

Surviving Failure

The story of Renée of France

The news traveled quickly through Europe. Renée, the great patron of the Reformation in Italy, had failed. She had been betrayed by her husband, browbeaten by a priest of the Inquisition, stripped of her wealth and her jewels, and isolated from her books, her family and her sympathetic court. Finally, she was humiliated by a public trial—she, the daughter of a King!—and sentenced to isolation until she recanted. All these things she could endure, but when they took her two young daughters to a convent to be raised by nuns, it was the last straw. She held out for a week, but finally Renée outwardly renounced the doctrine she inwardly believed, attended Mass and tearfully accepted Communion from a priest. Her enemies were jubilant. Her friends in the exiled church were brokenhearted.

So now what? How could Renée go on after this public failure?

Renée was born in 1510. She was called “the King’s very dear and much loved daughter,” but even her father, King Louis XII of France, could foresee future difficulty in finding a suitable husband for his hunchbacked, homely daughter. And sure enough, Renée ended up in a completely *unsuitable* arranged marriage to the playboy, Ercole II d’Este, the Duke of Ferrara, Italy, whose father was in debt to her family. Renee moved to Ferrara to begin her married life when she was seventeen years old.

Ercole was staunchly Catholic, but Renée was sympathetic to Luther and the “new thinking” of the Reformation. At first, her religious preference was merely a loyalty, like her patriotism to France. She felt no compunction about occasionally attending Mass with her husband and taking Communion in the Catholic Church. That would soon change.

It was a crime punishable by death to teach Reformed theology in Italy. Luther’s books were outlawed, as were any Bibles translated into the common language. But while Renee’s uncle was on the throne in France (her father died when she was five), no one dared object to Renée associating with whomever she chose—at least, they did not dare to object *officially*. She surrounded herself with Reformed scholars and poets. Her court was a haven for those fleeing religious persecution in France and Italy. One of the many fugitives who found refuge in Ferrara was the French reformer, John Calvin, introduced at court as “Charles d’Espeville” in 1535.

During his stay with Renée, Calvin carefully explained the doctrine of salvation by faith alone and how the Mass pictured resacrificing Christ—as if His once-for-all atonement was insufficient. Renée understood, and her heart was opened to the Gospel. Her religion, once a mere preference, now became a passionate reliance on the sufficiency of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Renée stopped attending Mass.



After her conversion, Renée continued her efforts on behalf of the Reformation with renewed vigor. She wrote letters to her husband and other government officials asking for mercy for those imprisoned for the sake of Christ and she continued to provide aid from her own fortune. During this period, she visited Faventino Fannio in prison.

Fannio came to believe the doctrines of the Reformation by reading the Bible translated into Italian—a forbidden book. He was so excited about what he had learned he could not contain his joy. He traveled about teaching one here and one there, urging them to study the Bible for themselves, until he came to the attention of the Inquisitor. Fannio was thrown in jail and threatened with death unless he recanted. He was unmoved. But when his wife and children came to beg him not to become a martyr, Fannio agreed to deny his faith to obtain his freedom. He was immediately tortured in conscience and “a horror of great darkness” fell on his soul. Fannio threw himself at the foot of the cross, and thus strengthened and forgiven, decided to prove his repentance by redoubled efforts to teach the Gospel. He was immediately arrested again and imprisoned in Ferrara for two years, where his plight came to Renée’s attention. Despite her efforts on his behalf, he died a martyr in 1550.

We don’t know for sure, but I’d like to think that Renée remembered the grace Fannio found at the cross after she recanted. What we *do* know is that Renée went right back to doing what she did before—providing aid to the persecuted in any way she could. She proved her repentance by her actions.

Renée’s story over the next few years is filled with difficult choices between the safety of those she loved and living an uncompromising faith. Most times, she succeeded. Sometimes she failed. Renée would return over and over again to the cross to find strength, wisdom, courage and forgiveness.

After Ercole’s death, Renée’s son told her that she must recant again or leave Italy. She left, and established a place of refuge in her castle in Montargis, France. The castle was affectionately known as “The Lord’s Hotel.” Renée did not turn anyone away who came seeking refuge, and at times the castle was so crowded it was difficult to move freely. Year after year she gave hospitality to those in danger, not considering her own safety or comfort. She died in 1574, but because of her faith in Christ, was denied burial with the rest of the royal family in Basilica of St. Denis. Her simple monument in Montargis reads, “May many daughters of France yet rise to emulate the example of her faith, patience, and charity.”

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