

The Lovely Italian Princess  
&  
the Erudite Spanish Reformer:  
Giulia Gonzaga & Juan de Valdés  
in the Protestant Reformation

By  
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UPON personal invitation of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, the 22 years-old Giulia Gonzaga Colonna, Duchess of Trajetto and widow Countess of Fondi, moved to Naples in December 1535.<sup>1</sup> Giulia, “illustrious by birth, was still more so by her mental and personal endowments”.<sup>2</sup> “Admirable woman of . . . aristocratic and thorough beauty”, as shown in her portrait kept in the British Museum,<sup>3</sup> Giulia was wooed by Ippolito Di’ Medici, and variously celebrated by poets, painters, scholars, and noblemen. The fame of her beauty reached such international proportions that Barbarossa (Admiral of the Turkish-Ottoman fleet) almost succeeded kidnapping her, in the summer of 1534, for the harem of sultan Soliman II.<sup>4</sup> But God had a wonderful plan for her life, having predestined her for salvation before the foundation of the world.

But how could she come to saving faith in Christ and in Him alone while her religion taught her to merit salvation by works and not to acknowledge it as coming by grace alone to be received through faith alone? So how could she then

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<sup>1</sup> In 1526, Giulia Gonzaga (b.1513) married Vespaciano Colonna (b. 1485), Count of Fondi and Duke of Gaeta, who died on March 13, 1528. Cf. Philip McNair, *An Anatomy of Apostasy*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967; p. 31; and [http://www.visitaitri.it/nuova\\_pagina\\_1.htm](http://www.visitaitri.it/nuova_pagina_1.htm)

<sup>2</sup> John T. Betts “Preface” to his edition of Juan de Valdés, *Commentary upon the Gospel of St. Matthew*, London: Trubner & Co., 1882; p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles: Erasmistas y protestantes. Sectas místicas. Judaizantes y moriscos. Artes mágicas*, México: Editorial Porrúa, 1995 (reprint of the 1882 edition); p. 104.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. McNair, op. cit., p. 30.

believe what she had not heard? And who could possibly be the preacher suited to her peculiar circumstances? Although the Gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone was already being preached all over Europe, on Giulia's side of the Alps and of the social gap such message was perceived with the political taints of a German revolt against the unity of the empire<sup>5</sup> and Christendom, not to mention the 1527 sack of Rome in which some Lutherans were involved.

Years before, around 1509, twin brothers were born to the nobleman Ferrando de Valdés, Perpetual Regent of Cuenca, Spain: Juan and Alfonso.

Alfonso de Valdés eventually entered into the imperial courtly life. He was present at the coronation of Charles V and not much later became his Chief Secretary. In that capacity, Alfonso was present at Luther's trial at the Diet of Worms; but the German monk did not produce any favourable impression on the Spanish courtier, who called Luther "audacious, shameless", his books "poisonous"<sup>6</sup>, and his followers "prone to evil."<sup>7</sup> Yet, he agreed on the need for a reformation and was dissatisfied with the way in which Rome was handling Luther.<sup>8</sup> "Alfonso's name is found subscribed to Imperial letters of the years 1526 and 1527, addressed to Pope Clement VII and to the College of Cardinals, in which a General Council is most energetically demanded."<sup>9</sup> That was exactly what Luther had originally requested. Through his writings and imperial politics, Alfonso pursued a reformation programme along the lines proposed by Erasmus, of whom he was protector<sup>10</sup> and friend, and who held both Valdés brothers in very high esteem.<sup>11</sup>

The other twin brother, Juan de Valdés, spent his youth years in the courtly life and later went on to study at the *Universidad Complutense*<sup>12</sup> (most likely Humanities

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Menéndez Pelayo, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Boehmer, *Lives of the Twin Brothers Juan and Alfonso de Valdés*, London: Trubner & Co., 1882; p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Menéndez Pelayo, op. cit., pp. 58-9.

<sup>11</sup> John Stoughton, *Footprints of Italian Reformers*, London: The Religious Tract Society, 1881; p. 107.

Menéndez Pelayo interprets a paragraph by Francisco de Enzinas (an acquaintance of both brothers) as implying that it was Alfonso who inculcated into Juan the "reformist ideas" (op. cit., p. 85).

