

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Berne Disputation (1528)

Proudly built on a rocky peninsula overlooking for a little way the blue waters of the Aar, Berne still retains, facing the Alps, the hallmark of a patrician city. If several of its hotels go back to the 18th century, its cathedral, the Minster, dates from the 15th century, and several of its beautiful fountains from the 16th. Its situation and the architecture of its wealthy streets still reflect its now dead aspirations to be a sovereign and conquering state. Like Zürich, it possesses a past full of dramatic crises of various kinds, where sordid intrigue mingles with heroic strife. Better than the city of the Limmat, which has been transformed by industrialization, Berne preserves its ancient picturesque character.

The town, whose coat-of-arms contains a threatening bear, had in 1526 resisted the pressures of catholic Switzerland, which desired to exclude from the Helvetic confederation those who sympathized with Zwingli. He was able to count on some faithful friends on the banks of the Aar—in particular, on Berchtold Haller and Nicolas de Watteville, who in fact were working in his favour. The arrogance of Lucerne, which presumed to exercise a censorship in matters of religious faith, only contributed to the success of their efforts. On January 4, 1527, Zwingli wrote prophetically: “The wind has dropped and milder airs [*mitiores zephyri*] are beginning to blow.” On May 6, the elections brought to the leadership of the state a team of magistrates favourable to the innovators. “Our greatest joy!” exclaimed Haller in a letter of May 26.

However, this political success was succeeded by a period of uncertainty and divisions. Supporters and opponents confronted each other daily. Six corporations gave up the masses which they had been accustomed to have said. Some priests were granted permission to get married. Others, who had been exiled, returned. Several preachers thundered denunciations of the mass from the pulpit. On September 4, the Canon of Berne told his friend of the measures taken by a numerous group of priests who were petitioning the Council for authority to go ahead and change the form of divine service. On November 15 the magistrates, following the example of what had been done at Zürich, decided to convene an assembly for public discussion of the issue. The four bishops of Constance, Basle, Lausanne, and Sion were to be invited, as were also several prelates who had taken part in the Baden disputations. The Bernese desired the participation of Zwingli, who was to be accompanied by Pellican, Leo Jud, or Myconius: "Many are calling for you", emphasized Haller in a letter of November 19. "We have got the wolf by the ears, but we haven't yet managed to tame him."

For the reformer who had been solemnly condemned at Baden, the hour of revenge was about to strike. The magistrates, delighted by this unexpected stroke of good fortune, no longer tried to hold him back; quite the contrary. The delegates of friendly cities, such as Schaffhausen, St. Gall, and Constance, gathered at Zürich, where they were given a splendid reception. On January 2, 1528, a hundred horsemen, surrounding Zwingli in his hour of triumph, took the road westwards. The Council had allotted to them a contingent of three hundred armed men, who escorted them as far as the Bernese frontier. The itinerary passed through the region of Bremgarten, which was subject in part to the jurisdiction of catholic cantons. The man who only yesterday had been treated like the plague found himself advanced to become an object of sympathy and admiration as well as of hatred. In the trim countryside villages, the peasants opened astonished eyes, thinking: "Here he comes, the accursed

fellow, the heretic!” The journey was completed without incident. When Berne was reached on January 4, Ulrich refused the proffered hospitality of noble houses, and, accompanied by the Burgomaster, Diethelm Roüst, went to the home of his kinsman, Leonard Tresp, who was administrator of the hospital and a member of the Great Council.

The disputation of Berne forms a pendant to that of Baden. The catholic party was hardly represented, so to speak. Eight cantons, including that of Glarus, sulked at the thought of this new contest. Like Zwingli a year and a half previously, the heads of dioceses disdained to be present. Sebastian de Montfalcon alone consented to leave Lausanne for a few hours. If we are to believe his letter of apology, a fall from his horse obliged him to go back, however. He deputed four theologians to represent him, but, not knowing German, they were unable to intervene in the debates. His letter expressing regret betrays his suspicions. He suggested that, taking the Bible as one's basis, one would get only “the husks of Scripture and the inkpots of the theologians”. With St. Paul, he proclaimed that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”.

The ten theses, drawn up on the basis of a scheme prepared by Ulrich before he left for Berne, were sent round to all the participants. The following is a summary of them:

“The sole head of the Church is Christ. This church is born of the Word of God, which gives it life. It must heed no alien power.”

“The Church of Christ cannot legislate except on the basis of the Word of God. Ecclesiastical laws are only binding in so far as they are founded on this Word.”

