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

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The Vatican Attempts to Reintroduce the Mixed Union

The congresses of the Opera were once held annually, but it was not until seven years after the one held in Bologna in 1903 that another national Catholic congress was called. Pius X, like a monarch who decided it was quite possible—in fact, advantageous—to govern without a parliament, did not allow one to be called even years after the reorganization of Catholic Action he had ordered was complete and the new unioni were functioning, which had happened by 1907. If he was afraid the divisive fight between the conservative leadership and the activists would resume at a national congress, his fears were justified.

The activists' anger exploded when it became obvious that the delegates to the 1910 congress faced yet another attempt to reintroduce the mixed union, which they thought had been laid to rest seven years earlier. The perception of the demise of the misto in Bologna was so widespread that it found its way into historical works written decades after the events. Francesco Magri was almost alone among the historians of Italian Catholic Action to notice that after the 1903 Bologna congress a systematic attempt was made to revive the mixed union. He connected this with some unnamed “conservatives” within Catholic Action. The evidence that has accumulated since 1956, when Magri published his From Christian Syndicalist Movement to Democratic Syndicalism, strongly suggests that the return of the mixed was not just a quixotic attempt on the part of the conservatives within the Catholic leadership but an integral part of the pattern that Pius X prescribed for the reorganized Catholic Action.
While preparations were under way for the 1910 Modena congress, including the reintroduction of the *misto* as a basic organizational form, Mario Chiri, a functionary of the Economic Social Union, was hard at work gathering statistical data. Soon after the congress, Chiri provided some astonishing information when he reported that only 4 of the 374 organizations of Catholic labor could be classified as *misto*. As it turned out, even these four were not really mixed. Although they did not bother to replace old statutes that called for a mixed membership, these four organizations, in Chiri’s words, “did not, in fact, include *padroni*” as members.\(^3\)

The obvious question is whether anybody knew before 1911, when Chiri’s findings were published, that in spite of decades of talk about it and efforts to create it, the mixed union remained a figment of the conservatives’ imagination. When in 1905 Bishop Radini was about to occupy his episcopal seat in Bergamo, he was handed confidential memorandums detailing the difficulties he was about to face in “Italy’s first diocese,” as Pius X called the area where the central offices of the Economic Social Union were located. Monsignor Carlo Castelletti, who served for over twenty years as *Assistente Ecclesiastico*, informed the bishop with the memorandums that the mixed union was an utter failure in “Italy’s first diocese.”\(^4\)

Nevertheless, in 1906, three years after the Bologna congress, which presumably concluded the debate over the usefulness of the *misto*, an article appeared in *Azione Sociale* entitled “The Past and Future of Economic Action among Italian Catholics.” It clearly indicated that the mixed union was included in the marching orders given by the pope to the reorganized Italian Catholic Action. The article’s critical importance was also highlighted by the fact that it was signed by Toniolo, the chief theoretician of Catholic social action. That he was in touch with Pius X as the pope personally oversaw the reorganization of Catholic Action became obvious later from Toniolo’s published correspondence. Toniolo’s message in the 1906 article was that, in spite of the decision reached in Bologna, the mixed union had to remain on the agenda. The *semplice* was to be restricted to “the great industrial enterprises and large landed estates where day labor is predominant and, because of the conflict of interests, any other combination would be impossible and complex.” The
mistò was to be organized in “small-size industries, collective rentals *colonia parziaria*], and among small landholders, where the intimacy of life and of interests favors solidarity.”