<sup>12</sup> "Complutense" means "from Alcalá de Henares". It was in this university where the *Poliglotha Complutense* was prepared.

and Canon Law).<sup>13</sup> He was well versed in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew and mastered the Spanish language.<sup>14</sup> In 1529 Juan published *Dialogue on Christian Doctrine*, which ignited against himself the hostility of the Spanish Inquisition. Providentially, his case was appointed to scholars of his *Alma Mater* who were sympathetic to him, while enjoying also the favourable intervention of other people in prominence (including the General Inquisitor), all of which finally secured his absolution.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Juan's brother, Alfonso de Valdés, had also provoked the Spanish Inquisition with his writings around the same time, but such was his political power and influence that in 1530 he got an ample charter of absolution for his whole family precisely from the very same pope whom he had attacked in his writings, Clement VII.<sup>16</sup>

By 1531 Juan had found refuge from the Spanish Inquisition in Clement's papal court with the honorary title of Chamberlain<sup>17</sup> and the honorary dignity of Imperial Secretary with some semi-official role as Imperial agent.<sup>18</sup> At Clement's court he enjoyed the confidence of Pietro Carnesecchi, the pope's Secretary and later Protonotary of the Apostolic See –a man so influential that it was believed “that he... wielded the pontifical power.”<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Alfonso was travelling with the Emperor through Germany and having meetings with Melanchthon at Augsburg. “The intercourse between the two [Alfonso and Melanchthon] was a very friendly one, and with the sovereign, Valdés successfully set off the conciliatory and reasonable tone of the Protestants, and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 84. Menéndez Pelayo reports that many are the authors that refer to Juan de Valdés as “*jurisconsulto*” (jurist).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 84-85. In fact, his best-known work (still in print and widely read and studied) is his *Diálogo de la lengua* (ca. 1533-36), considered one of the three foundational documents of the modern Spanish language.

<sup>15</sup> José C. Nieto argues that part of Valdés's defense was his age, he was a “minor” (under the age of 21 years old).

<sup>16</sup> Edward Boehmer, *Lives of the Twin Brothers Juan and Alfonso de Valdés*, London: Trubner & Co., 1882; p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> John T. Betts, in his “Introduction” to Boehmer's *Lives* explains that the post was “...that of ‘Cameriere d'onore, di spada e cappa’, meaning a chamberlain of honor, a secular, a layman, a post of honour involving no regular duties . . . they do not present themselves at the palace except when they choose to do so, and that it is usual for the Popes to send the Cardinal's hat by them to newly-appointed Cardinals” (op. cit., p. iv).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>19</sup> John T. Betts in the “Introduction” to Boehmer, *Lives*..., op. cit., p. vi (citing Riguccio Galluzzi, *Storia del Granducato di Toscana Firenze*, 1822).

smoothed the way for a public reading of [the *Augsburg Confession*] in the presence of the Emperor . . . It was with pleasure that he saw the Emperor . . . constrained to yield great liberty to the evangelical movement.”<sup>20</sup> Alfonso died in October of 1532, and it was so reported to Henry VIII by his then ambassador in Vienna, Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the English king about Valdés in very complimentary terms.<sup>21</sup>

By 1535, after the death of Clement VII, Juan de Valdés became imperial agent and moved to Naples, which would become his home place for the rest of his life and his missionary field. Various described by his contemporaries as “Gentleman of cape and sword,” “noble and wealthy knight,” “prudent and learned man,” of “courtly bearing”<sup>22</sup> and “patient spirit,”<sup>23</sup> “of handsome looks, very sweet manners and of smooth and attractive speech,”<sup>24</sup> Valdés enjoyed the friendship of “the most distinguished members of the aristocracy of Italy of their period.”<sup>25</sup> He used to gather them at his country house on the *Riviera di Chiaia*<sup>26</sup>--“one of the most beautiful places on earth”.<sup>27</sup> “Here Valdés received on the Sunday a select number of his most intimate friends; and they passed the day together in this manner: after breakfasting and enjoying themselves amidst the glories of the surrounding scenery, they returned to the house, when he read some selected portion of Scripture, and commented upon it, or some ‘Divine consideration’ which had occupied his thoughts during the week—some subject on which he conceived that his mind had obtained a clearer illumination of heavenly truth”<sup>28</sup>. His circle included scholars, *literati*, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, noblemen, and “the most

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<sup>20</sup> Boehmer, op. cit., p. 16-17. Menéndez Pelayo reports, nevertheless, that Alfonso found some of the propositions of the confession to be “bitter and intolerable” (op. cit., p. 70).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 17, and Menéndez Pelayo, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Stoughton, op. cit., p. 110; and Menéndez Pelayo, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>23</sup> Stoughton, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Menendez Pelayo, op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> John T. Betts, “Preface” to Juan de Valdés, *Commentary upon the Gospel of St. Matthew*, London: Trubner & Co., 1882; p. viii.