“Christ is our only wisdom and righteousness; He provides the expiation of all sin. To rely on the merits of others to obtain holiness and forgiveness is to deny Christ.”

“It is impossible to prove the doctrine of transubstantiation from Holy Scripture.”

“The mass, in which Christ is offered to God as a sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead, implies blasphemy against the very holy sufferings and death of Christ.”

“Christ alone died on our behalf. He alone must be invoked as the Mediator and Intercessor between God and believers.”

“Scripture is silent about a purgatory after this life.”

“The adoration of images contradicts texts from the Old and New Testaments. They must be abolished wherever there is any risk of their being worshipped.”

“Marriage is forbidden to no class of men, whereas adultery and immorality are forbidden to all.”

“The scandal of immorality is worse on the part of priests than with men in any other condition of life.”

The Bernese magistrates had taken the church of the Franciscans. Furnished with pews, equipped with a pulpit, on January 6 it welcomed, in addition to the councillors and their guests, two hundred and fifty priests of the town and country, together with about a hundred chaplains.

It was an old friend of Ulrich, the Burgomaster of St. Gall, Joachim von Watt (known as Vadian), who was asked to preside over the debates. His portraits still show us the picture of a man whose doublet, cut low in accordance with the fashion of the time, reveals too fat a neck beneath the double chin. The face, devoid of beauty, is redeemed by the brown eyes, sparkling with intelligence under their sharply outlined eyebrows, and by the deep wrinkles which imprint on the thick flesh a note of self-control and calm. A man of learning and culture, subtly intelligent and deeply religious, a doctor and a magistrate, Vadian embodies the universal scope of the Renaissance mentality. He was keenly interested in all that concerns man. If he abandoned in midstream the study of law for that of medicine, the reason was that the latter introduced him more deeply to the understanding of nature. After his return from Vienna to his native city, he worked to reconstruct the latter in the new light shed by humanism. His first contact with Lutheran ideas interested him without bringing him to a decision. Although on good terms with Zwingli, he kept his distance during the early years of the Zürich reformation. Would he follow the lead of Glareanus or Faber, with whom also he was in correspondence? He read Luther like a man who did not wish to

precipitate matters, and who was scared by the verbal violence of the rebellious monk. At his request, his friends furnished him with books by the new thinker and also with those which were written against him.

Not until October, 1522, did he publicly intervene in the discussions of the day with the publication of a little treatise on the Credo, *Brevis indicatura symbolorum* (a brief study of the creeds), in which he decided in favour of a serious investigation of Holy Scripture as the basis of the faith. He apologized for his intervention as a layman in a theological debate, but circumstances, he said, had brought him into contact with a circle of priests, some of whom were partisans of the new ideas, while others dreaded them as a source of strife. As the discussion was in part concerned with the credal article *descendit ad inferna* (He descended into Hell), he felt unable to refrain from expressing his opinion.

From that moment, the mind of Vadian was made up. He would never go back on the decision: did not both Renaissance and reformation plead in conjunction for a return to original sources? At St. Gall, he energetically pushed ahead in the same direction as Zwingli at Zürich. When the city, deaf to the appeals of the abbey, replaced the mass by the Lord's Supper, the first to receive the symbolic bread (on April 21, 1527, in the Church of St. Lawrence) was Joachim von Watt. For a little more than a year he had been first magistrate of the city, such was his fellow-citizens' confidence in him. No one was better qualified than he to preside over the victorious debates of Berne.

The debates lasted for several days. Alternately, the two priests of the city, Berchtold Haller and Franz Kolb, commented on the articles and asked opponents to express themselves by basing their objections on Holy Scripture. A priest from Appenzell, Theobald Huter, the provincial of the Augustinians, Conrad Träger of Fribourg, and another monk of the same order, Alexius Grat, who was a confessor at Berne, disputed as best they could in favour of tradition. "The struggle was easy for the heretics", notes with melancholy one James of Münster, a priest from Solothurn, who

was following the discussions, “for no well-armed adversary opposed them. If the supporters of the ancient beliefs had had some courage and skill, their party would have been maintained at Berne, at least for a year longer. We are receiving the punishment which our contempt for knowledge and our neglect of study have deserved. Our overthrow is absolute. It might have been avoided if our bishops had been more studious and less fond of girls.”