An editorial in *L’Osservatore Romano* in May, 1910, shortly before the Modena congress convened, forcefully reminded readers that the mixed unions were an indispensable means of “social regeneration” and that they “represent, and must represent, the true ideal for Catholic social action.” The double affirmative of the official paper of the Vatican was reaffirmed by the leaders of Catholic Action when they finalized the plans for the congress, which included the organization of labor as a major topic of discussion. Beginning in June the General Directorate of Catholic Action held a series of meetings, and by the third one, on September 25, the program of the congress was decided. The General Directorate sent a telegram announcing the agenda to the pope, speaking of “filial attachment” “to the Apostolic See, infallible Teacher of the truth.” The format of the pass to be used at the congress was also made public: it carried the picture of Pius X framed in lombard-gothic motifs, the pope’s favored style in art. The tenseness in Catholic leadership, submerged in the terse reports about the meetings on the pages of *L’Osservatore Romano*, came to the surface in a circular released by the General Directorate on September 12. It issued a stern warning against “vain and sterile discussions, useless and untimely complaints,” and urged a “concord of intentions and of zeal for doing good.”

The meetings of the General Directorate were called to coordinate the proposals of the various *unioni*, which were prepared at the assemblies of their own governing bodies. The Economic Social Union held its first meeting in April. Medolago’s presidential address displayed a studied opaqueness, a tendency to deal only with generalities. He spoke of internal conflict between “diverse tendencies” that “paralyzed” Catholic Action in previous years. He also criticized the prevalent tendency in the Catholic labor movement “to be concerned almost exclusively with gaining limited goals and immediate economic advantages” instead of following “the light of the immutable principles of sciences, Catholic doctrine, and the instructions of the Holy See.”

Aside from this veiled reference, he did not mention the labor
movement. His avoidance of the topic might have given hope to some of the activists, but it bothered Toniolo’s professorial inclination toward orderliness. “We are in trouble if we don’t bring forth our ideas in neat and positive [forms],” he wrote in a letter to Caissotti in August. But the professor did not need to worry. Further careful considerations and, one may add without hesitation—although it cannot be documented with extant evidence—consultation with the Vatican eventually produced a document of great clarity. The theses that the Unione Economico Sociale proposed for acceptance in Modena twenty days before the congress advocated “mixed professional unions in situations where the economic and moral interests of the *padroni* are closely tied to those of the workers (rentals in agriculture *agricoltura a colonia* small-sized industries, and small commercial enterprises) … [and] simple professional unions in situations where such sharing of interests does not exist.”

To what extent this was a case of *Roma locuta* will remain a subject of debate until the background materials become available, but ten days before the congress, the editors of *L’Osservatore Romano*, anxious to make things clear and unequivocal, printed the proposals that were to be presented by Niccolo Rezzara on behalf of the Economic Social Union.

There are some intriguing questions for Vaticanologists in connection with Rezzara’s report. For instance, how “official” was the official paper of the Vatican? Pius X, who was more than once quick to react to what he did not like on the pages of provincial Catholic papers, cannot have disagreed with the assertion of *L’Osservatore Romano* in May that the mixed unions “represent and must represent the true ideal for Catholic Action.” This was the opening shot in the battle about the mixed union in Modena. If it was not a direct expression of the pope’s wish, was it a trial balloon testing the possibility of something Pius X thought would be nice to have if it could be had?

This suggestion appears to be a sacrilege in connection with a pope whose virtues gained him sainthood and who was very forcefully consistent when it came to principles. Yet though he represented eternal truth, as the head of an organization he could not
always remain above practical and tactical considerations. His office demanded that he stress what society should have been and eventually ought to be, but at least on some occasions he also had to come to terms with reality by finding out what could and could not be done. That he used the pages of the *Civiltà Cattolica* for testing public reaction to ideas is documented irrefutably. If indeed the *Civiltà*, to quote Pius’s secretary, Monsignor Bressan, always said “what the pope desired,” how did the editorials in *L’Osservatore Romano* relate to the directing will of the pope?

Aside from issues of interpretation of sources, the battle over the mixed union in Modena and Rezzara’s report open questions of a personal nature. Why was the report not delivered by Medolago? Was this connected with the fact that the count’s presidential address in April deliberately avoided the theme of the organizational forms of labor? Questions might be raised about Toniolo as well. He was the *rapporteur* on the subject of labor at previous congresses, and was asked as late as 1906 to write a programmatic article for the Economic Social Union. In Modena he did deliver an address, but this was to the plenary session of the congress and not to the meeting of the Unione Economico Sociale, which held separate sessions like all the other *unioni*.