<sup>26</sup> “On the Chiaja, not far from the rock-cut road from Naples to Pozzuoli, where tropical vegetation mingles with that of higher latitudes, and where Virgil’s tomb arrests the traveller’s attention. . . Juan de Valdés had a country house, not crowded into a long line of palaces and villas, but standing by itself, ‘set in vedure’, with an open view of the glorious bay, and refreshed at eventide by a cooling breeze” (Stoughton, op. cit., p. 109).

<sup>27</sup> John T. Betts, “Preface” to Juan de Valdés, *Commentary upon the Gospel of St. Matthew*, London: Trubner & Co., 1882; p. viii.

<sup>28</sup> “Life and Writings of Juan de Valdés”, by B. J. Wiffen, prefixed to the *CX Considerations*, translated by John T. Betts, p. 138. Cited in Stoughton. op. cit., p. 109.

noble and discrete women of Naples,"<sup>29</sup> such as the poetess Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547), friend of Baltasare Castiglione (author of *Il Cortigiano*) and Michelangelo's Platonic love, and the young noble Giulia Gonzaga Colonna.<sup>30</sup> It would be Giulia toward whom Juan's mind would be "most forcibly brought into exercise. Her noble faculties, her pursuit of the highest virtue, and the loveliness of her mind and person alike engaged his regard".<sup>31</sup>

Juan de Valdés was probably first recommended to Giulia as legal advisor on a litigation brought about by the death of her husband.<sup>32</sup> However, as confidence ripened between the two during the Lent season of 1536, it became apparent that Giulia's core needs were not legal but spiritual, and that her legal advisor's chief gifts were in biblical exposition and as well as in pastoral theology. One day, Giulia and Juan attended one of the Lenten sermons by Bernardino Ochino in company with the Emperor, his court, and the whole of Neapolitan society. The whole audience, including the Emperor and Giulia, was deeply moved, and for Valdés the experience was apparently "akin to... a religious conversion."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Menéndez Pelayo, op. cit., p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> The following lines by Jacob Burckhardt provide a good picture of Valdés's social circle in Italy: "It would be juster to wonder at the secure foundations of a society which, notwithstanding these tales, still observed the rules of order and decency, and which knew how to vary such pastimes with serious and solid discussion. The need of noble forms of social intercourse was felt to be stronger than all others. To convince ourselves of it, we are not obliged to take as our standard the idealized society which Castiglione depicts as discussing the loftiest sentiments and aims of human life at the court of Guidobaldo of Urbino, and Pietro Bembo at the castle of Asolo. The society described by Bandello, with all the frivolities which may be laid to its charge, enables us to form the best notion of the easy and polished dignity, of the urbane kindness, of the intellectual freedom, of the wit and the graceful dilettantism, which distinguished these circles. A significant proof of the value of such circles lies in the fact that the women who were the centers of them could become famous and illustrious without in any way compromising their reputation. Among the patronesses of Bandello, for example, Isabella Gonzaga (born an Este) was talked of unfavorably not through any fault of her own, but on account of the too-free-lived young ladies who filled her court. Giulia Gonzaga Colonna, Ippolita Sforza married to a Bentivoglio, Bianca Rangona, Cecilia Gallerana, Camilla Scarampa, and others, were either altogether irreproachable, or their social fame threw into the shade whatever they may have done amiss. The most famous woman of Italy, Vittoria Colonna (b. 1490, d. 1547), the friend of Castiglioni and Michelangelo, enjoyed the reputation of a saint. It is hard to give such a picture of the unconstrained intercourse of these circles in the city, at the baths, or in the country, as will furnish literal proof of the superiority of Italy in this respect over the rest of Europe." (*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Seattle, WA: The World Wide School, Part V, Ch. IV, "Social Etiquette"). On-line edition: <http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/hst/european/TheCivilizationoftheRenaissanceinItaly/chap36.html>

