The Troubled Origins of the Italian Catholic Labor Movement, 1878-1914

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Conclusions

In 1984 the international press reported a statement by Pope John Paul II. It was a condemnation of class struggle as a “social evil” contrary to the spirit of Christianity. The statement, which rejected one of the basic tenets of “liberation theology,” was a very old wine in a new bottle. It reflected a contradiction that ran in an uninterupted line through the history of modern Catholic social thought, which recognizes distinct social classes but denies the reality of conflict among them.

That age-old contradiction touches upon a concept that is at the very core of Catholic and, indeed, all Christian theologies, the idea of caritas, Christian love. In applying this theological concept to modern society at the turn of the nineteenth century, Catholic sociology drew heavily on the writings of Aquinas, whose works represented the most sophisticated elaboration of the concept of caritas. Becoming an official philosophy of the church, Neo-Thomism provided important elements in Italian Catholic social doctrine in general and labor theory in particular. One of these was the concept of the misto, the mixed union, an organizational form that was the source of a great deal of discussion, frustration, and conflict in the Italian Catholic labor movement during its formative years.

The mixed union was to include among its members both the workers and the capitalists, thus establishing a symbiotic relationship between various social strata, a relationship based on shared love. The misto, which subjected the workers, the “inferior classes” in the parlance of Catholic sociology, to the charitable care and “tutelage” of the “superior classes,” was a manifestation of paternalism, a system of labor relations that was rapidly becoming obsolete at the
turn of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless the church leadership, wary of a social climate increasingly charged with conflict, supported the concept of the mixed union because it promised to avert class struggle.

Preventing the working classes from gaining autonomy and becoming a viable social and political force that would confront the upper classes was the aim of corporativism, an international ideological current that inspired the speakers at the congresses of Italian Catholic Action as they formulated the concept of the mixed union in the 1870s and 1880s. But during the last decade of the century, it became increasingly obvious that the *misto*, which was modeled on an idealized version of the medieval guilds, was an idea whose time had passed long ago.

Though it may have been a portent of hope and love for Italian Catholics, the mixed union became the source of a conflict between ideals and reality, between church leaders—the custodians of Catholic ideals—and Catholic activists, who were called upon to put these ideals into practice. The activists, daily facing reality, learned that the Italian workers were less and less inclined to submit to the permanent social inferiority implied in the “tutelage” of their interests within the mixed union.

It was a sign of realism on the part of Pope Leo XIII that in 1891 he decided to allow Catholic activists to organize simple unions, which were to enroll workers only. The pope stressed the importance of the mixed union as the ultimate aim, and his acceptance of the *semplice*, the simple union, was somewhat tentative, a part of the experimentation with new ideas and practices that characterized the Leonine period of church history. For instance, he encouraged the participation of priests in social action. The massive growth of the Italian Catholic labor movement during the last years of Leo’s papacy was in part the result of the work of activist clergymen who, side by side with their lay brothers, brought one Catholic local after another into being.

However, those years also saw internal strife increasing in Italian Catholic Action, with the conservatives giving battle to the activists. Among those involved with organizing labor, the conflict centered on the simple union and was an unforeseen consequence of
Leo’s acceptance of the semplice. As those who confronted the activists pointed out, this organizational form carried within it the potential of class struggle and of strikes, which Catholics of conservative persuasion considered manifestations of class struggle. The activists who organized simple unions were issuing an invitation to class struggle. Those who took the side of the workers in strikes—and what else could union leaders do?—were seen as violating the principle of caritas. The sight of priests on the picket lines was especially horrifying to Catholic conservatives, who argued that by taking sides in a social conflict these clergymen put the universality of their ministry in jeopardy.

