Francesco Turrettini (1547-1628): Pilgrim of faith

"And what if God puts you to a difficult test by bringing to you the necessity of leaving all to follow Him, to leave your country, to abandon your parents, your friends, your goods, and your possessions, and to break off all the attachments that you have to the world? Make it known that you are the true children of this father (Abraham) of believers, and imitators of his faith by detaching yourselves voluntarily from all that you hold most dear and sweet in the world and showing that you truly love God above all, that you prefer His grace to the love of the world, the salvation of your soul to the ease of your flesh, and the glory of heaven to the advantages of the earth."

From the sermon "The Calling of Abraham" by Francis Turretin (1623-1687)

When we think of the Reformation, Italy is generally the last place that would come to our minds. A firm and permanent Reformed church never did establish itself in Italy. However, Italy did influence the Reformed churches significantly through her Reformed pilgrims who wandered throughout Europe fleeing from the horrors of the Inquisition. In this article, we would like to give an overview of the life of one of the most illustrious Protestant emigrants, Francesco Turrettini. He should not be confused with his famous grandson, Francis Turretin, who wrote the massive systematic theological work the Institutes of Elenctic Theology.

The Reformation in Lucca

The ancestral homeland of the Turrettini family was the Tuscan city of Lucca, just a few miles from the more famous city of Pisa. In the sixteenth century, Lucca was an independent republic. It was like many of the other cities of Northern Italy, enriched by eastern trade and experiencing the culture of the Renaissance. The merchants of this town traveled throughout Europe selling silk cloth and other items that they manufactured.

It seems that it was through the travels of these Italian businessmen that the Reformation first came to Lucca. Already in the 1520s, the Lucchesi Senate banned all "Lutheran" books from the city. Consequently, the city of Lucca was already somewhat prepared for the coming of great Reformer to their city.

And a great Reformer did come to the city. His name was Peter Martyr Vermigli. He was born in 1500 and had become an Augustinian monk, eventually being promoted to Visitor of the Order. Vermigli had earlier come to Protestant convictions through his reading and contacts with, among others, the Spanish Reformer, Juan Valdez.

In 1541, Vermigli became the Prior of the monastery in San Frediano in Lucca. This not only gave him power of the monastery but also great influence in the city. Almost at once, he began the work of reforming the Church. Immediately, he began to preach through the Bible in Italian. He also founded a college in the city. The teachers of this school read like a who's who list of Reformed theologians of the second half of the sixteenth century. Immanuel Tremellius, a converted Jew who later made a new translation of the Hebrew Bible into Latin with Franciscus Junius, taught there along with Jerome Zanchius or Zanchi. The result was that the Reformation began to be established in the Republic of Lucca.
By 1542, the news of the spread of "heretical" Protestant doctrines in Lucca had reached Rome. One thing we should understand about Italy was that it had been in near constant warfare for several hundred years, one city-state vying against another for power. Something like heresy would be a plausible pretext for an invasion and new war. That's why the bishop of Lucca wrote to the Senate of Lucca in 1542 that they should work to stamp out these "heresies" He wrote, 

"(I) beg you to take steps to cure the evil while still possible; assuring that if you do not do this, and quickly, measures will be taken by others in a manner most displeasing to yourselves."

His warning was no idle one, and the senate began to act.

The Senate of Lucca did not actually pass a law against the "Lutherans" until 1545. At this time, Vermigli fled to Switzerland and then Germany, where he continued to spread the biblical teachings of the Reformation. In spite of these laws, the Reformation continued, as did the complaints against Lucca. In 1555, Giovanni Carafa became pope as Paul IV, and Michel Ghisleri became the commissar of the Inquisition. Both of these men were fanatical opponents of the Reformation. Seeing the writing on the wall, many of the Protestant families of Lucca and other cities began to emigrate.

Many of the Lucchesi families emigrated to Lyon. For several centuries, trade had passed through northern Italy to Lyon and finally to Antwerp. Consequently, the families of Lucca had many connections and even relatives in Lyon. After the emigration, the Lucchesi merchants continued to travel through Lyon and would speak with their relatives who had left Lucca. Thus, the Reformed faith continued to spread in Lucca through the travels of the Lucchesi merchants.

The Senate of Lucca did not want to ban travel to these places that were so vital to their economy, but they did feel the need to respond, if not out of Roman Catholic piety, at least out of fear of reprisal for their inactivity. They passed a decree on January 9, 1562 that may seem somewhat shocking to modern ears. They declared that all those who had emigrated were rebels of the city and forbade them to live in Italy, Spain, France and its possessions, Flanders, or the Brabant (the last two being modern Belgium and Netherlands). Furthermore, to put teeth into their decree, they offered a monetary reward and a lifting of banishment to anyone who could authenticate that they had killed one of these rebels in those places.

The Turrettini family

Having seen the background in Lucca, we turn to Francesco and his family. The Turrettini family had been prominent in Lucca since at least the early fifteenth century. They were nobility. In the Holy Roman Empire, children of the nobility could generally not take part in commerce. However, the sons of nobles in the cities of Lucca, Genoa, Venice, and Florence were given an exception by the Emperor. The Turrettini family was thus active in the silk trade of their nation. The influence of the Turrettini family can also be seen in their prominent position in the government. Francesco's father Regolo was actually gonfalonier or chief magistrate of Lucca.

Francesco himself was born on May 5, 1547. The period of his life in Lucca covers the establishment of the Reformed Church in Lucca as well as the persecutions. He was an active and able young man. By the age of 17 or 18, he was running his father's silk business to the point that Regolo did not have to give any thought to it.

