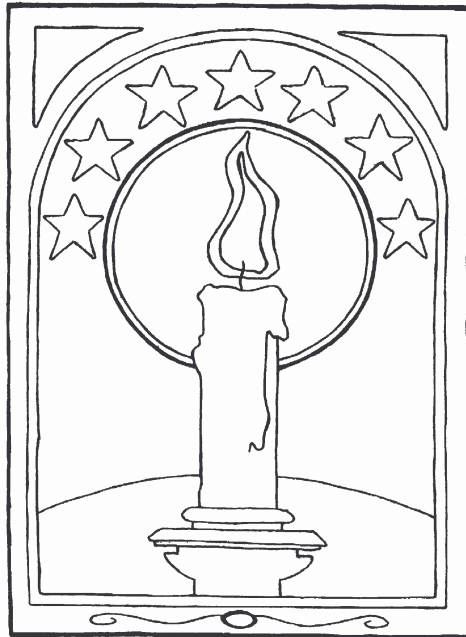


UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

WALDENSIAN FELLOWSHIP



Newsletter No. 62

November 2006

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Dear Friends,

In this edition we bring you more of the Tuscany trip, a report from Synod in Torre Pellice, and news of recent films and books. Lucetta Geymonat, who visited England again in October, has also written on what the Fellowship means to her, Anthony Earl writes about the Liceo and Pauline and Donald Hood have fresh news from Rieti. We also have details of the reunion at Hinsley Hall after Easter.

We welcome comment and articles from our readers, both British and Italian, in either language, for through sharing we grow in understanding of each other.

Vi auguriamo pace e felicità a Natale e preghiamo che Dio vi benedica nell' anno a venire.

Peace and happiness at Christmas and God's blessing in the New Year.

Kate Grand

The Social Work of the Waldensian Church in Florence

In Florence we were privileged to hear of and see some of the social activities of the Waldensian Church.

We stayed in their guest house, named the Gould after Emily, a philanthropic American woman, which funds work with children and the elderly in Florence and elsewhere in Italy. Housed in a huge 17th century palazzo, this is home to eight boys and eight girls who are also educated there. They are referred by social services from dysfunctional or abusive families and several are Albanian refugees. Boys and girls live separately in two 'houses' with house parents, but siblings meet in their free time, e.g. playing football in the large and pleasant grounds. (We watched the children playing and enjoyed their shouts. They always sounded happy and we never heard any arguments or disagreements.) On average children return to their own families after about four years but some remain until they are eighteen, when they may move into a communal flat and prepare for independent living. Not all go on to manual work or hotel and catering jobs: Paolo Rossi, who spoke to

us, said they had had a future lawyer, a pilot and even an African head of state. The Gould also hosts family support meetings, where parents have access to their children only under supervision, and this can be done here in safety for the child.

Two day-centres cater for eighteen children each, who attend after school for lunch and help with their schoolwork. The Gould works closely with parents and social workers, offers training courses for youth leaders and much more

Similarly, across Florence, the Istituto Ferretti helps children from age three upwards, referred by the council, who go in the afternoon after their normal schooling ends, for special, almost one to one teaching to improve their school grades. Ferretti has excellent facilities including books, toys and puzzles for all ages, a very well-ordered kitchen where nutritious meals are prepared and a marvellous TV and computer room for the older children. Angela also showed us the outside play area, some of which was under cover – in the heat we were glad to take advantage of it. On both sites partial funding comes from the local authority, and we sensed a little frustration that they could do more, if only the local council were more generous.

Some of our group visited il Gignoro, the old people's home run by the Waldensians, and were greatly impressed. One of the group wanted to put his name down there and then!

We also visited an interdenominational Protestant Social Centre where mentally handicapped adults and others with mental problems were holding a display and sale of crafts they had made, and saw some fantastic origami, needlework and woodwork, but sadly most of us were unable to communicate with the people there. They did ask if German was any use.