During the first skirmishes, Zwingli intervened but little. He did not wish to overshadow his hosts, in particular the modest Haller, whose zeal and seriousness had induced the change of mind in the Bernese. He flung himself all the more keenly into the discussion when it reached the article concerning transubstantiation. A priest of St. Gall, Benedict Burgauer, had made himself the advocate of the Lutheran conception of the sacrament. Ulrich, who for several months had been debating this theme with the Wittenberg reformer, could restrain himself no longer. Suddenly the rising dispute of the theologians echoed beneath the vaults of the Church of the Franciscans. For five days, it was a question of the 6th chapter of St. John’s Gospel, of the words which the evangelists ascribe to Jesus when He instituted the eucharist, of the corresponding Pauline texts, of the relation between the Christian communion and the Mosaic Passover. Members of the Council, soldiers, craftsmen, listened unwearyingly. Ulrich led what he jokingly called “the dance of the bears”. With admirable skill, he adapted his phrasing to the mentality of his hearers. With regard to the warning addressed to the Corinthians, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner”, he made a distinction between a purely external attachment to the Church of Christ and a sincere faith. The superficial communicant was “like someone wearing an external sign of belonging to the Gentlemen of Berne, but who, in his heart, is not faithful to the people of Berne”. Such an unworthy soldier was guilty towards the Republic. The soldier’s uniform, a visible sign of an invisible allegiance, committed one. The soldier who had dishonoured it by misusing it or tearing it, had not

struck or pierced the Gentlemen of Berne, but he was none the less guilty towards them. The priest Bergauer confessed himself convinced by so much simple logic and withdrew all his objections.

On January 26, at the conclusion of these memorable weeks, Haller once more spoke. He expressed the wish that everyone present should retire with the conviction that a serious and important change had been effected. The dominating motive of the preachers had not been a liking for discussion for its own sake, nor the need to call attention to themselves by the introduction of a few innovations, but the desire to work for the honour of God and the salvation of all believers, and of the Bernese in particular. Out of fidelity towards their sacred office, the pastors had been led to proclaim the Gospel sometimes with gentleness, sometimes with sharpness. The true grace of God which had illuminated them urged them not merely to introduce modifications in church worship, but had also inspired in them a spiritual renewal and change of life. Turning to his colleagues, Haller exhorted them with affectionate emotion to render themselves worthy of the office which had been entrusted to them. In the name of the Council, he then thanked all those who had taken part in the sittings.

The activity of Zwingli was not limited to his interventions in the discussions. With Bucer, Ambrose Blarer, Oecolampadius, Conrad Schmid, and others, he preached in the Cathedral, attracting an immense crowd. On January 19 he gave a commentary on the Apostles' Creed, which made clear that he was orthodox on the essential points of the faith. In addition, he approached the central subject of the mass and justified his own conception of the Lord's Supper. While he was speaking, Bullinger tells us, a priest was officiating in a side chapel. He stopped, facing the eucharistic elements, listened eagerly to the words of the preacher, and, when the sermon was finished, cast off his sacerdotal vestments and threw them on the altar, crying: "If that is the mass, I will not celebrate it again, either today or ever again."

On January 30, in his second sermon, Zwingli encouraged the Bernese to persevere in the way they had just taken. What nourishes faith—and the reformer insisted on this point—is not the visible instruments of devotion, but the inner knowledge of the God of Jesus Christ. Following the example set by Zürich three years earlier, the clergy had already, on January 13, two hundred in favour and forty against, voted to abolish the mass. On January 27, when the sacristans, as was their custom, lighted the wax candles of the sombre Cathedral early in the morning, they observed with astonishment that no priest presented himself to say mass. The bells rang in vain. Alone with the flickering lights, in the vast, desolate sanctuary, the organist, in despair, opened for the last time the organ lid. At his touch there arose under the motionless arches the sorrowful strains of the hymn: “O Judas, how canst thou have betrayed thy Lord?” Then he closed the instrument, which became silent for centuries.

On January 27 the members of the noble Diesbach family gathered in their private chapel for the celebration of an anniversary mass. On the same day, the Council issued an order forbidding the continuance of church worship in its old form. Workmen were summoned to demolish the twenty-five altars of the Cathedral. The images were destroyed and their fragments buried. The only ornaments which escaped this iconoclastic fury were a few pictures from the private chapels, which their owners claimed. A supporter of the ancient faith, Councillor Hans Zehender, entered the denuded church on his ass: “If they wish to make of this place a stable,” he said in explanation of his conduct, “my ass must enter it too.” The impertinent fellow found himself dismissed from his office.

The people voted and approved the decision of the authorities. Alone, the town of Lenzburg, with Frütigen and Zimmenthal in the Oberland, opposed the measure.

The decision of Berne completely altered the confessional position of Switzerland. It gave Zürich the support of a powerful state. Basle, which until then had been hesitant,