

The Christian Scene in the Mediterranean

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In his *Apologia* Newman writes

I think it would be a very serious evil, which Divine Mercy avert!
that the Church should be contracted in Europe within the range of
particular nationalities.¹

The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent sweeping changes that have taken place in the political configuration of Europe force us to go beyond territorial concerns in our consideration of unity. More than simply a geographical reality, in fact, unity is something that encompasses history, culture and tradition, and which has in Christianity its first matrix.

My subject is the Christian scene in the Mediterranean area, the 'south' of Europe. Our first task, therefore, must be to rid ourselves of those all too common prejudices which equate the 'south' with regress and cultural backwardness. After all, depending on one's perspective, every country is always to the 'south' of another. To deal comprehensively with the situation of Christianity in the Mediterranean area in the short space allocated to me is practically impossible, and would require a knowledge of social and cultural phenomena which do not easily lend themselves to synthesis. Given my background, therefore, the analysis which follows has to be restricted to the Italian situation.²

The situation in Italy, however, is also one which does not easily lend itself to brief description. A great deal of space would be required even to sketch the background against which the current situation of Christianity has come to be created. I have decided, therefore, to concentrate on two areas: firstly, the general situation of the life of believers in Italy and, secondly, the situation of Italian theology. Taken together, these two perspectives should give some indication of the global condition of the country with regard to Christianity.

Before we begin, however, a further methodological premise would be opportune. The observations which follow stem from a *theological* analysis of the phenomena which interest us, rather than from a sociological, anthropological, or psychological analysis, which would require a corresponding methodology. Reference will be made in the course of this paper to studies done in sociology but these have been interpreted from a theological point of view. This means that we begin from the presupposition of faith, a faith which is concerned to know about the actual conditions in

which it lives and which knows how to refer to those data existing primarily within faith and not outside it.

1 A general overview of the Italian situation

The situation of the Italian Church lies within an historical context which is as peculiar as it is unique: that of the presence of the Successor of Peter and of the Apostolic See. This simple fact has not been without repercussions, as illustrated by the events of the end of the last century which led to conflict between the two worlds of church and state.

The taking of Rome by the Italians in 1870 and the end of the Papal States was anything but a painless process. While Pius IX imprisoned himself in the Vatican and Catholics ceased active participation in the political life of the new kingdom (the so-called '*non expedit*'), a liberal-masonic culture, highly anti-clerical, began to permeate the middle classes and decision-making institutions.³ In short, the 'Roman Question' was born.

The situation was eased somewhat with the signing in 1929 of the Lateran Pacts which officially put an end to the 'Roman Question', giving the Church in Italy its own identity and rendering it more autonomous with regard to the Italian state and, to a certain extent, the Holy See.⁴ The role played by the Fascist forces in this process, however, led to further tension between church and state in the post-war period. A strong communist party found the Church of Pius XII in the front line in the struggle to halt its advance to power in 1946. The excommunication decreed in 1949 for those adhering to the Italian communist party, even if it was personal and not aimed at the party as such, had an 'exceptionally strong impact' on the country and rendered the contrast between the Catholic, and, communist worlds even more violent.⁵ The communists, with their profession of practical materialism, promoted a move away from traditional values and hardened their anti-clerical stance, while, on the Catholic side, a kind of anti-communist spirituality came to be created by Fr Lombardi S.J. with his 'Better World Movement'.

In the period immediately following World War II, a tripartite division could clearly be seen in Italian culture (inspired particularly by the interpretations of Marx elaborated by Gramsci and Labriola); then there was a bourgeois-liberal culture, associated with Einaudi, the first President of the Republic; lastly there was an equally strong Christian culture which had its political manifestation in the Popular Party, founded by the Sicilian priest Don Luigi Sturzo, and which was the forerunner of the present Christian Democratic Party. The presence of three such distinct cultural forces, however, did not impede the realisation of the common effort to reconstruct Italy in the wake of her defeat in war. On the other hand, apart from some rare occasions,⁶ these forces did not hesitate to clash with each other on the political level, sometimes even physically. At this point we come up against one of those peculiarly Italian contradictions which surfaced in this period. Communists had absolutely no hesitation in assisting at Mass or at other religious functions, a symptom of a still more

basic cultural tradition which saw the relation with God as fundamental, apart from any ecclesial or ecclesiastical mediation. The books by Giovanni Guareschi, famous the world over, recounting the exploits of Don Camillo only highlight this paradoxical situation as it was lived in a particular region of Italy, Emilia Romagna, where the communist culture and effort were at their strongest.

