

A NEW VERSTEGAN LETTER

by ANTHONY G. PETTI

The Vatican Library has often been a fruitful source for discovering letters and dispatches by English Catholic exiles, and one written by Richard Verstegan (c. 1550-1641) has recently come to light among the Barberini Manuscripts.¹ This is a holograph dated 9 May 1624, addressed to Cardinal Francesco Barberini, the Cardinal Protector of England, and proves to be Verstegan's last extant letter, written when he was about seventy-four years of age. The hand is a little spikier than hitherto, but in other respects is just as firm. The special palaeographical feature of the letter is that it is the only one known in which Verstegan consistently uses the italic hand rather than the secretary. It is also his only known letter written in Italian. The subject matter is painfully common among the Catholic exiles, being a request for a pension, but nevertheless the letter provides useful new biographical and bibliographical information. First of all, in relation to Verstegan's period in Rome in 1584, it apparently shows that he was eventually successful in obtaining a pension from Pope Gregory XIII, even though initially his letters of recommendation from the Nuncio in France merely produced an irritated reply from the Papal Secretary of State (21 May 1584) to the effect that His Holiness could not support every Englishman who came into his domains.² According to this present letter, Verstegan would have received a pension from approximately the beginning of June 1584 until Gregory's death in April 1585.

The biographical sequence of events is necessarily abridged in the letter, but there is, notwithstanding, a noticeable conflict with other extant information. Whereas it would appear from the letter that Verstegan remained in Rome until April 1585 and then went directly to Antwerp, the fact that one of his works, *Typus Ecclesiae Catholicae*,³ appeared in Paris with dedicatory epistle signed by Verstegan and dated 3 January 1585 might indicate that Verstegan was back in Paris by the beginning of that year. Nevertheless, it can now be assumed that if he did return to Paris, his stay was brief and that he was in Antwerp by the end of 1585.

Concerning a later period of his life, it is somewhat surprising to find from the letter that even by May 1624 Verstegan was still not financially well off. His fortune must have taken a sudden turn for the better the following year when, according to the Schepenbrieven in the Antwerp Town Archives, he was engaged in the buying and selling of fairly substantial houses, though it is to be noticed that the new house he bought was a little too much for him to pay for at once and he had to take out a loan.⁴

The main interest of the letter is the description of the projected book against the Calvinists. It is clear that it was to be based on his earlier writings and in particular the popular *L'origine et présent estat de la secte Calvinienne*, a broadsheet with illustrations published in Antwerp by Robert Bruneau in 1611, followed by a Dutch translation, *Oorspronck*

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ende teghenwoordighen staet van de Calvinische secte, by the same printer, and two French editions, one published in Paris and the other in Lyons.⁵ The book seems not to have been completed, which leads one to assume that the pension requested of Urban VIII was never granted. Verstegan did, however, write one further religious polemic after 1624, but it was confined to an attack on the Dutch Calvinists, *Oorloge ghevochten met die wapenen van die waerheydt*, 1628.⁶

As in his previous attempt to obtain a pension from the Pope, Verstegan supported his request with a letter of recommendation, this time from the Jesuit Mark Tempel, who writes in Latin to Cardinal Barberini, commenting that Verstegan is an able man who has written many effective books against the Calvinists and is in need of money in order to proceed with his polemic writings.⁷

Finally, it should be noted that the new Verstegan letter, the eighty-second which has come to light, reveals some of the dominant traits in his personality. It contains the same singleness of purpose, devotional ardour, and intolerant vehemence which characterise all of Verstegan's polemic writings and in this respect it shows the man to be very much the same in his seventies as he was in his thirties. It is printed in full below with a translation in the same format as in the volume of his letters published by the Catholic Record Society, volume 52 (1959).

VERSTEGAN TO CARDINAL BARBERINI

Antwerp, 9 May 1624

Vatican Library, MSS. Barberini Latini, vol. 8620, ff. 18-19 r. Holograph.

Illustrissimo et Reverendissimo,

Come il negotio per il quale io scrivo si di consideratione dara senza à Vostra Illustrissima di mia prezzuntione.

Piacera à Vostra Illustrissima sapere che passato quaranta anni, forsato da la persecutione contro li Cattolici in Inghilterra fui necessitato absentarmi, ritirandomi à Parigi di Francia, dove publicato *L'executione in Inghilterra*.⁸ Fui al instansa del Imbasciatore de la Regina Ilizabetta incarcerato et in apresso per la extraordinaria diligentia del illustrissimo Nuntio (à qual tempo residente) da su Magesta Enricho Tertio liberato. Di dove, proviso di lettere di raccomandatione di detto illustrissimo Nuntio, mi transferii costi in tempo di Sua Santita Gregorio XIII, di buona memoria, del qual mi fu ordinato honesti intratenimento, puntualmente ricevuto sua vita durante. Apresso sua morte pigliai mi residentia in questa citta d'Anversa dove ho scritto et publicato diversi libri contro heretici et principalmente contro la setta Calvinistica.

Et come si noto nissuna setta prezzentemente in Europa essere piu perniosa, ho doppo longo travaglio et diligentia observado particolarmente il secreto di essa à segno tal che persona fin oggi ha penetrato tanto avanti l'errori; et percio ho voluto scrivere l'Istoria de la setta Calvinistica.