In Lucca, by the way, on finding an Information Centre by the city walls, we decided to ask for directions to the Waldensian church, where we had had tea on my first Waldensian holiday en route to Livorno. We foxed them. We were told there was no Waldensian Church in Lucca, the nearest was at Barga, and the official tried

unsuccessfully to ring the Barga church. Then Yvonne remembered she had her directory with her and the day was saved. We were directed to the street and found it without difficulty by the notice board outside.

Kathleen Brown

The Foundling Wheel

Those who visited the Spedale degli Innocenti in Florence and saw where the foundling wheel used to be, on which abandoned infants were left to be taken in by the nuns, may be interested to know there are now 8 such wheels in use in Italy. This year 17 babies have been abandoned in hospitals and dustbins. It is estimated ten times that number are never found. Many are left by illegal immigrants afraid for their child. The latest wheel has just been installed at a Rome hospital in the hope the children may be saved.

Kate Grand

Waldensian Synod: August 18th – 25th 2006

As usual, this year's European Session of the Waldensian Church Synod provided many opportunities for "catching up" on what is happening, not only in Italy, but throughout Europe – and beyond! As is the case every year, there were guests from France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK; but it was the opportunity to meet representatives of the Reformed Churches in Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania which was of particular benefit this year. Between them, these guests brought me up to date both with news from the Protestant churches in their own countries and with news from Hungary, the Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Baltic States.

But the main focus is on the situation in Italy, of course. The new Bishop of Rome is still setting out his stall – though the Waldensians are not too enthusiastic about what they have seen so far! – and the political situation was far from clear, following the recent defeat of Berlusconi. The Catholic Church continues to play a major role in Italian life, both socially and politically, and the Protestant minority often finds its voice drowned out. Over many generations the Waldensians have forged a strong relationship with

the Italian Jewish community and they work together on the ethical implications of such issues as scientific medical research, human rights and the present bone of contention – the teaching of religious education in schools. At present, this involves the local Catholic bishops appointing RE teachers (often without the necessary teaching qualifications) who teach the Catholic catechism – at public expense. In an increasingly secular, multi-cultural and multi-racial Italy, this situation is unsustainable, and in some areas of Italy 50% of pupils are “opting out” of RE. An attempt by the previous government to have marks for RE included in the final “Baccalaureate” (thus putting those who “opt out” at a great disadvantage) was defeated last year, but the Catholic Church continues to press for its exclusive position to be maintained by the State.

One of the major theological items in Synod this year was as report from the Joint Commission on Dialogue between the Waldensian Church and the Pentecostal Churches in Italy. This year’s report had the title “The Understanding of the Scriptures” and was very positive about the amount of common ground found between the two sides. Obviously there are differences in approach, but at a theological level the report emphasised the common understanding that the authority of the Scriptures as “the Word of God” has to be seen within the context of the work of the Holy Spirit, both in the formation of the Scriptures and in their interpretation by our own generation. This proved to be Paolo Ricca’s final presentation to Synod before retirement, and he was very pleased to be bowing out on such a positive note.

A major review of “in service training” for ministers and the courses offered by the Waldensian Faculty excited discussion. A new Church History Professor was also appointed by Synod after lengthy (!!!) presentations by five candidates.

Thursday evenings are kept aside for “recuperation of business” – and this year we were fortunate to finish by 11 p.m. – and that was mostly because of a stalemate regarding Israel and Lebanon which led to debate being abandoned. I have known Thursday evenings

move into Friday mornings, and one year closure came at 12.40 a.m.!

The voting for the various new executives and committees on Friday went smoothly, with the Tavola being returned unchanged. Maria Bonafede is highly regarded for her work so far and has the total backing of the Synod. Altogether, I found Synod in relaxed mood, and generally in good heart. The diminishing membership roles are causing some concern – but we know all too well what that means!

It is always a pleasure to attend Synod and to be welcomed back into the Waldensian Fold. “When are you coming back?” is asked by some, year after year. “Every year,” I say. And I hope that will be the case for many years to come.