<sup>31</sup> Stoughton, op. cit., p. 119.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. McNair, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Although “Valdés was undoubtedly the superior intelligence, and was further advanced in ‘Paulinism’”<sup>34</sup> and the doctrine of justification by faith, Ochino’s sermon was somehow used by the Holy Spirit to transform that knowledge into passionate action, displaying the fullness of his theological abilities and devoting to it more and more of his interest and time. As a result, he first wrote *Alfabeto christiano* in response to Giulia’s spiritual thirst. The gatherings with his influential and aristocratic friends became opportunities for Biblical exposition, theological discussion and, most of all, for the preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Valdés promoted the reading of works by John Calvin, Martin Luther, Martin Bucer, and Ulrich Zwingli, among such people as Carnesecchi, Ochino, Benedetto, and Pietro Martire Vermigli. It was through Valdés that Vermigli was first nurtured in the gospel to become later one of the chief theologians of the Reformation.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Valdés had a direct influence upon the two most influential pulpits in Naples, the one’s held by Vermigli and Ochino. Valdés’s writings reached as far as the influential cardinal Gasparo Contarini who, in striving for a reformation of the western Church from within and from the top, would later recommend Vermigli to be appointed for reformation commissions on two occasions.<sup>36</sup>

Notwithstanding the above, the first and special object of the theological works of this “*Dottore e Pastore* of noble and illustrious persons”<sup>37</sup> was the spiritual growth of his dearest friend Giulia –“the one who drank deepest of his instructions”.<sup>38</sup> It was for Giulia that Juan translated the Scriptures into Spanish and for whom he wrote his Bible commentaries (also in Spanish). It was to Giulia that Juan dedicated his translation and *Commentary to the Epistles of Saint Paul*, his translation and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>35</sup> Vermigli became professor of Divinities at the University of Oxford during the reign of the Reformed “Boy King” Edward VI of England.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Nieto, op. cit., p. 147 (quoting Edmondo Cione, “Epistola del primo Editore” to Juan de Valdés, *Le cento e dieci divine considerazioni*, Milano: Fratelli Bocca, Editori, 1944; p. 527).

<sup>38</sup> Stoughton, op. cit., p. 119.

*Commentary to the Psalms*, and his translation and *Commentary to the Gospel According to Matthew*.<sup>39</sup>

“Possibly no man ever lived that did more by word and by writings to teach another spiritual truth, than did Valdés for Julia.”<sup>40</sup>

Valdés died peacefully in 1541, right before the beginning of the Italian Inquisition’s persecution in Naples and six years before the Council of Trent’s *Decretum iustificatione* against the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone. In spite of his Reformed stand, Valdés never separated formally from the Roman Church, as he was never forced to make that choice. More than attacking Rome, he “confined himself to the inculcation of what he believed to be Divine truth.”<sup>41</sup> From the peculiar vantage point of his time (before the Council of Trent) and of his influential position, the hope for a Reformation from within and from the top was not ungrounded. Juan de Valdés’s life, influence and reformist ministry among the aristocracy and high clergy in Italy, stand indeed as an incontestable witness to the fact that every possibility for a reformation without separation was exhausted, and that the Vatican, having turned its back deliberately and explicitly against the apostolic faith, cannot possibly be the “one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.”

In the meantime, Valdés’s ministry succeeded in neutralizing the socio-political elements that were obstacles for many in the aristocracy and south of the Alps to embrace the evangelical doctrines of the gospel of grace. Thousands of people who otherwise would have never heard the gospel of justification by faith alone came to saving faith in Christ, including the princess whom God had predestined for salvation and preserved from the hands of the Sultan, and who is now enjoying the presence of Christ, her Saviour, and life everlasting in God’s glory. Amen.

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<sup>39</sup> “Juan de Valdés has the merit of having translated for the first time into our language [Spanish] any part of the *New Testament*” (Menéndez Pelayo, op. cit., p. 105). Menéndez Pelayo, an ultra-conservative Roman-Catholic, recognizes Valdés’s translation as “faithful and accurate” (Ibid., p. 106).

<sup>40</sup> Betts, “Introduction”, op. cit., p. vii.

<sup>41</sup> Stoughton, op. cit.