Since the activists did not cease and desist, the conservatives’ pressure for restoring the harmony between Catholic ideals and practices mounted. By 1903, when Pius X succeeded Leo XIII, the conflict between the two factions became so intense that it threatened Italian Catholic Action with paralysis. Instaurare omnia in Christo, “to restore all things in Christ,” the motto Pius X announced for his papacy, implied the need for change. The new pope turned out to be a reformer who introduced an unprecedented number of changes during his relatively short papacy, but these changes involved the internal life of the church, such as improvements in religious practices, liturgy, church music, and administration. As far as social, political, and economic theories and practices were concerned, Pius X was not innovative but profoundly conservative, and considered the tenets of Thomistic philosophy working propositions for modern society. With the election of Pius X, the Leonine expansion of Catholic social theory ceased and experiments such as priests’ participation in the Catholic labor movement were called off. For Pius X, who ordered a thorough reorganization of Italian Catholic Action, instaurare omnia in Christo meant making caritas the governing principle of social life. In Esupremi apostolatus, his first encyclical, published in 1903, the announcement of the program of “restoring all things in Christ” was preceded by a stern condemnation of class struggle. And as late as 1910, Pius X insisted upon the mixed union as the basic organizational form of Italian Catholic labor.

During the years between 1903 and 1910, Italy experienced massive labor unrest in the form of wave after wave of strikes. Instead of
waning, class consciousness was on the rise not only among the workers, who avoided the mixed union, but also among the padroni, the owners of industrial and agricultural enterprises. The padroni, of course, supported the idea of the mixed union because they recognized it for what it was, a means to keep the workers under paternalistic control. But their support was manifest more in words than in deeds. In practice the padroni were no less reluctant than the workers to join the mixed union. Unwilling to extend the effort and resources required by “angelic charity,” which the theologians proclaimed the guiding principle of the mixed union, they organized employers’ and property owners’ associations instead.

The pope’s insistence upon the mixed union and the avoidance of social conflict and strikes put Catholic labor organizers at a disadvantage in a time of labor unrest. The Catholic labor movement declined, and this was probably just as well as far as Pius X was concerned. The 1910 congress of Catholic Action refused to accept the mixed union and opted for the semplice, amidst an angry confrontation between the activists and the leaders, who echoed the pope in demanding the misto. Furthermore, a year later a statistical study appeared that showed the lack of realism in the pope’s stance: the study revealed that among the hundreds of Catholic locals not one was a mixed union.

The situation clearly called for a doctrinal adjustment, which, dramatic as it sounds when mentioned in connection with religious doctrine, is not unknown in the history of the church. Catholic theology, like all religious doctrines, changes by shifting emphasis from one doctrinal element to another, focusing upon one part rather than another in the inexhaustible riches of the church’s traditions. But how could a pontiff do anything but emphasize the need for Christian love; how could he not demand that caritas, the very essence of Christianity as it was the essence of God, guide the activities of the faithful? That which was contrary to Christian love had to disappear. Just before he died, Pius X was apparently preparing to issue an encyclical that would have called into question the very existence of Catholic labor movements and the simple union.

Some extant evidence suggests that during the last weeks of his life the pope may have decided against this move. His reconsideration might have been a response to the consternation of, and protest
by, leading churchmen and lay activists that flooded the Vatican from all over the world. The protest and the influence it may have exerted point to an anomaly in church history. Pontiffs always tended to lavish special attention on the Catholics of Italy, not only because until 1870 popes were the heads of an Italian state, but also because they were of Italian origin. This attention meant closer supervision. Thus the shadow of the Vatican fell heavily on Italian Catholic Action, whereas Catholics abroad had somewhat greater freedom.

This was especially true at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the Italian faithful constituted an indispensable force for pontiffs in their struggle with the Italian state. This was shown by the Non Expedit, the ban on the participation of Catholic citizens in national elections, which, applying to Italy alone, gave Italian Catholic Action a distinctiveness that placed it outside the mainstream of the universal church, a uniqueness that brought with it the very close scrutiny of the Vatican.

Yet the pontiffs, leaders of a worldwide organization, daily observed and pondered the experience of the universal church, and this influenced their attitude toward Italy. More than once they looked abroad for examples for Italian Catholics to follow. Teaching by example was the church's traditional way of teaching. Thus, *Germania doceat!*—“teach us, Germany”—became the password Pius X handed down to his Italian followers.