John S. Bremner

Teaching in the Liceo October 2006

Classroom teaching in the Liceo gives me a thrill: all the nice feelings of working with cheerful responsive and occasionally pert young people, the sheer pleasure of being *thanked* at the end of a lesson, and the satisfaction of observing the tiny steps of real progress; all that without the bother of school paperwork or the grind of correcting exercises and essays. In a week’s work I ask for and receive an honest timetable of sixteen lessons of somewhat less than an hour each, and to that you must add preparation time of at least an hour per session: so choosing activities, finding realien, making photocopies, getting your patter right. Registration, discipline, youthful vagaries -- other experts see to all that!

When British people, think about the Liceo Valdese, it is vital to abandon contextual thoughts and prejudices we may have about the dialogue between private and public secondary education. The Liceo is NOT a “public school.” In common with Catholic schools throughout Italy, it charges fees, but a useful comparison could be made with the old Direct Grant system or even with voluntary aided schemes.

The total fee is equivalent to about £2300 per annum, abated considerably by means testing parental income, and by a major grant from the Regione di Piemonte. There are also scholarships, some of them full fee, from local authorities such as the Torre Pellice. The school benefits too from the generosity of folk of the German diaspora, and from other well-wishers.

What makes the Liceo special is the ambience of caring and support pervading all plans for the pupils' education and activities. Staff might protest that all that is simply normal attention to the human factor (for which Italians are pre-eminent); I like to think that it is the deep-set legacy of a Protestant foundation. It deserves utter respect for its stand-point on faith. The whole school is an expression of faith, but not of proselytism or even of missionary ambitions. Unlike state schools, there is no official teaching of religion provided by a catechist or nominee of the diocese. Pupils are encouraged to think for themselves without being subject to propaganda (which in some state schools can be over heavy). What the curriculum provides is a course in the History of Religion, an objective account without persuasive intent. The importance of this feature has to be understood against the background of a history of persecution and tyranny, some traces of which remain in Italian society. Basically, the message is that if you want freedom, it does not come free, and you have to pay for it.

The fee calculation also applies to the many school trips to other European destinations, twice to Britain, or once to Germany and once to France, in each year. The Headmaster sets store on these essential parts of his curriculum, and positive means testing applies to the charge made to parents. He views travel as a process of learning to compare, widen horizons (especially beyond the Piemontese valleys!), and understanding how other folk live and feel. The Italian national curriculum, which is defined by the 18+ *maturità*, places similar weight on study abroad, and a stay in another European country, for two weeks, is, if accomplished successfully in the judgment of the host institution, rewarded by up to 5% of the total. (Another 5% goes to a minithesis rather like that set by the International Baccalaureate).

All this means that for our pupils in Quinto Anno (=Upper Sixth), two weeks in a foreign school are essential. British schools used most recently are: Eltham College (taking two for the classroom, two for the library); St Columba's College Dunfermline; and the Mount School York. More schools are urgently needed, to widen the opportunity and spare the loyal hosts too regular a burden.

CAN YOU, AS MEMBERS OF THE WALDENSIAN FELLOWSHIP, HELP?

We are looking for good sixth forms, where our Waldensian pupils, usually as a pair, can receive the hospitality of the classroom (preferably but not indispensably without further charge) and join in a normal timetable for a period of two weeks, usually in the summer term -- so that means joining the Lower Sixth at a quiet non-examination moment. Naturally family hospitality has to be found in the same or a separate household, and for that the Liceo is ready to pay a reasonable charge for bed and board over 14 days. Nice if it can be a family connected with the British school, but manageable if not.

The set-up requires a Tutor to oversee their lives and provide the usual support in the host school, maybe the same person who has to hunt out host-families, and the hidden guarantee is the Tutor will have to provide a concluding certificate of airworthiness such that the extra marks can be claimed.

