

LUDOVICO NECCHI AND ITALIAN CATHOLIC ACTION

IN 1886 the recognised leader of the Catholic laity in Italy, Giuseppe Toniolo, Professor of Political Economy at the University of Pisa, wrote as follows:

‘ True civilisation, which should not be confused with mere material progress, flowed out of the wounded side of the dying Christ when he inaugurated on Mount Calvary a new era of self-denial and charity. Only an imperfect preparation for civilisation existed in the world before the Cross. Outside the shadow of the Cross can only be found either the complete negation, or the gradual decomposition of civilisation. In union with the Cross the history of the advance of civilisation is synonymous with that of the progress of Catholicity.’

Compare these words with the following re-evocation of the pagan spirit of Ancient Rome, written in 1876 by the Italian Poet Laureate, Giosuè Carducci:

‘ Rome, alas! triumphs no longer
From the day when first that Red-haired Galilean
The Capitolian heights ascended,
Threw her his cross and bade her
“ Bear it and serve Me.” ’

‘ Fled the wood-nymphs, shocked, to the rivers weeping
When a weird black company, clothed in sackcloth,
Through the ruined marble temples came chanting
Mournful psalms and Litanies,
And of plains that once resounded with human labour
Made a dreadful desert, and called the desert
“ Kingdom of Heaven.” ’

In these two passages is expressed the essence of two hostile ideals, two mutually exclusive conceptions of civilisation: on the one hand the spirit of the Gospel, on the other that of the paganism of the Ancient World. Which was eventually to gain the mastery of the situation and mould Italian civilisation? This was the fundamental issue which remained open during the half-century which elapsed be-

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tween the clash of Church and State in 1870 and the recent Lateran Treaty in 1929.

The career of Ludovico Necchi must be viewed in the light of the events which took place during this period of Italian history. He was born in Milan in 1876 and died in 1930. His lifetime therefore corresponds almost exactly with the period during which the Liberals held the reigns of political power in Italy. A fundamental tenet of Italian Liberalism was that religion was simply the private concern of the individual—nothing more. According to this theory, artistic, scientific, social and political life should be freed from the thralldom of religion—or, as it was sometimes contemptuously termed, 'clerical influence.' In practice, this theory could only lead to the gradual de-Christianisation of a traditionally Catholic and Christian country. And as this process of moral and spiritual decomposition went on, anti-Christian and anti-religious ideas proportionately gained a firmer footing and spread more rapidly.

Catholic Action during the whole of this period was an attempt to prevent the destruction of the Christian heritage of past centuries. It was simply a defensive movement which aimed at preserving the corner stones of Christian civilisation. It passed through three main phases in Italy—not, indeed, sharply divided, but merging as the years went by one into another, as fresh problems were added to those already in existence.

Each of these phases is linked inseparably with the name of a great leader of the Catholic laity. The Roman question which was uppermost naturally at the outset in men's thoughts recalls to mind at once the name of that stalwart defender of the papal claims, Giambattista Paganuzzi. The gradual moral disintegration of Italian society tended inevitably to sharpen the contrast between rich and poor, and with the growth of industrialism in Northern Italy a solution not merely of the Roman Question was rendered urgent, but likewise of the conflict between Capital and Labour. And as social problems began to be brought more

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and more into the forefront of the battle, a new leader of the Catholic laity came forward, a professor from the University of Pisa, Giuseppe Toniolo.

Toniolo is a much more outstanding figure than Paganuzzi. A distinguished sociologist, he was in close touch with Harmel and Lorin in France, with Pottier in Belgium, with Brants, Pesch and Cathrein in Germany. When Leo XIII drew up the *Rerum Novarum*, he consulted Toniolo on various technical points before issuing the encyclical.

The first attempt of Catholics to exercise a direct influence on the intellectual life of modern Italy dates back to the days of Toniolo, himself a university professor. This last phase of Catholic action, previous to the conclusion of the Concordat and the Lateran Treaty, culminated shortly after Toniolo's death with the foundation of a Catholic University in Milan. In this great achievement a leading part was played by Ludovico Necchi.

A short biographical study of the late Dr. Necchi, written by his close friend, Mgr. Olgiati, a professor on the staff of the Catholic University of Milan, has been translated into English and issued in pamphlet form by the Catholic Truth Society. With a view to enabling this pamphlet of some seventy odd pages to reach as wide a circle of readers as possible, it has been published at the low price of two pence.