However, this way of teaching by example implied that the experience of Catholics abroad had validity for Italian Catholics, and this meant a break with the uniqueness of Italian Catholic Action, which the pope wanted to maintain. The activists arguing against the Non Expedit would typically point abroad, especially to Germany and the success of German Catholics, not only in propaganda but in politics as well. By pointing to the need for a Catholic political party, Germany was teaching a lesson Pius X did not want Italian Catholics to learn. It was also teaching them the need for greater freedom, the need to get out of the shadow of the Vatican, to break out of the iron cage of conservatism that prevailed in the Vatican during the papacy of Pius X.

What Germany taught became a source of yet another conflict during the last year of the papacy of Pius X. The conflict had been
smoldering for some time, but it exploded then in a very dramatic way. It was centered on the principle of *confessionalità*, the pope’s insistence that Italian Catholic labor unions remain strictly religious in nature. The Catholic activists pointed out that this principle was damaging to the prospects of Catholic labor, for members who were practicing Catholics and doctrinally sound were hard to find, especially among the industrial workers. Nevertheless the relaxation of the principle of *confessionalità* in Italian Catholic social action did not come during the papacy of Pius X; it was to be one of the first acts of his successor. Pius X remained adamant about it as far as the Italian Catholic labor movement was concerned.

In 1912 he decided to grant a request that German Catholics had put forth for decades, and allowed German Catholic unions to enroll non-Catholics as members. *Singulari quadam*, the encyclical that announced the concession, was addressed to the German situation. Thus the Vatican maintained that since Italy, unlike Germany, was a religiously homogeneous society, *confessionalità* would remain valid for Italian Catholic labor. Pius X might have made a concession to this rule a few weeks before he died. If that indeed happened, this concession coincided with other signs indicating that the pope might have decided against issuing the antilabor encyclical, which would have placed the Catholic labor movement all over the world in jeopardy from a doctrinal point of view.

If indeed Pius X did make such a decision, this represented a change in position. Did Pius X, a headstrong man, change his mind? The acts of his life speak against such an interpretation. The hallmark of his style was consistency, both in doctrine and in the application of doctrine to life. His consistency in social doctrine was that of Neo-Thomistic social philosophy. The failure of the mixed union, indicating the ultimate failure of Neo-Thomism as a social philosophy, is the most important marker on the road of the development of the Italian Catholic labor movement during the papacy of Pius X, an era that resounded with conflict between ideas and reality, with a battle between an ideistically motivated leader and social activists who represented reality. Ideas eventually had to give way to reality.

If everything could have been restored in Christ and all men subjected to His laws, as Pius X hoped, there would have been no class conflict. Equilibrium among classes would have prevailed, and
cooperation among classes and productive social peace would have been possible. If only everything could have been restored in Christ and everyone subjected to His laws! For above all the laws of Christ demanded caritas, love and consideration for one’s fellow man. The laws of Christ prescribed concise and abiding duties to individuals as well as to classes.

But the laws of Christ did not govern society. They never did except in the medieval utopia of Neo-Thomists like Pius X. Hence the expectations of Pius X appear highly idealistic. But do all social programs not appear idealistic, especially as seen through the looking glass of time? Nonetheless, it is also true that all social reformers have to confront reality: they must come to terms with it in order to transform it.

“Even though we aspire to the infinite, to act we need concrete, limited, finite goals, a practical ideal, a specific program,” said Luigi Sturzo.¹ The Catholics’ confrontation with reality came as they attempted to work out such concrete programs. In the crucible of life, the ideal of the mixed union melted away into a heap of ashes. When faced with reality, the ideal world of Neo-Thomism proved itself to be a utopia. Thomism had the potential to become a tool of realistic social analysis, and to some extent it became one in northern Europe, especially in Germany and Belgium. But in Italy, Neo-Thomism degenerated into something to which the label “philosophy” might justifiably be denied, since Italian Neo-Thomists seem to have forgotten too often that philosophy means asking questions.