Toniolo’s Modena address was general in nature but did touch upon the organization of labor. The reference, somewhat veiled, seems to have been to the simple union alone, giving the impression of a contrast with Toniolo’s 1906 article, which clearly presented both the mixed and the simple unions as the forms Catholic labor organizations would take. If indeed this was the case, and Toniolo’s Modena speech represented a change in position, was it an expression of disapproval of Rezzara’s report? In view of the fact that in every situation he accepted the will of the pope as the will of God, it is unthinkable that Toniolo joined the ranks of the activists in a rebellion against the pope. Thus Toniolo’s advocacy of the *semplice*, if indeed his speech can be called that, weakens arguments that suggest determination on the part of Pius X to bring back the mixed at whatever cost. Toniolo always seemed to be aware of inclinations “up there,” in the Vatican, and by 1910 he became extremely wary of
saying or doing anything contrary to the pope’s wishes. Hence an advocacy of the simple union as the sole organizational form of Catholic labor on Toniolo’s part can be taken as an almost certain sign that Pius X may not have been firmly committed to the mixed union as a viable form for the present. He is likely to have thought that it was something that should have been, or even could have been, in existence, and hence the drive to reinstate it. But in the end, it was likely to be rejected at the congress as impractical, since this view was so widely held that it could not have been hidden from the pope. In fact, one is inclined to posit the rather cynical hypothesis that both Medolago and Toniolo avoided delivering the report, which represented an attempt to reinstate the mixed union, because they found this suggestion unrealistic. For whatever reason Rezzara got stuck with it, and one is inclined to pity him because the insistence upon the mixed must have represented an even greater violation of his perception of reality than it did for Medolago and Toniolo.

Rezzara was an activist who came to Modena as the hero of the 1909 Ranica strike, which he led, amid national publicity, to victory over the *padroni*. “Which one is the real Rezzara?” asks the historian Dino Secco Suardo. Is it the Rezzara of the Ranica strike, or the Rezzara of the Modena congress who a few months after Ranica drew the ire of the activists and eventual historical ignominy for attempting to revive the mixed union. Secco Suardo leaves the question unanswered, but there is no need to posit a paradox in connection with this case. Secco Suardo gives the key to the explanation when elsewhere in his volume he notes that the affairs of Italian Catholic Action during the papacy of Pius X reminded him of Napoleon’s dictum according to which the “best soldier was not the most courageous, but the most obedient one.” Rezzara, to his merit, was apparently willing to take on a battle in which he was sacrificed in an attempt to regain a position, for no better reason than to prove that the position could not be regained.

That this was the case is strongly suggested by Rezzara’s behavior in Modena. He showed no resentment for getting stuck with an unpleasant task that Medolago probably imposed on him in a manner typical of bureaucratic organizations, in which the bosses
inevitably dump such tasks on subordinates and reserve for themselves chores that promise to prove them clearsighted, wise, and successful as leaders. Rezzara backed up the proposals of the Unione Economico Sociale in his report\textsuperscript{17} by arguing that

> every apostle of this beneficial action has to try to arrive, little by little and through a methodical and rational process, at the organization of professional corporations either mixed, where these are possible, or simple unions where the first cannot be constituted. Since capital and labor within branches of activities share common interests to develop, protect, and defend, their harmonious coordination is indispensable. This can best be achieved in the mixed unions, with the natural and permanent organisms of these. [But such a task] is more difficult in the simple unions, which have distinct and separate organisms, even if these do not suffer from convulsions.