Ring me to know more (01784 254019); if you know of a British school where international spirit is not crushed dead by our own examination system, contact them, tell me, write to the Headmaster of the Liceo, Dr Elio Canale, via Beckwith, Torre Pellice 10060 (TO). If they need further assurance, I can speak as having on-the-ground knowledge, and if the school is not too far, I will myself make a personal visit.

The Fellowship's help here may be crucial.

Anthony Earl

More News from Rieti

Readers will be pleased to hear that Servizio Cristiano (SC) is alive and well. Pauline and I visited Rieti at the beginning of November

to meet the present Director, Demetrio Canale, an energetic 34 year old bachelor, son of the Principal of the Liceo in Torre Pellice. He was just celebrating his first year in office with a fund-raising visit to one of the supportive church groups in Germany, another to a partner school in Sweden and a training course in Tuscany for the Waldensian diaconate.

We happened to be in Riesen on All Souls Day (November 2nd) when many people visit their family's graves. Outside the Town Hall the Riesen band of 30 players led off in slow and solemn style to lead a procession of townsfolk to the cemetery. They were seen off on the Town Hall steps by one of 3 Commissioners, appointed by the provincial authority to assume the reins of local government after 43 people, including the Chairman of the Council, had been remanded in custody awaiting corruption trial. It was encouraging to see Demetrio recognised by many of the locals.

With the recent appointment of Armando Casarella as pastor of the Riesen Waldensian Church, Demetrio's responsibilities are very much focussed on S.C. and its mission to bring spiritual health and well-being to the community of the town. When Tullio Vinay first came it had a population of 16,000, now reduced to little more than 11,000. The closure of the sulphur mine and more recently of a promising clothing factory mean that the main employment for men is in agri-culture for which they travel in all directions out of town each morning. Educational standards are low and there is little to engage young people. Against this background SC strives to provide especially high quality education to the 59 3-5 year olds in the kindergarten and the 90 6-11 year olds in the elementary school. There are 7 teachers from the locality assisted by volunteers. Mid-day meals are provided and a school bus goes the rounds each morning collecting some of the children. Alas, after 18 years the bus is feeling its age and is not predicted to pass its next M.O.T..

In the town the Family Health Centre serves the local population providing ante- and post-natal classes, sex education and assistance with women's social problems in what has been a somewhat backward society. In addition recent activity has expanded into social work among teenagers 'estranged' from

school. This work has the support of the municipality in providing some of the professional staff.

In much of its work SC is dependent on the addition of volunteers, usually recent school leavers or conscientious objectors from military service, who stay for about a year. At present the group comprises 7 Germans, 1 Hungarian and an older Romanian, Zoran. During our visit the girls were evident in the school, the kitchen and in housekeeping, and the men on the estate. The major task now was the olive harvest with over 1,000 trees. We helped with picking, mostly by beating the trees with sticks or pneumatic shakers and gathering the olives into boxes for the press. This is a co-operative venture just outside the town where small farmers queue up in their carts to feed their harvest into the press, whereby the olives are cleaned and crushed, extracting water and finally seeing a rich pale green flow of oil into waiting vessels. The SC oil, derived from over a dozen varieties, is highly regarded. A good deal is sold through their contact with German churches. Last year's total yield was 6,000 litres but this year's will be less as a result of weather conditions.

Next to the olive plantation is SC's almond orchard which this summer produced 1,500 kg – to help to satisfy the Sicilian passion for marzipan.

For the residents and especially the school, the vegetable garden is all-important. A huge harvest of tomatoes was processed in the summer, providing a year's supply of passata for school dinners almost every day. In nearby plots lettuce, artichokes, aubergines, spinach, herbs and other vegetables are tended by the volunteers under the supervision of a head gardener. The melon harvest was already over.

Out of hours attractions for the volunteers are limited in Riesi, though they had discovered a dancing class in the town, and having recently mastered the cha-cha-cha, were looking forward to the challenge of jive! Twice a week they take themselves swimming to the baths in Licata.

