Minor and impressed on those regions the Syrian leadership in Christianity. Daring in his scholarship, Helvidius accused Jerome, as Jerome himself admits, of using corrupt Greek manuscripts. 14

That part of the ecclesiastical system of the fourth century, which was peculiarly ascetic and rigid, found an impersonation in Jerome, who exhibited its worst and most repulsive traits in the whole tenor of his life and conversation. Sourness, bitterness, envy, intolerance, and dissatisfaction with every manifestation of sanctity which did not come up to his own standard, had become habitual to him, and were betrayed in almost everything that he wrote, said, or did. Censoriousness, and the spirit of invective, were amongst his most strongly marked failings, and the very best men of the age did not escape his censure." 15

The second renowned reformer in north Italy and forerunner of Vigilantius was Jovinian (A.D. 330-390). He was so superior in scholarship that the united attempts of such learned advocates of the Papacy as Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose failed to overthrow his scriptural and historical arguments.16 Of him Albert H. Newman says:

That the protest of Jovinianus awakened great interest and received influential support is evident from the excited polemics of Jerome, and from the public proceedings that were instituted against him in Rome and Milan.... The persistence of the influence of Jovinianus is seen in the movement led by Vigilantius. It is not unlikely that followers of Jovinianus took refuge in the Alpine valleys, and there kept alive the evangelical teaching that was to reappear with vigor in the twelfth century." 17

Beuzart relates how a learned French historian speaks of the relentless persecution carried on as late as 1215 by monks against so-called heretics named Jovinianists, Patarines, and Albigenses. 18

Jovinian drew the wrath of Jerome because he taught that the lives of married people, all other things being equal, are fully as acceptable in the sight of God as those who are not married; that eating with thanksgiving is as commendable with God as abstemiousness; and that all who are faithful to their baptismal vows will be equally rewarded at the day of judgment. Because of this, Jerome said that Jovinian had "the hissing of the old serpent," "nauseating trash," and "the devil's poisonous concoction." 19

Vigilantius was convinced that the new system of austerities, processions, and sacraments did not result in making men preeminently happy and holy. Vigilantius witnessed too many of the ecclesiastical riots of the day.

When Damasus was elected pope, A.D. 366, the dissensions in Rome were so violent that the gates of the basilica, where his rival was consecrated, were broken open, the roof was torn off, the building was set on fire, and one hundred and thirty-seven persons were killed." 20

Similar ecclesiastical riots were seen at this time in Palestine. Jerome, in one of his epistles, declares that their private quarrels were as furious as were those of the barbarians.

What Caused the Rupture Between Vigilantius and Rome?

When Vigilantius returned to Sulpicius, his employer, he stood at the parting of the ways. On the one hand there was Martin, bishop of Tours, rushing from cave to cell in the excitement of supposed miracles; there was Sulpicius, turning from sound scholarship to fables and visions; and the gentle Paulinus of Nola was groveling before the image of a favorite saint - the victim of delusions. On the other hand, there was Helvidius challenging the corrupt manuscripts in the hands of Jerome, the bishop of Rome, and their followers; there was the great leader Jovinian defending gospel simplicity and a married clergy. The event which decided Vigilantius was his visit to Jerome.

By this time the Goths, Celts, and Franks had forgotten their days of invasion and their religious differences, and were being united by the invisible bonds of community life. They prized their Latin Bible (not the Latin Bible of Jerome), generally called the Itala, "because it was read publicly in all the churches of Italy, France, Spain, Africa, and Germany, where Latin was understood; and Vetus, on account of its being more ancient than any of the rest." 21 To supplant this noble version, Jerome, at the request of the pope and with money furnished by him, brought out a new Latin Bible. He was looked up to by the imperial church as the oracle of his age. Vigilantius having inherited his father's wealth and desiring to consult Jerome, determined to visit him in his cell at Bethlehem.

He went by way of Italy, paying a second visit to Paulinus. While he was there, processions to the tomb of the saint were made, accompanied by the swinging of incense and carrying of lighted tapers; but Vigilantius said nothing. The gentle manners of Sulpicius and Paulinus coupled with their meek devotion softened their delusions. When, however, he encountered the fierce polemics of Jerome, the eyes of the Gallic reformer were opened.