Rezzara then pronounced something that must have sounded like a call for retreat: “No one among us has any illusion about the possibility of constituting mixed unions. A little bit because it is believed or feared that there is conflict among classes, something that clouds even the brightest minds, a bit because of the ignorance of certain working classes, too abandoned and depressed, a distance between the two factors [classes] is maintained, and these accuse each other of distrust.”

**The Activists’ Refusal**

In trying to please everybody, Rezzara managed to say the right thing in the wrong way as far as the more radical activists were concerned. His attempt to blame the failure of the mixed union somewhat one-sidedly on the “ignorance” of working people, when everybody high and low knew that the *padroni* too avoided joining the workers in common organizations, could hardly be pleasing to the activists’ ears. But that was only a side issue in the attempt to discard the conclusions reached and duly approved by a majority vote at the previous Catholic congress in Bologna. In view of an apparent contradiction in the keynote address, which insisted upon the mixed
union but acknowledged its impracticality, the activists could not be blamed if they wanted clarification as to exactly what direction their efforts were to take in the future.

The activists were charitable enough not to personally attack the hero of the Ranica strike, who, in the language of bureaucracy, was just doing his job. They vented their anger and frustration on the institution Rezzara represented. What followed his report, which closed with the suggestion to accept the proposals for the mixed union, was, in the words of the reporter for L’Osservatore Romano, a “violent indictment of the Unione Economico Sociale.”

Rezzara can hardly be said to have fought over the mixed union. Apparently he went to the congress instructed to concede this point if necessary, and he conceded rather quickly, admitting that the “mixed professional unions are by now a utopian dream of the past.” He had a position, prepared by Toniolo years before, to retreat to, a position that was a marvel of compromise between ideals and reality: “The mixed organizations,” Rezzara said, “must remain abandoned for now, but they must not be forgotten, like a torch that must never be extinguished.” The hope for the eventual victory of truth, charity, and the mixed union was apparently enough to placate worries “up there.”

The modification of the resolution proposed by the Economic Social Union, involving the deletion of the mixed union from the final version accepted by the congress, was a clear victory for the activists. But letting this initiative die was apparently as far as Pius X was willing to retreat in the face of the rebellion of the activists.

As for strikes and class struggle, another issue that concerned the activists very much, Rezzara remained firm in the face of a flood of criticism: “It cannot be our program, because it is not Christian, it is not civil, it is not social to organize the professions in order to line them up, one against the other, as if the transitory fact of seeing some in conflict with others would be considered permanent and would have to be accepted as the principle and basis for professional organizations.”

But activists like Restito Cecconelli, a priest from Padua, persisted. Criticizing the resolutions proposed by the Economic Social Union, he said:
Look at the verbs that fill this document: orders, wants, deliberates, advises.... Now this preoccupation induces fear in me.... We had better stay home if we cannot say what's in our hearts. In the report presented by Rezzara, there is no mentioning of strikes, yet we had to organize and sustain several of them, but from the Economic Social Union never came advice, never instructions in spite of the fact that it was indispensable that we make these strikes.... As far as the mixed unions are concerned we declare to be absolutely against them. Those who know about organizing from practical experience know about the difficulties of propagandizing. The peasants watch us carefully, us Catholics and priests, to see if we are sincere, if, after delivering our propaganda, we end up riding with Count A and Baron B.... They will respect us only if we return home on our own poor wagons.

Because the clamor of the activists would not cease, Filippo Crispoldi, the president of the congress, interrupted the debate to warn that "congresses can be useful, but they are not indispensable." Crispoldi's remarks clearly reflected the position of Pius X better than Cecconelli's. Approval of strikes as legitimate means employed by Catholic labor unions was not forthcoming from the pope's lips or pen. He did not even say a word that would have indicated his acceptance of a temporary abandonment of the mixed union. If he indeed "accepted" it, his acceptance was announced by silence. "The Pope will remain silent," he remarked when he consented to a change of momentous importance, the lifting of the Non Expedit on a case-by-case basis. But in one of his last public pronouncements, in May, 1914, Pius X referred to those who misinterpreted him "by attributing a meaning entirely contrary to the one wanted by the pope, and consequently taking for agreement something that was but a prudent silence." He thus warned those who would interpret his silence as agreement.