May we therefore make a plea to British youngsters to consider work in SC in a gap year – an opportunity for worthwhile service in a different country with new friends? Board and lodging are provided together with pocket money, and initially I can help with introductions. On a lighter side there are now two reasonable eateries in Rieti and the re-sited Coniglio bar has 26 varieties of the best ice cream we have tasted this year.

Links with the UK and with the URC are much valued by Demetrio and any means of strengthening these will be welcome. At present the Notizie is circulated to 130 addresses in the UK, including many in Northern Ireland; 23 copies go to members of our Fellowship

Pauline and Donald Hood

What the Waldensian Fellowship means to me

My link with the URCWF is above all a link of friendship. It started in 1995, when I was involved in the Committee of the Collegio Valdese of Torre Pellice and I wrote to Dr. Cowhig to ask if the Fellowship would support a student with a grant. She answered very kindly and asked me to attend as speaker the annual meeting, which was to take place at Northern Theological College in Manchester, and talk about the Collegio Valdese and the work being done there. On that occasion I made most of the friends with whom I have kept in touch all these years and through these first personal contacts I became aware of what the fellowship was and what its aims were. What its members shared was, and still is, the knowledge and love of the Waldensian Church, but, above all, the faith in Jesus Christ they hold in common with it and the Protestant approach to the reading of His Word.

This came back to my mind when I read how Rev. Achille Deodato described Dr. Ruth Cowhig's first visit to the Valleys in his memoirs *le Cose che stanno dietro*¹: 'Mrs. Ruth Cowhig, member of the URC Committee in charge of the relationships with Evangelical churches overseas, regretted that these relationships were established only among the people occupying the top positions, and left aside the

¹ A. Deodato, *le Cose che stanno dietro*, Alzani Editore Pinerolo 2003
My trans.

members of these churches, and decided to visit the Waldensian Valleys and also the churches in Turin and Milan... But Mrs. Cowhig did not confine herself to visiting the historical sites and our Institutes, she looked for personal contacts with people living and working in the places she was visiting. She asked to attend the meetings of the church councils, to meet members of the women's fellowships and to participate at church assemblies and at the District assembly which was being held in that period. In this way she met many people.'¹

Mr. and Mrs. Cowhig's regular visits continued and the personal contacts were maintained, also through the visits of other members of the Fellowship. The result was a regular alternation of group visits to and from the Valleys and to and from Waldensian congregations in other parts of Italy.

But there is another very interesting aspect I would like to emphasise, that is the network of relationships that has gradually been built thanks to these personal contacts and which has contributed to arouse or increase mutual interest on both the English and the Italian side and, I believe, has brought new members to the Fellowship. I will give some examples.

Mrs. Cowhig and Miss Yvonne Jones, the Secretary of the fellowship, joined the Conference which the following independent schools: Eltham College, Caterham School, Silcoates, Taunton, Walthamstow Hall, Wentworth Milton Mount, which have foundations in the URC, held in Torre Pellice in October 2002, the Collegio Valdese being an associate member of the six schools. And again in 2004 more than one member of the Fellowship took part in the visit to the Waldensian Valleys organised by the Chapels Society. A more recent opportunity to meet for some members of the Fellowship was the trip to Germany 'In the Steps of Martin Luther' organised and led by Mr. Anthony Earl in May 2006. In 2005 the Collegio Choir visited York and Leeds and was able to give two concerts there which would not have been possible without the help of Fellowship members. The 43 student members of the Choir, their 2 conductors and the teachers accompanying them had a very concrete example of the work of the Fellowship.

From personal contacts to group contacts, this, I think, is how the fellowship was built and developed. The wealth of friendship, experience and knowledge gradually formed has been kept, increased and spread, strengthening the mutual links between the Fellowship and the Waldensian Church.

I am firmly convinced that these links will be kept, even though, in time, they might take on new forms of expression. Everyone caring for the Fellowship, I think, can exploit their imagination and creativity to work out what these new forms might be and when they might best be adopted.