The promise represented by the works of early Italian Thomists like Matteo Liberatore proved to be false in the long run. The dialectical method, intrinsic to the works of Aquinas, was put to masterly use for analyzing the ideas of mid-century Catholics in Liberatore’s 1846 dialogue.² But one searches in vain for the dialectic in the social analyses of Neo-Thomists at the turn of the century, who allowed the dialectic to become the exclusive property of Marxists. It is rare to see in their works a creative application of Thomistic ideas to the modern world. Instead, they attempted to fit modern society into a rigid, dogmatic framework of Thomistic principles. And if these principles turned out to be straitjackets, neither philosophy nor Aquinas but only the Neo-Thomists are to blame. For Aquinas’s philosophy, as Etienne Gilson and Ralph M. McInerny have re-
cently pointed out, was an extremely creative adaptation of Aristotle’s thought to medieval intellectual, social, and political conditions, as well as to the principles of Christianity. But Aquinas’s method of continuous questioning stood in contrast to the dogmatism of most of his self-proclaimed disciples at the turn of the century, whose work more often than not was an exercise in what Gilson described as interpreting “a universe that has long ceased to exist.”

It is, however, unfair to fault only scholars for the shortcomings of modern Thomism and to lavish praise, as Gilson did, on the Neo-Thomistic initiatives of the leaders of the Catholic church. In so doing Gilson seems to have overlooked the fact that it was the church that made the thought of Aquinas a philosophy *ex decreto*. Monsignor Amato Masnovo, a historian of Italian Neo-Thomism who cannot be accused of either antichurch or anti-Thomistic bias, observed that soon after the publication of *Aeterni Patris*, the encyclical that turned Thomism into an official philosophy of the church, the Neo-Thomistic current that “gained in extension” began to “lose in profundity.” Its newly gained popularity amounted to vulgarization and led to superficiality. One is tempted to ask if this is not the fate of every official doctrine.

The Neo-Thomistic scholars who attempted to force the modern world into a straitjacket of dogmatic Thomistic principles were following the lead of papal doctrinal statements. Because these papal teachings often took the form of an encyclical, a weighty form of expression for Catholics, the burden of an inflexible Thomism came to rest on the consciences and intellectual outlooks of Catholics all over the world, but especially in Italy. The ossification of Thomism, already at work under Leo, reached its height during the papacy of Pius X. A study of the directives and practices of this pontiff leaves one with doubts about the positive contributions Gilson and McInerny claimed for papal Thomism and leads one to suspect that the ossification and sterile orthodoxy of Neo-Thomism did not come in spite of the intentions of the church leaders, as Gilson and McInerny suggested, but because of them.

Throughout his career as a churchman, Giuseppe Sarto insisted that the Thomistic doctrine had modern validity. One of the last documents released in his name was the *motu proprio* “Doctoris
Angelici,” which ordered Italian seminaries to make scholastic philosophy the basis of “sacred studies.” “Doctoris Angelici” was followed by a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Studies that summed up Thomistic philosophy in twenty-four “theses.” The publication of the “theses” was the culmination of the development of Neo-Thomism during the papacy of Pius X. With its method of confining Thomistic doctrine to dogmatic “theses,” the decree was symbolic of the quality of philosophical research involved in the church-sponsored Thomism. This very method leads one to question the praise James A. Weisheipl directed at the “ardent” Neo-Thomistic efforts of Pius X. Ironically, the same writer pointed out that Thomism became “closed, safe, and sterile,” “imposed by legislative authority. Legislation did not stimulate a return to the true thought and spirit of St. Thomas relevant to our day.”

The reduction of the thought of Aquinas into dogmatic “theses” whose unquestioned acceptance was expected of all Catholics shows that Pius X did not believe, to paraphrase McInerny, that Thomism had to meet the same demands in the intellectual marketplace as any other philosophical position. In a 1911 editorial comment, the Rivista difilosofia neoscolastica, a church-sponsored publication, reflected the “stupor” of many of the pope’s contemporaries who renewed the old objection to making Thomism a philosophy ex decreto; but the editors denied, of course, that something like that was happening.

Although both the motu proprio and the decree of the Sacred Congregation dealt with theological problems, it would be a mistake to conclude that for Pius X the doctrinal validity of Thomism never extended into the realms of social and political life. He condemned the modernists precisely because they argued that theology and religion could be separated from social and political problems, and that the pope’s authority should be limited to theological and strictly religious matters. Murri expressed this position when he declared that he doubted the pope enjoyed “special light from the Lord” in connection with social and political problems.