Vigilantius, A.D. 396, was the bearer of a letter from Paulinus to Jerome, and this was the introduction which made him personally acquainted with the most extraordinary man of that age. Jerome was the terror of his contemporaries; the man above all others, who, in a mistaken attempt to do his duty to

God, failed most signally in his duty towards men, unmindful of the apostle's words, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar," etc. The mortification of the flesh had tended to puff up his spirit, and of all the polemical writers of the fourth century, he was the most bitter and severe." 22

The first meeting of Vigilantius with Jerome at Bethlehem is described in this language:

A narrow bypath leading off from the street, at the spot where the tomb of King Archelaus formerly stood, conducted the traveler to the cell of Jerome; here he found the ascetic clad in a vestment so coarse and sordid, that its very vileness bore the stamp of spiritual pride, and seemed to say, "Stand off, my wearer is holier than thou." The face of the monk was pale and haggard. He had been slowly recovering from a severe illness, and was wasted to a shadow. Frequent tears had plowed his cheeks with deep furrows; his eyes were sunk in their sockets; all the bones of his face were sharp and projecting. Long fasting, habitual mortification, and the chagrin which perpetual disputation occasions, had given an air of gloominess to his countenance, which accorded but ill with his boast, that his cell to him was like an arbor in the Garden of Eden." 23

Vigilantius was at first warmly received by Jerome. The scenes at Bethlehem were the same as he had witnessed on the estates of his friends who had been drawn into the tide of asceticism. The sourness of temper and the fierce invectives of the editor of the Vulgate began to raise doubt in the mind of Vigilantius, however, as to the value of the whole system. The Gallic presbyter was especially incensed at Jerome's criticism of Paulinus; but it was when Jerome turned fiercely upon Rufinus, his former friend, that the break between Vigilantius and Jerome took place.

Vigilantius left Bethlehem to visit Rufinus at Jerusalem. There was nothing in the life and atmosphere of that ancient city to encourage the visitor from southern France. He learned enough from his interview with Rufinus to recoil from Jerome's leadership and to discover the first protest arising in his heart against the new system of asceticism and monasticism. He returned from Jerusalem to Bethlehem fully determined to protest against the unchristian vagaries of the monk whom few dared to oppose. As a result of this encounter, Vigilantius resolved to quit for good the contentious successors of the Alexandrian school, because of their loose theology and because they associated with the swarms of Egyptian monks. He determined to raise his voice in defense of the gospel's primitive simplicity.

Another incident occurred to strengthen his resolution. He revisited Nola, Italy, returning by way of Egypt. One can imagine his indignation when he learned that Jerome was not satisfied with all the humiliations and sufferings Paulinus had undergone to conform to asceticism, but had written a taunting demand that his friend surrender all his wealth immediately.

Then Vigilantius decided to break the silence. How and where and against what, we learn from Jerome's reply to Reparatus, a priest of southern France, to whom, about A.D. 404, Jerome wrote the following concerning Vigilantius:

I have myself before now seen the monster, and have done my best to bind the maniac with texts of Scripture, as Hippocrates binds his patients with chains; but "he went away, he departed, he escaped, he broke out," and taking refuge between the Adriatic and the Alps of King Cotius, declaimed in his turn against me." 24

In the Cottian Alps, in that region lying between the Alps and the Adriatic Sea, Vigilantius first began

public efforts to stop the pagan ceremonies that were being baptized into the church. Why did he choose that region? Because there he found himself among people who adhered to the teachings of the Scriptures. They had removed to those valleys to escape the armies of Rome. "He was perhaps aware that he would find in the Cottian Alps a race of people, who were opposed to those notions of celibacy and vows of continence, which formed the favorite dogma of Jerome, and were at the bottom of all his ascetic austerities." 25

How fruitful were the endeavors of Vigilantius, may be seen in the following, taken from another letter of Jerome to Reparius: "Shameful to relate, there are bishops who are said to be associated with him in his wickedness - if at least they are to be called bishops - who ordain no deacons but such as have been previously married." 26 It is not known whether the bishops who were agreeing with Vigilantius in his crusade against the semipagan Christianity of his day were on the Italian or the French side of the Alps. It mattered little as far as Jerome was concerned, since the preaching of Vigilantius on both sides of these mountains produced the thundering denunciations of Jerome, the great champion of the state church, that were heard all the way across the Mediterranean from Bethlehem. Thus the new mission of Vigilantius had created a cleavage between those who elected to walk in the apostolic way and those who gave church "development" as their reason for adding pagan ceremonies to the glamour of state gorgeousness.