This situation altered in 1958 with the election of John XXIII. His decision to enter directly into the pastoral arena as Bishop of Rome was one of the most important factors in re-establishing the dialogue between the Church and society. Moreover, Vatican II also heralded for the Italian Church a season of renewal based on a dialogue which still continues today.

The presence of the Apostolic See has also been a decisive factor in the formation of a national episcopal conference and in its various interventions in the public life of the country.⁷ The Italian episcopal conference made a somewhat timid appearance in 1959 with Cardinal Giuseppe Siri of Genoa as its first president, but it was not until 1964 that the first official convocation of the bishops actually took place. As Bishop of Rome and Primate of Italy, the Pope is the head of the conference, exercising this function through a president whom he freely nominates. In relation to this, it should not be overlooked that it is only since 1984 that diocesan bishops in Italy have been nominated following the procedure applied to most other countries, that is, through the intervention of the papal nuncio. Prior to this, bishops in Italy were nominated directly by the Congregation for Bishops

I hope that this brief historical panorama will be useful for understanding the complexity and uniqueness of the situation in Italy. Here we might briefly mention the problem of relations with other Christian confessions and with Judaism. In Italy ecumenical dialogue is of very recent origin. The fact that Protestants and Jews have been considered as a small minority has delayed the establishing of a constructive dialogue. Italian believers, sharing the common world situation, are currently living through a period of transition which does not permit a clear forecast of what the future will bring. The most characteristic features of this transitional period revolve around certain epicentres which may be summed up in the following observations.

a) The most general features which characterise this period are a notable *vitality* coupled with a strong sense of *contradiction*.

While Catholics officially constitute 88% of the population, the level of participation in Sunday celebrations is extremely low, especially in the larger centres of population where it ranges from 12% to 20%. Catechesis, in the sense of a systematic study of the faith, is undertaken by a ridiculously small percentage of the Catholic population (1%–2%), with participation often erratic. Among the most remarkable phenomena is the presence of a volunteer force comprising millions of people, young people above all, who freely dedicate themselves to helping to resolve some of the

most disagreeable situations in society. Yet this witness often goes hand in hand with an almost total ignorance of the most fundamental principles of faith and morals. Also remarkable is the fact that 76% of Italian tax-payers accept the opportunity offered them by law and sign over 0.008% of their taxes to the Catholic Church for use in works for the common good, as against the 22% who choose to put this money at the disposal of the state. Furthermore, 95% of the students in state schools freely opt for Catholic religious education, notwithstanding the strong opposition manifested by certain political parties of a non-Christian inspiration who were quick to exploit this issue for political ends. These facts express by themselves the vitality and contradictoriness of the situation in which Italian believers find themselves.

A further characteristic of the present situation, also marked by a strong sense of contradiction, is the so-called 're-awakening' of religious life. Italian parishes are authentic centres of personal formation, with the presence of young people strong and constant. The main force for the permanence of essential values relating to life and personal formation is, by common consent, the Christian community.

Traditional associations, such as Italian Catholic Action, which have hundreds of thousands of members throughout the country, exist alongside newer movements with a strong formational slant, such as 'Communion and Liberation', the Focolare movement, Charismatic Renewal, the Neocatechumenate, St. Egidio, the Abele Group, and so on, to mention only the most well-known.⁸ All these newer groups were born in the freshness of Vatican II and continue untiringly their work of evangelisation. However, the richness of their presence is not always matched by a corresponding sense of the complementary nature of charisms and ministries. These movements, which from the outside are noted for the strength of their witness, are not always willing to accept a complementary role within the Christian community. Unfortunately, forms of protagonism and intolerance continue to surface and the multiplication of initiatives and groups led in 1981 to the episcopal conference issuing a note concerning the criteria of ecclesiality for groups, associations and movements.