The pope’s insistence that he spoke with an authority binding on all the faithful in social matters implied a serious restriction for Catholic social doctrine. It tied the solutions of modern social problems to a program of “restoration” based on the Thomistic utopia of me-
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One of the “errors” of the modernists mentioned in *Pascendi*, the encyclical Pius X addressed to the problems of modernism, was their desire to see the church’s attitude towards social questions changed. That was, for Pius, an aspect of the modernists’ “reforming mania.” “Social modernism,” associated by orthodox theologians with ideas such as those expressed by Romolo Murri and the Lega Democratica Nazionale, came to be connected with a rejection of the applicability of Thomistic principles to modern society. In this Pius X gave the lead in *Pascendi*. The modernists, the pope stated, wanted to abandon the old ways of the Thomistic synthesis and to “relegate” scholastic philosophy to the realm of the history of philosophy because they considered it irrelevant to modern realities.

But the pope silenced those who, like Giovanni Ravaglia, attempted to relate the principles of Thomism to modern social conditions, and in so doing implied that social justice went beyond charity to include the right of the workers to demand what was their due. The *forma mentis* that prevailed in the Vatican during the papacy of Pius X was mirrored in a papal letter to the archbishop of Los Angeles. Dated January 27, 1910, this letter tied together in a single Latin sentence the suggestion that Aquinas is “leader and teacher” with the demand for submission *omnio et in omnibus* to the Apostolic See. This obedience entailed the final degeneration of Thomism from a tool of social analysis into a dogmatic rehashing of selected sayings of the Angelic Doctor. This was shown by the fact that in 1914, according to Toniolo’s carefully considered judgment, the *Rivista internazionale di scienze sociali*—established by Pope Leo to foster Thomistic research—could not publish “materials of a controversial nature,” such as Caissotti’s essay that questioned the social philosophical wisdom emanating from the Vatican through the *Civiltà Cattolica*.

The degeneration and ultimate decline of Thomism was the eclipse of Toniolo, whose *oeuvre* in Italy, if not worldwide, was the most significant attempt to create a social science and an understanding of modern society based on Thomistic notions. Toniolo was the revered master of a generation of Catholic intellectuals and a teacher who broadcast from the speaker’s platforms of Catholic
congresses that social science had to be an “apology for charity” and that charity was “a scientific category.” Today he is almost completely forgotten. During the 1950s someone in a position of importance must have thought that Toniolo was a great thinker, for the Vatican published his *Opera Omnia* during the same decade that Pius X was elevated to sainthood. But the glory reflected by the figure of the pontiff, the first pope to become a saint in several centuries, was not enough to revive the fortunes of his faithful servant and adviser. The publication of Toniolo’s collected works just proved that he was hopelessly obsolete as a social scientist. More than that, he became nearly incomprehensible even to the very small group of experts who use his works as documents of an age. His writings are monuments to the failure of the Neo-Thomistic revival.

One might say that whatever existed in the past, by virtue of its existence, is safe from being called a failure. It is true that, when it first appeared, Neo-Thomism acquired historical significance by providing key elements for an ideology that served, as all ideologies do, to justify as well as to cover up particular social interests. Like the veils painted over the naked figures of Michelangelo’s frescos in the Sistine Chapel, Neo-Thomistic ideas were used to cover up the naked class interests of the rural aristocracy. The beginning of the Neo-Thomistic revival coincided with the halcyon days of the Restoration: the ideas of the Angelic Doctor were recalled to combat the ideology of the Revolution of 1789. Not unexpectedly, Thomism went into decline as the alliance between the aristocracy and church lost its actuality, and as a new social force—the bourgeoisie—replaced the landed aristocrats in social and political importance. A sign of the waning of Thomism was that the Thomistic review *Divus Thomas*, published in Rome since 1880, folded in 1905, apparently because the dwindling number of subscribers did not provide sufficient support for its survival. It was to be “revived” in 1909 under the personal guidance of Pius X in the form of the *Rivista di filosofia neo-scolastica.* But the new review, at least during the era of Pius X, was characterized by an almost total lack of interest in the application of Thomism to social and political problems.