The New Organization of Free Churches

The Alpine churches of France and Italy were not swept into the new hysteria. They welcomed Vigilantius with open arms, and his preaching was powerful. "He makes his raid upon the churches of Gaul," cried out Jerome. Those in the south of France who desired the new teachings appealed to Jerome to defend the innovations against the attacks of Vigilantius. Jerome's reply, addressed to Reparius, reveals what doctrines and practices the Gallic reformer was denouncing - church celibacy, worship of relics, lighted tapers, all-night vigils, and prayers to the dead.

Again and again Jerome begged to have sent to him the book which Vigilantius wrote. The historian Milner has exclaimed, "For a single page of Jovinian or Vigilantius I would gladly give up the whole invectives of Jerome." 27 The new leader of the churches which had not united with the state spent his fortune in collecting manuscripts, circulating the Scriptures, and employing amanuenses to write pamphlets, tracts, and books. Jerome demanded that he be delivered over to the state for banishment or death; and as historians and the decrees of popes point out, the state church, when seeking the life of opponents, turned them over to the secular tribunal for punishment. 28 This was done in order to disguise their crime. 29 "The wretch's tongue should be cut out, or he should be put under treatment for insanity," wrote Jerome. Thus the ecclesiastical leaders, supported by state police power, were abandoning the persuasion of love for the brutal argument of force.

In spite of all this, those in the regions under consideration, were determined to follow the Bible only. They were growing in strength, and were coming closer together. Under the impetus of the campaigns of Vigilantius, a new organization was being created, destined to persist through the coming centuries. Vigilantius had prepared himself for this throughout the years by giving days and nights to study and research. It is a regrettable fact that none of his writings have been preserved.

How demoralizing the influence of the monastic hysteria was may be seen in the transformation wrought in Augustine (A.D. 354-430). This renowned writer of the church (probably of all Catholic

Fathers, the most adored by the Papacy) was forced by the popular pressure into the views of Jerome, and was in correspondence with him. His complete surrender to the policy of persecution is given at length by Limborch. 30 Augustine, from his episcopal throne in north Africa, gave to the Papacy a deadly weapon; he invented the monstrous doctrine of "Compel them to come in." Thus he laid the foundation for the Inquisition. Intoxicated with Greek philosophy, he cried out that its spirit filled his soul with incredible fire. 31 He had wandered nine long years in Manichaeism, which taught the union of church and state and exalted the observance of the first day of the week. 32 Augustine found many reasons why the doctrines and practices of the church should be enforced by the sword. 33 The doctrine "Compel them to come in," sent millions to death for no greater crime than refusing to believe in the forms of ecclesiastical worship enforced by the state. Such was the atmosphere of the age in which Vigilantius ministered.

In his day another controversy existed which was to rock the Christian world. Milan, center of northern Italy, as well as all the Eastern churches, was sanctifying the seventh-day Sabbath, while Rome was requiring its followers to fast on that day in an effort to discredit it. Interesting pictures of the conflict are given by an eminent scholar and writer, Dr. Peter Heylyn. 34 Ambrose, the celebrated bishop of Milan, and Augustine, the more celebrated bishop of Africa, both contemporaries of Vigilantius, described the interesting situation. Ambrose said that when he was in Milan he observed Saturday, but when in Rome he fasted on Saturday and observed Sunday. This gave rise to the proverb, "When you are in Rome, do as Rome does." Augustine deplored the fact that in two neighboring churches in Africa, one observed the seventh-day Sabbath, another fasted on it. 35

Vigilantius has been called "the Forerunner of the Reformation," "one of the earliest of our Protestant forefathers." 36 Although the practices against which he inveighed continued for hundreds of years, yet the influence of his preaching and leadership among the Waldenses. 37 burned its way across the centuries until it united with the heroic reforms of Luther. As the Papacy promoted persecutions from time to time against the Waldenses, it proclaimed the "heresy" of these regions as being the same brand as that of Vigilantius. Two centuries later medieval writers leveled their attacks against Claude, bishop of Milan, and against his followers on the basis that he was infected with the "poison" of Vigilantius. 38 From the days of the Gallic reformer on, multiplied churches of northern Italy and southern France bore an entirely different color from that which rested upon legal ecclesiasticism. Thus, Vigilantius, in southern Europe, like his contemporary, Patrick, of Ireland, can be counted as being one of the early bright stars of the Church in the Wilderness.