Linked with this, we appear to be assisting at the re-birth of an equivocal sense of the sacred. As in all the historical situations in which this equivocation has surfaced, it ought to be considered in a realistic light, without particular enthusiasm, since, in effect, it is a sign more of the end of an age than of the dawning of a new one. This return to a sense of the sacred, moreover, is accompanied by the appearance of the 'new' religious 'movements' or 'sects', a phenomenon previously almost unheard of in Italy. These groups have no shortages of members both because they tend to attract people in search of a sure and easy path to God and because of the presence in their ranks of strong personalities capable of satisfying their members' need for authority. On the other hand, this phenomenon explains the urgent need for theology to re-think the apologetics of the act of faith. It should not be overlooked that since Vatican II, while many studies have

been produced relating to the 'dogmatics' of faith, its meaning in Scripture and its content in the Fathers and the different theological schools, almost nothing, apart from some very rare examples, has emerged as to 'why' we believe, as an act which engages the believer in an intelligent and personal response to his or her act of faith.⁹

Phenomena such as these can be of little comfort to the theologian, who exercises in the Christian community the ministry of a critical understanding of faith. If it were not too paradoxical, we would have to turn Rahner's theory of anonymous Christians on its head and say that many of today's believers are actually anonymous atheists. When an answer is given to questions of why we believe, it shows itself to be more evasive, is often linked with emotive justifications, and reveals a lack of reflection and study of that which should constitute the essence of Christian living. Left unresolved, the question of why we believe inevitably gives way either to fideism or to the different forms of contemporary atheism.

b) From a more directly political point of view, Italy is going through a qualifying moment in its transition to a mature democracy. The political involvement of believers made itself felt this year in a referendum on whether to abrogate certain electoral laws. This referendum, opposed, as we might well expect, by almost all politicians as a class, saw the direct involvement of Catholics, without any official position having been taken by the bishops, and resulted in almost the whole of the electorate voting in favour of the proposed changes.

More specifically, the disintegration of the political parties means that, on the one hand, there is still a need for Christians to be united in a single party, the Christian Democrats, so that the Christian values that inspired it may still find a home there; on the other hand, the reluctance shown by the members of this party to develop a new approach to politics, together with a recurrent and misleading disregard for morals both in political life and in the management of the common good, has led to confusion and disaffection for political involvement among many of the younger generation. Some people think in terms of the refounding of a Catholic party without taking into account the impossibility of such an undertaking, while there are others who press for the episcopal conference to concede full liberty to Catholics in their choice of political party.

The presence of laws objectively contrary to the principles of faith often gives rise to situations of conflict which, however, have never given way to the forms of civil intolerance often seen in other countries. The overall trend, therefore seems to be one of diversification in political effort, but linked with a fundamental unity which sees a reference to the common values of the tradition before specific choices born of faith.

2 The situation in theology

On several occasions and at different moments theology in Italy has sought to focus its efforts by going in search of co-ordinates which would help it establish its historical setting and increase its self-understanding. The first overall evaluation of theology in Italy immediately after Vatican II was made in 1967 by the Jesuits Flick and Alszeghy.¹⁰ A few years later, in 1974, a further element was added to the mosaic with an article by G. Colombo which offered a bibliographical study of the 'dogmatic theology' produced in Italy in the twenty years from 1950 to 1970.¹¹ A further synthesis was formulated by L. Serenthà in an article which can be considered as the conclusive evaluation of the 1970s.¹²

This is not the place to attempt a critical evaluation of the current situation in Italian theology thirty years after Vatican II. Some observations, however, can at least give some idea of the direction in which Italian theology is moving and its limits.

To speak of 'theology in Italy' means first of all to specify our peculiar way of conceiving and interpreting the content of faith within our particular ecclesial and cultural situation. Italy, in fact, differently from other cultural contexts, has never had a nationalistic culture; there has continued, almost without interruption, both a sense of eternity, which relativizes the possible absolutes of any particular age, and a cosmopolitan sense which is the capacity to overcome the confines of one's own country in order to have the world as one's home. Typical of this culture is its openness to the new, without, however, having to render it an absolute, and its welcome to every form of progress as something which belongs to humanity as a whole rather than as the property of any one nation or social situation.

Certainly, as we said above, the presence of the Apostolic See alongside the complex of pontifical universities present in Rome may have led to the conclusion that theology emanating from Rome is to be identified with Italian theology, and that 'Roman' theology is passively subject to Vatican directives. These conclusions, as unjust as they are misleading, require to be corrected if we are to speak of things as they actually are instead of just employing gratuitous slogans.