THE FIRST TWO PHASES

The three phases of Catholic Action in Italy are all reflected in the career of Ludovico Necchi.

It is on record that during his schooldays a rabidly sectarian Government school-teacher came and stood close up to him boiling with rage. Brandishing his cane in the boy's face, he bellowed: 'You little idiot, do you actually believe in the necessity of the Temporal Power of the Papacy?' Young Necchi never turned a hair, but answered quietly: 'Certainly, sir.'

To realise how such an incident could have been possible in a Government School we must go back to the days of Paganuzzi. A glimpse into those times is given us by Mgr. Olgiati, the author of the pamphlet on Necchi, in his reminiscences of Paganuzzi.¹

'Those were days of unabashed anticlericalism, when armed with trowel and triangle the puny Architects of the Universe were fondly dreaming that—after the collapse of the Temporal Power—they would soon be able to destroy the Spiritual Power of the Papacy; when Liberalism, which had proclaimed the separation of Church from State, was advocating a complete severance of civil life from religious moorings; when Socialism, sweeping all before it, was spreading like wild fire amongst the masses by fanning into flame sparks of economic discontent and, on the unproven plea of a materialistic conception of history, was trampling barbarously underfoot the spiritual and moral heritage of mankind.

'Though widely differing from each other, and sometimes even in violent conflict, these different political and social tendencies all had in common the same desire to witness the death throes of Catholic civilisation. Philosophers, compilers of popular scientific textbooks, poets and men of letters, all were in agreement on this point. The monkeys of the Darwinists, the roses of Ardigò, the Grecian spring scenes of Carducci, conspired together to cast out the Red-haired Galilean. From the Masonic Lodges, from the Universities, from the Chamber of Deputies, and from workmen's clubs, the same order was sent out: a death-warrant against Christian Rome.'

With the second phase of Catholic Action in Italy, Ludovico Necchi was more intimately connected. The Roman Question was not in abeyance when he entered the University of Pavia as a medical student. It remained unsettled for, like his predecessor Pius IX, Leo XIII still protested against the Law of Guarantees. But it was overshadowed

¹ *I Discorsi di Giambattista Paganuzzi*. Published by Romolo Ghirlanda (Milan, 1926).

by the more pressing problem of the growing conflict between Capital and Labour.

Leo XIII had already issued *Rerum Novarum*, and his faithful henchman in Italy was Giuseppe Toniolo, Professor of Political Economy at the University of Pisa. Toniolo, the chief exponent of Christian Democracy, defined Democracy as: 'that condition of society in which all the social, legal and economic factors, preserving their full hierarchical development, each in due proportion contribute to the well-being of the whole community in such a manner that the greatest benefit is reaped by the lowest classes.'² In the mind of Toniolo, Democracy is the gradual upraising of the masses owing to the exertions on their behalf of those above them. It was the Gospel of Christ that brought this new social doctrine into the ancient pagan world, and this programme has already been partially carried into effect by the action of the Church on society. It is a process which may lead eventually to a state of equality between all men—but it will be a state of equality on the highest level. It has nothing in common with the dictatorship in its own exclusive interests of any particular class. This would arrest its development. So likewise would those forces whose aim is to drag down all those above to the dead level of those at the bottom of the social scale.

Necchi flung himself whole-heartedly as a young man into the movement started by Toniolo. Drawing its inspiration from the Gospel, Christian Democracy aimed at putting into practice the social programme traced with a masterly hand by the Pope and thereby stemming the advance of anti-clerical Socialism. He realised at a glance the strident contrast between this Christian conception of raising morally and economically the lowest strata of society and the programme of the Socialists. In a speech

² Toniolo: *Il Concetto Cristiano della Democrazia*. Published by *Vita e Pensiero* (Milan). The C.T.S. have recently issued a pamphlet on Giuseppe Toniolo. (Price 2d.).

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delivered in Milan in 1901, he criticised the extreme sections of the latter thus:

'Then the mask was torn off and the real aim finally disclosed Economic problems faded into the background. The Socialists evinced less and less interest in them, so intent were they on reviving the most abject and trivial forms of a stale type of "bourgeois" anticlericalism. . . . This fact is not without interest for us. It throws daylight on to ideas repeated insistently by Catholics—namely, that besides the purely economic aspect there is also a moral and religious side to social questions, and that Socialism so-called is only a new form, adapted to novel conditions, of that ancient anti-Christian spirit which represents the reaction against ethical laws of the lowest instinct of the individual, of matter against spirit, of sensation against idea, and which consequently of its very nature is opposed to the true interests of the people, even though it may deck itself in the borrowed plumes of democracy.'