The last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the elaboration of a Thomistically-oriented Catholic social and political
philosophy. During those years Italian Catholic Action evolved under the overbearing influence of Neo-Thomism. But the very fact that at that time Catholics stressed the need for a total transformation of society amounted to an admission of the inapplicability of the Thomistic vision of life to modern society. With their advocacy of a corporative “reconstruction” of society, the Catholics conceded that the Thomistic ideas were working propositions only for a society reconstructed along medieval lines. Thomism as a program for social and political action was a dead-end street. It led Catholics into the rejection of the social and political world in which they lived, into a program of action that was no less utopian than that of the revolutionary Socialists, whom the Catholics so bitterly opposed.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, many Italian Catholics gradually abandoned the Neo-Thomistic utopia of medieval society, and with it the insistence upon the all-encompassing modern validity of notions like charity and alms that grew out of Thomism. The more they became involved in social action, the more insufficient the reliance on the individual conscience alone in dealing with the problem of the working classes appeared to Catholics. They had to realize that the fate of the “poor,” the working classes, had to be a subject of legally guaranteed rights. What this implied, in turn, was that the Catholics, those self-proclaimed champions of the “poor,” had to gain representation in the Parliament, where laws were made and modified.

Yet Pius X did not allow for the establishment of a Catholic political party. Lacking a party through which to channel their efforts toward social reforms, the Catholics increasingly drifted toward an alliance with the political forces under Giovanni Giolitti’s direction, for they were attempting to see through Parliament some of the very same social legislation the Catholics were urging. This alliance, tentative at first, became increasingly important toward the end of the papacy of Pius X and was consummated on a very large scale with the Gentiloni Pact in 1913.

The pact, which represented the virtual abandonment of the principle of the Non Expedit and allowed Catholic voters to go to the polls in very large numbers, was shrouded in secrecy. Prime Minister Giolitti, a representative and leader of the liberal bourgeoisie,
never admitted that he had anything to do with it nor that it involved some of his men. But V. O. Gentiloni, the president of the Unione Elettorale, one of the Catholic national organizations that appeared after Pius X remade Italian Catholic Action in his own image, claimed that hundreds of candidates signed individual agreements promising to uphold Catholic interests in the Chamber. It was also public knowledge that there were Giolittian liberals among the two hundred deputies, whom, Gentiloni asserted, were elected with Catholic votes in the 1913 elections.13

Pius X, who kept a tight rein on Italian Catholic Action, and whose confidant Gentiloni was, certainly knew about the pact. Indeed, it must have originated with him. It appears to have been the culmination of a policy initiated in 1904, when for the first time the pope lifted the Non Expedit in a few localities where Catholic votes were deemed necessary to prevent the election of radical and Socialist candidates. What was in 1904 a trickle of Catholic votes became a flood with the Gentiloni Pact. This retreat from the policy of Non Expedit, like the insistence upon the mixed union, was an integral part of a drive to prevent the industrial working class from becoming a viable social and political force, or, as the Socialists would have it, “the arbiter of the future.” Behind it was an obsessive concern with the threat of socialism and an equally obsessive fear of the industrial working class, which in the minds of Catholic conservatives like Pius X, was associated with socialism.

In searching for a base from which to confront the “Socialist menace,” something that he apparently considered a mortal threat to the church, the pope reached out toward the bourgeoisie. The outline of an alliance between wealth and the altar was slow to emerge, but it eventually became one of the defining characteristics of the papacy of Pius X. As this alliance was becoming a working proposition, Thomism was turning into a burden. Reminding men of means of the obligations the laws of caritas imposed on them became something of an anomaly. Thus a year after the alliance between wealth and the altar came to a denouement with the Gentiloni Pact, Pius X not only tolerated but apparently approved arguments that implied the abandonment of the Thomistic principle of the “social functions of property.”
But with a conservative like Pius X as their taskmaster, Italian Catholics were condemned to run forever behind the spirit of the age. In 1914 the pope was apparently ready to abandon the old struggle against liberal social philosophy. Drawing conclusions from the alliance between wealth and the altar, he seems to have contemplated an alignment of Catholic social doctrine with the tenets of Manchesterian capitalism. However, by 1914 liberal bourgeois like Giolitti were giving up many of these tenets as obsolete, rejecting, for instance, the idea of the permanence of poverty on the social landscape. “New Liberalism,” a liberalism with a social conscience, was on the rise.¹⁴