A Catholic theology, wherever it comes from, that does not have among its points of reference the living magisterium of the Church which interprets the content of faith (*Dei Verbum* 18) would lack one of the constitutive partners in theological dialogue and would forfeit any claim to be a work of scholarship. On the other hand, to speak of a 'Roman' theology is to ignore the historical and cultural evolution which has taken place in recent decades and the wider theological tradition.

First of all, we must note the coming into being of new theological faculties outside Rome, which have their own peculiarity and field of specialisation.¹³ From the foundation of the Theological Faculty of Southern Italy at Naples in 1941 to those at Milan (1968), Palermo (1980) and Florence (1991), these university centres have been characterised by the will to concentrate their efforts in a few chosen fields, namely theological

methodology (Milan), theological anthropology (Florence) and ecclesiology (Palermo)

These centres exist alongside organisations such as the Italian Biblical Association, the Association of Moral Theology, the Association of Liturgy, as well as two other theological associations. The older of these two, the Italian Theological Association, is primarily concerned with the pastoral mediation of theology and with updating those involved in pastoral work; the more recent, the Italian Society for Theological Research, engages in interdisciplinary research and for two years has had its own journal. *Ricerche Teologiche*, which represents the first serious attempt at scientific research outside the house journals of the various university centres.

As well as the various theological faculties, there also exist what are known as Superior Institutes of Religious Sciences, now functioning in approximately two hundred Italian dioceses. The primary aim of these institutes is to provide access to theology for lay people, thus breaking the centuries-old tradition which limited the study of theology exclusively to candidates for the priesthood.

Dialogue between theologians is no simple matter¹⁴ and yet, without wishing to enter into detail, it would be opportune to highlight some of the most original features of Italian theological output in the years during and after Vatican II.

Two bibliographical studies have appeared in the last decade which are of considerable interest in revealing how much has been published in Italy in the fields of christology and ecclesiology in the wake of Vatican II.¹⁵ In the twenty years from 1963 to 1984 3737 ecclesiological titles were published, the vast majority divided between works of a pastoral-catechetical nature (779) and translations; while in the period from 1965 to 1983 1708 christological titles were published, of which 1263 were by Italians. (Translations accounted for only 445 titles.)

In the period following Vatican II, therefore, it emerges that Italian theological output has largely been taken up with ecclesiology, something that is hardly surprising if we consider the enormous changes produced by the Council in this area. But, apart from the original contribution of an ecclesiology viewed in terms of communion,¹⁶ this output has been largely limited to translations and works of a pastoral nature.

An innovation, on the other hand, is the fact that it is possible to see the real theological effort in Italy concentrated in christology. The various christologies which have appeared, differing in character and intention, show quite clearly that Italian theology is capable of articulating original thought. More directly, the christologies of Amato, Bordoni, Forte, Moiola and Serenthà show themselves in their complementarity to be an original product.

Another positive development in this field is the fact that theology in Italy, ahead of other theological schools, has been alive to the need to produce works of 'synthesis'. In this context at least two examples must be cited: the various dictionaries and the series *Corso sistematico di Teologia*.¹⁷

The former have been conceived as tools, capable of presenting the development of themes of interest to the various theological disciplines. With the latter the intention has been to provide a properly worked out treatment of theology read in the light of Conciliar renewal, but representing a break with the pre-Conciliar manuals. This series, in fact, is presented as a set of contributions by different authors who in their own fields offer a complete and organic treatment of a particular aspect of the faith.

A most appropriate summary of what I have said in this section and an accurate indicator of the current state of Italian theology is provided by the headline which appeared above an article on this theme in a recent edition of the periodical *Il Regno*: 'Theology between vitality and diffidence'.¹⁸

I would like to conclude this paper by returning to the general theme of this Conference: Christian Hope in Europe's Future. It is not rhetorical, as recent events in the Soviet Union and elsewhere confirm, to say that Europe is living at an historic moment. With this in mind, no one can be excluded from the task of elaborating a new consciousness if we are to avoid facing the future fatalistically instead of with the full conviction that we are building something that will last.¹⁹ In this future, to borrow an expression of the present Pope, Europe will have to breathe with both lungs if it wishes to give full expression to its identity, which means that what matters on the religious front also has a value on the social and cultural level. It seems to me that theologians, as experts in the Christian Mystery, have the task of convincing European men and women of the global nature of personal existence which goes beyond fragmentariness, reaching the true *sensus hominis* in the moment in which it reaches the true *sensus Dei*.²⁰