Lucetta Geymonat

Miscellany

In the last week or so two books have caught my eye:

‘Homer’s Simpson’ by John Malcolm is a detective story that begins with the hero, Tim Simpson, going out to Turin to meet up with an older banking colleague who is considered gaga for hoping to work with the Waldensians, “an obscure Protestant sect”, in developing tourism in the valleys! It needed a better proof reader for the Italian and some of the historical detail was not quite right, but it was intriguing to find anything about Waldensians there at all.

‘The Birth of Venus’ by Sarah Dunant is set in Florence following the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent and paints a very vivid picture of the years when Savonarola was in power. Art, philosophy, love, the place of women, political machinations, squalor and brutality are all there. It is a real page turner and has drawn praise from many quarters, including Simon Schama and Antonia Fraser. For me Florence, especially San Marco, will never seem the same again.

Viva Zapatero!

Manchester has just held its Italian Film Festival and I managed to see quite a few of them. One of the most disturbing, ‘chilling’ a friend of mine described it, was ‘Viva Zapatero’, directed by Sabina Guzzanti, a comedian whose satirical TV show, *Raiot* (a play on RAI the Italian state TV company and riot) was pulled after the first

programme, despite excellent audience ratings. She herself was taken to court by Berlusconi, accused of parading filth, vilification and who knows what in the name of satire, and she won, but her show was not reinstated. So she turned to film.

This is a documentary. It opens with a sketch featuring Guzzanti made up as Berlusconi and Rory Bremner as Tony Blair. They then talk about their shows as they both gradually peel off their masks. For us it is unthinkable that Rory Bremner should be censored. Guzzanti interviews people behind the French equivalent of Spitting Image, which pillories Chirac mercilessly. She calls to her cause Dario Fo and other Italian comedians and journalists who have lost their jobs for telling the truth. She interviews Italian politicians of the left as well as the right, challenging them to justify their actions in failing to prevent Berlusconi from undermining democracy. They are all condemned by their own mouths, voicing empty platitudes, arrant nonsense or floundering for words, visibly embarrassed and sweating before the camera. Why, she wants to know, is Italy 53rd in the world in one league table and 77th in another on free speech and democracy?

Adalgisa Serio, the Italian lecturer who introduced the film, was amazed it had drawn a full house in Manchester. She was keen to align herself with the crowds of her fellow countrymen seen, in the film, out on the streets, demanding the return of 'Raiot' and moves to rectify Italy's standing in these areas.

And why the title? Because Spain's prime minister on taking power had immediately brought in a law to ensure free speech and democracy.

II Caimano

The latest Nanni Moretti film to be shown in Britain is part comedy, part domestic drama and ends on a very black note. The eponymous cayman is a barely disguised Berlusconi.

Kate Grand

BIENNIAL GATHERING at HINSLEY HALL, April 11th-13th 2007

Our Biennial Gathering is fast approaching with our usual setting of Hinsley Hall. We have been very fortunate that Revd. Dr. Daniele Pevarello, latterly of Torre Pellice, has accepted the invitation to be our guest on this occasion. He has just begun a 3-year research programme at Westminster College, Cambridge and will speak to us about the Waldensian Church, particularly drawing on its historic development: a topic, I am certain we shall find both interesting and stimulating.

A Booking Form is enclosed with this Newsletter which provides further details.

I do hope a large number of us will be able to meet up on this occasion as our Biennial Gathering promises to be most informative and enjoyable.

Yvonne Jones

Jack and Joyce Thompson

Jack Thompson died on 28th August this year. Over the past few years he had struggled with ill health, particularly since the death of his wife, Joyce, in December 2004. Both Jack and Joyce were keen supporters of the URC Waldensian Fellowship: they took part in many trips to Italy, attended reunions and welcomed guests into their home. They loved life, showed generosity, kindness and Jack especially had a great sense of humour. We have already missed their presence among us.

Membership subscriptions

The subscription rate is £5 for one year or £10 for three years. A note is enclosed for those members whose subscriptions have expired. The membership records are held by the Treasurer, George Morton, who should be informed of any change of address.

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