We do not know when Francesco was converted to the biblical gospel. However, when Pope Gregory XIII dispatched the bishop of Rimini on a disciplinary mission to Lucca, Francesco had reason to fear that the Senate would deliver him up to the Bishop. On October 17, 1574, at the age of 27, he left Lucca with just a few possessions. Later, the bishop of Rimini sought to get him to return and gave assurances that he would be satisfied with merely occasional conformity. He refused, as he later told his sons, because it was his firm faith that "one could not obtain salvation in every religion." He was officially condemned as a rebel and traitor on February 28, 1578.
Francesco’s wanderings

The first place that Francesco went was Lyon. Very soon afterward, he went on to Geneva, having only two cases of silk in his possession. He was one of the last refugees to arrive from Italy, and he was treated with suspicion by the Italians. Turrettini soon proved himself, however. He did not have any work in the city, and so for the first time he truly gave himself to study and grew in his faith in Christ. He also learned how to make a particular type of silk as a trade.

On August 22, 1579, Francesco followed the old trade route from Lyon to Flanders and in particular, Antwerp, the center of commerce in Europe. There was a French Reformed church there, and many Italians and Frenchmen had fled there via Lyon. Francesco also traveled to this commercial center of Europe and began a business there.

At this time, the Netherlands and Belgium were all united in opposing the authority of Philip II, King of Spain. Eventually this would result in the split of the provinces into Spanish Belgium and Dutch Belgium or, as they are called today, Belgium and the Netherlands. Philip II sent Alexander Farnesse, Duke of Parma, to fight in the provinces. From 1584-1585, he laid siege to Antwerp. Francesco feared that if the city were taken, he would be handed over to be killed because of the Lucchesi decree of 1562. He fled a few days before the siege ended. For the rest of his life, he gave thanks to God that he had delivered him from this great danger.

From Antwerp, Francesco made his way to Frankfurt am Main, now the largest city in Germany and then a free city-state. The Italians who emigrated had a predilection for city-states like their own. From Frankfurt, he went on to the city of Basel in Switzerland where he lived for two years. Francis Turrettini's biographer, Eugene de Bud& describes the arrival of these Italians in Switzerland this way:

"Pursued by papal rage on the foreign soil that had offered them their first asylum, these martyrs of the faith finally arrived in Switzerland where they found a much safer refuge."

We should not think that the decree of 1562 had been forgotten because it was introduced twenty years earlier. Henry IV, King of France, rebuked the Lucchesi for that decree in 1596 and asked them to repeal it.

On February 22, 1587, Francesco formed a partnership with M. Wertmuller of Zurich for the sale of silk and settled in the city. Turrettini settled in the city of Zurich where he did not know the language. Because of the decree of 1562, Turrettini had to do business in someone else's name. In spite of these handicaps, the Lord blessed his labors, and he was able to amass a large fortune, which became the foundation for the wealth of the Turrettini family. Rarely did any merchant in that day focus on one business. Turrettini also became a banker and was later the confidential banker for the Genevan government.

In 1587, at the age of forty, Turrettini married the seventeen-year-old Camilla Burlamachi, also from a noble, emigrant Lucchesi family. Camilla had survived the dangers of the St. Bartholomew Day's massacre and arrived safely in Switzerland. During their stay in Zurich, the couple had several children, among whom was the great theologian Benedict Turrettini.

In 1592, Francesco decided to settle his family in Geneva. From that point on, he became an ardent supporter of this city. He had found a permanent home for his family. He built a house in 1620 in which his descendants still dwelt down into the nineteenth century. He gave generously to the city. In 1622, he lent a large sum to the city in order to help them finance their wars against the Duke of Savoy, who was constantly threatening to retake the city that had renounced his rule a hundred years earlier.

In 1627, Turrettini and his sons were made bourgeoisie, or citizens, of the city. This gave them the right to vote in the General Council, and Turrettini became a member of the Council of 200 and the Council of 60. These were set up to mostly give advice, and the Council of 60 elected the Senate, which actually governed the city. He very well might have been elected to the Senate, but only
native born citizens could serve on the Senate or Little Council. Turrettini did not enjoy his status as a citizen long; he died on March 13, 1628.

**Conclusion**

De Buck wrote concerning Francesco, "He found his delight in the fear of the LORD and in doing good. When he died, he left a beautiful memory behind for his children, a noble example for his descendants to follow." He was diligent in his labors and devoted to the Lord. He left to the city of Geneva a great sum of money for the help of the poor, but his greater gift was his descendants, such as Benedict and his grandson Francis, who taught theology in the city and preached to the people of the grace of God in Christ.

In the life of Francesco we see a wonderful example of someone who showed that "if anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). This does not mean that we should literally hate our family. It means that our love for Christ should outshine our love for our families as the sun does the stars. It means that when God calls us to leave them for His sake, we must do so. Francesco could have compromised and stayed. Instead, he held fast to the true faith and left.

We also observe in Francesco the promises of Christ who said,

"There is no one who has left house or parents ... for the sake of the kingdom of God who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life."

(Luke 18:29-30)

Like Abram, Francesco left his home, not knowing where he was going. But God finally led him to a place where he could not only follow the true religion, but also to a place where he prospered in this life. Like Job, he lost all his possessions, only to regain them later with interest. We are so often worried when we have to make sacrifices for the kingdom of God. We think that we will lose this or that. We need to trust in Christ who has said that he will not only give us eternal life if we follow Him, but will also take care of us in this life and bless us even with prosperity insofar as it redounds to His glory and our good. Consider the life of Francesco when you have to make the little sacrifices for the Kingdom and see how God amply rewards His servants for the sacrifices they make for Him.

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3 Ibid., 12.