- 1 J. H. Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, London 1976 ed, p 180.
- 2 In saying this, in no way do I wish to detract from the importance of Spain, Portugal and Greece. However, the socio-cultural differences between these countries, together with their different legal systems, which give rise to different positions with regard to believers and the magisterium, make a general analysis impossible.
- 3 Even today in Rome it is possible to find anti-Vatican monuments situated in strategic places; in fact, the 'Prati' district of the city was designed in such a way that from no part of it is it possible to see the dome of St Peter's.
- 4 An identity more on the pastoral than on the institutional level. Cf G. Alberigo, 'La Chiesa italiana tra Pio XII e Paolo VI', in G. Alberigo (ed), *Chiese italiane e concilio*, Genova 1988, p 17.
- 5 *Ibid*, p 22.
- 6 For example, there was the request made by Togliatti, leader of the Italian Communist Party, for the Lateran Pacts to be inserted under art. 7 of the Italian Constitution.
- 7 Cf A. Riccardi; 'La conferenza episcopale italiana negli anni '50-'60', in G. Alberigo, *op. cit.*, pp 35-39.
- 8 For a theological evaluation of the phenomenon cf B. Secondin, *Segni di profezia nella chiesa*, Milano 1987.
- 9 Cf P. Fisichella, *Introduzione all teologia fondamentale*, Casale Monferrato 1992.
- 10 Cf M. Flick and Z. Alszeghy, 'Il movimento teologico italiano', *Gregorianum* 48 (1967), pp 302-325.

- 11 G. Colombo, 'La teologia italiana. Dogmatica 1950-1970', *La Scuola Cattolica* 102 (1974), pp 99–191.
- 12 L. Serenthà, 'La teologia Italiana post manualistica' in a book by various authors, *La teologia italiana oggi*, Brescia 1979, pp 57–100.
- 13 The faculties of theology present in the state universities were abolished in 1873 and never re-opened.
- 14 Italian theology has more than once been the object of severe criticism from within its own ranks, even if this has often been inspired by disputes between individual theologians: e.g. G. Colombo, 'La teologia italiana e la lettera dei 63 teologi', *Teologia* 14 (1989), p 97 speaks of the 'chronic and acclaimed underdevelopment of Italian theology'. G. Ruggieri, 'Chronache teologiche: Presentazione', Autori vari, *La Chiesa italiana nell'oggi della fede*, Casale Monferrato 1979, p 5 has this to say: 'It should not be considered offensive to speak of the 'poverty' of current Italian theology. And not because the condition of poverty is not specific of our theology in this precise moment, but because it is as well to take humble and critical account of the motives which are at the origin of our theological condition'. L. Sartori in *Settimana*, 12 November 1989, p 9, speaking of the Italian Theological Association, suggests that in 'the second decade of our journey together there has been no shortage of intransigent, polemical, or obsessed people. Some have withdrawn, fearing more than anything else mishaps in their relations with others who have left slamming doors behind them. As a consequence, and also because of the difficult relations with the Italian Episcopal Conference, others have backed out, preferring not to compromise their ecclesiastical reputation. Lastly, some have seen in our journey a kind of theology adrift, open to the winds, and so have found the need (cf Milan) to interest themselves in the critical foundation of theology. Their work is noble and significant. However, the disputes which interest them have been outdated in Germany for three or four years.'
- 15 N. Ciola, *Studio bibliografico della cristologia in Italia 1965–1983*, Roma 1984; *Idem, Il dibattito ecclesiológico in Italia. Uno studio bibliografico 1963–1984*, Roma 1986.
- 16 Cf S. Dianich, *La Chiesa di Gesù Cristo*, Roma 1973, *Idem, La chiesa mistero di comunione*, Torino 1977.
- 17 C. Rochetta (ed), *Corso di Teologia Sistemática*, voll. 1–11, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna 1985 onwards. Among the various theological dictionaries which have appeared we may mention: *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia*, *Nuovo Dizionario di Spiritualità*, *Nuovo Dizionario di Liturgia*, *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, *Dizionario Teologico Interdisciplinare*.
- 18 'La teologia tra vitalità e diffidenza,' *Il Regno* 34 (1989), p 648.
- 19 John Paul II to the European Community, 20 May 1985. Cf *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II VIII*, p 1579.
- 20 This paper was translated from the Italian by Graham Bell.