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In la quale sara dimostrato:

1. Primieramente, l'origine et descendensa, con la vita de Joannes Calvino, per la quale aparisca non essere possibile che sia venuto da Dio.
2. Secondo, la seditione et libelione con la quale hanno introdotto tal setta à Hinevra, Francia, Inghilterra, Scotia, et Paesi Bassi.
3. Tertio, l'opera de li Apostoli di tal Heretici, monstrando, tra li altri veneni, che ciascheduno di loro predicatori hanno dormito con figlie et le proprie moglie amasate et altri fatti simili abominevoli.
- 4.° Quarto, le sceleragini et sacrilegii à la Chiesa di tal setta con sui li danni fatti à li Cattolici.
5. Quinto, le quatre principali differentie di tal setta et le punti di contraversie in lor religione con sui li libri et scritti di uno contra altro, et persecutioni, impregonamenti, bandi et morte.

Da queste remostrationi ne seguira che molti partirano da tal setta et venira odiosa a li successori.

Et perche io possa passare avanti al travaglio, ateso che deve essere tradutto et impresso in molte lingue, suplico humilmente Vostra Illustrissima sia servita ponerlo in consideratione à sua Santita⁹ à fine piacendoli ordinare modesto intratenimento per mese à fine mi possa quietamente impiegare tanto in questo che altre à gloria di Dio et di sua Santa Chiesa. Con restare,

Anversa, 9 Maii, 1624.

Di Vostra Illustrissima et Reverendissima
Servitore Obbedientissimo,

[signed] Richardo Verstegano

[Translation]

Most Eminent and most Reverend Lord,

The importance of the matter about which I write will give the reason for my presuming on your Eminence.

May it please your Eminence to know that forty years ago I was forced to leave England by the persecution of Catholics there, and withdrew to Paris, where *The Execution in England*⁸ was published. At the instigation of Queen Elizabeth's ambassador, I was imprisoned and afterwards, through the extraordinary diligence of the most eminent Nuncio then resident there, I was freed by His Majesty Henry III. Thence, provided with letters of recommendation from the said most eminent Nuncio, I moved there [*i.e.* Rome] in the time of His Holiness Gregory XIII, of happy memory, by whom I was given an honourable pension which was received punctually during his life. After his death, I took up residence in this city of Antwerp, where I have written and published many books against the heretics, and principally against the Calvinist sect. And because there is no sect at present known to be more pernicious, I have, after a great deal of work and diligence, made a particular study of these sects to such an extent that no one, until today, has uncovered so many of their errors, and therefore I have the desire to write a history of the Calvinist sect.

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In this work it will be demonstrated:

1. Firstly, the origin and descent, with the life of John Calvin from which it will appear that it could not possibly be derived from God.
2. Secondly, the sedition and libel which the sect has introduced into Geneva, France, England, Scotland, and the Low Countries.
3. Thirdly, the work of the apostles of these heretics, showing, amongst other villainous things, that everyone of their preachers has slept with their daughters and killed their true wives, and other similar abominable facts.
4. Fourthly, the crimes and sacrileges of this sect against the Church, with the harm it has inflicted on Catholics.
5. Fifthly, the four principal religious groups within this sect and the controversies among them with their books and writings one against the other, and the persecutions, incarcerations, exiles and death.

From this exposition it will follow that many have separated from this sect and it has become odious to its successors.

And so that I can proceed to such work, seeing that it will have to be translated and printed in many languages, I humbly implore Your Eminence that you may see fit to place the matter before His Holiness⁹ to the end that he may be pleased to grant a modest monthly pension for me to engage in the work without molestation, for this reason as much as any other: for the glory of God and His holy church.

I remain,

Your most Eminent and most Reverend Lordship's most obedient servant,

Richard Verstegan

Antwerp, 9 May, 1624.

NOTES

¹ I am grateful to Fr A. J. Loomie for locating the letter and sending me a xerox copy.

² P.R.O., Roman transcripts, 31/9. See further A. G. Petti, *A Study of the Life and Writings of Richard Verstegan*, M.A. thesis, London, 1957, pp. 81-82.

³ Described and reproduced in thesis, pp. 87-90. See also *Recusant History*, 7, p. 89.

⁴ Schepenbrieven 1625, 2, 570, f. 356. See further thesis, pp. 365-6.

⁵ *Vid.* thesis, pp. 305-08; *Recusant History*, 7, pp. 92, 98.

⁶ Thesis, pp. 369-72; *Recusant History*, 7, p. 95.

⁷ Vatican Library, MSS. Barberini Latini, vol. 6795, no. 30. The letter is undated but was presumably sent on or before 9 May 1624, the date on Verstegan's letter.

⁸ Verstegan is referring to his *Descriptiones quaedam illius inhumanae*, published in Paris, 1583-84. Verstegan's activities and publications in Paris at this time, together with the endeavours of the English ambassador, Edward Stafford, and the help given Verstegan by the Nuncio Raggazoni are described in *Recusant History*, 5, pp. 70-77. See also *Recusant History*, 8, pp. 288-91.

⁹ Urban VIII.