THE THIRD PHASE

Having thus placed the leader in the midst of the times in which he lived, let us now consider the man himself—destined to play so important a rôle in the third phase of Catholic Action: The development of Catholic higher studies in Italy.

Fr. Gemelli, O.F.M., the present Rector of the Catholic University of Milan, draws the following pen-portrait of Necchi as he was when they were both boys together at a Government Secondary School:

'Black-haired, with sharp, observant eyes and open, simple manners, not unmingled with a certain reserve, he was always quietly dressed, though wearing often a peculiar fur cap. Friendly and always ready to help his school mates, hard-working and intelligent, he was recognised as the top of the class, yet liked by the other boys.

'In his features, lit up by a constant kindly smile, there was something peculiarly attractive. A certain reserve in manner did not create a barrier to friendliness with his school-fellows, while his nimble wits permitted him, appar-

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ently at least, to answer questions correctly without hesitation. In brief, even in those days the character of Ludovico Necchi was calm, good-natured and well balanced: traits which were distinctive of him right through life.'

As medical students at the University of Pavia, the two inseparable school-friends now found themselves in hostile camps. Gemelli, as the leader of the Reds, edited a Socialist magazine entitled *The People*. On the other hand, hardly had Necchi arrived at Pavia than he joined the Catholic University Students' Club, of which shortly after he became president.

The two students, diametrically opposite in their ideas, often came across each other. The youthful apostle of Christianity was opposed by the revolutionary firebrand and anti-clerical atheist, but the bond of friendship between the two remained unbroken.

We next come across Necchi and Gemelli at the military hospital of St. Ambrose in Milan, where both of them were drafted, on leaving the University, for the period of their military service. The discussions between them on the fundamental problems of life still continued. In the heat of an argument, Necchi once suggested to his friend—who, unknown to them both, was travelling along the road to Damascus—to pray to God in this manner: 'O God, if You exist, make Yourself known to me'

Then came Good Friday of the year 1903. Without any warning, like a sudden flash of light in the darkness, Ludovico heard this invitation:

'Necchi, come with me to church.'

He scrutinised closely the face of his friend. Despite his rising emotion, he dared not yet entertain any hope.

It was only after entering the basilica of St. Ambrose when Gemelli, kneeling down, hid his face in his hands, that Necchi understood. The divine winner of souls, Jesus Christ, had triumphed.

It is essential that this incident of the conversion of Gemelli, who soon after joined the Franciscans, and eventually became the founder and present Rector of the

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Catholic University of Milan, should be known. For without it the subsequent career of Ludovico Necchi would be unintelligible.

In the issue of May, 1922, of the *Bolletino degli Amici*, introducing to his readers different people who had assisted him to found the University, Gemelli wrote: 'Necchi Dr. Necchi but above all my very close personal friend Necchi has been a transparently honest and patient helper, who has given us always the benefit of his mature judgment and reflection. When he voices an opinion I feel sure that he is right, since to an upright man God grants special graces.'

Necchi was always Fr. Gemelli's right-hand man. He worked beside him on the Permanent Committee, on the Council of the *Istituto Superiore 'Giuseppe Toniolo,'* and on other committees connected with the University. When Fr. Gemelli offered him the professorship of biology at the University he accepted it gladly, since he was eager for an opportunity of co-operating with all his might in the great intellectual enterprise of the Catholics of Italy.

Dr. Necchi lived to see the conciliation between Church and State which definitely closed that chapter in the religious history of Italy which had been opened six years before his birth by the breach made by the troops of Victor Emmanuel II in the walls of Papal Rome at Porta Pia. Nearly twelve months passed after the signing of the Lateran Treaty between Pius XI and Mussolini, and then this faithful soldier of the Church in Italy—almost as if ready to sing the *Nunc Dimittis*—was taken rather suddenly away from the scene of his labours on this earth.

The web of Ludovico Necchi's life is interwoven so closely with the threads of Catholic Action in that stormy period in the religious history of Italy which has just drawn to a close that those who wish to gain a clearer understanding of the present religious situation cannot do better than learn the history of what has preceded it from the biographical sketch of Necchi issued by the Catholic Truth Society.

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