What he said was not new. One of the basic principles of church history is that changes in the position of the church often become manifest by the silence of pontiffs about subjects that might have been dear to the hearts of one or more of their predecessors. Given the fact that, as Toniolo observed, one pope "does not all of a sudden deny the direction given by another," changes in the life of the church come through the gradual abandonment of positions pre-
viously taken. Change comes in the church by drawing a veil of silence over subjects.

Later events strongly suggest that the silence of Pius X immediately following the Modena congress was not an act of approval. Yet the historian has to deal with evidence from the aftermath of Modena that is unequivocal in indicating some degree of hesitation on the part of the Vatican. Right after the meeting closed, in an approving review of the decisions of the Modena congress *L'Osservatore Romano* did not mention the mixed union, and emphasized the participants’ “desire to spend Catholic social efforts especially in favor of the proletariat.”

Four days later, on November 18, the editors returned to the proceedings of the congress in a more critical mood, warning Italian Catholics of their duty to submit to the Holy See:

> Obedience to pontifical leadership means [for Catholic Action] that it must not only resolutely escape every suspicion of class struggle, the suspicion of which in itself was nobly avoided by the congress, but it also means acquiring the marked characteristics of an action that, without weaknesses and unbecoming servility, is an element and a precious coefficient of harmony and concord between capital and labor, and of the pacification of various social classes by disciplining, coordinating them, and harmonizing their interests, rights, and reciprocal obligations. Obedience to pontifical leadership means to imprint our professional organizations with a markedly Catholic characteristic, flying freely in the light of the day the flag of our sacred principles as the voice of our supreme Teacher reminded and ordered us to do.\(^{21}\)

If we read this statement, and we must, as a rejection of class struggle, what are we to do with an editorial in *L'Osservatore Romano* that, seventeen months later in April, 1912, seemed to express resignation to the “peaceful struggle of competition pacifiche lotte della concorrenza” carried on by the “professional” organizations? Whatever the exact meaning of the sentence, with it the editors of the Vatican’s official paper came as close as they ever would to presenting as legitimate the economic conflict among classes. In this they concurred with Biederlack’s updated and especially German Catholic understanding of conflict and strikes.\(^{22}\)
How much of what *L'Osservatore Romano* wrote was on instructions from above and how much was due to the principle of objective reporting, which the editors presumably accepted, is an interesting if frustrating subject for those scholars who attempt to unravel the history of Italian Catholic journalism. The Vatican’s paper did report the activists’ argument that the Catholics should organize “the working classes alone, since the superior classes possess a natural inclination *cemento naturale*] toward organization that is lacking in [working-class] people.” But these arguments did not prevail in the end; the accepted resolution spoke of the importance of “giving attention and care to the professional organization of the middle class *ceto medio*], which constitutes a great moral force and exercises a balancing socioeconomic function, an influence that sometimes is more prevalent than any others.”

Then, to be sure that nobody would be deprived of the beneficial activities of the Unione Economico Sociale, there was the effort to organize the *padroni* too. The resolutions of the Modena congress did not specifically mention this, but year after year Medolago sent out circulars about the *organizzazioni padronali*. The one mailed out on November 23, 1912, quoted a *motu propria* of Pius X stating that “the concept of Christian Democracy has to be cleansed *bisogna rimuovere*] from the inconvenience that concentrates all the effort in favor of the lowest classes and seems to neglect the superior classes, which are no less important in the conservation and perfecting of society.”

Self-accusingly, the signatories of the circular—Medolago, Rezzara, and Monsignor Luigi Daelli—“confessed” that “until now” “Catholic social action was almost exclusively focused on the needy classes, while the *classi padronali* were almost forgotten.” The fact that a circular during the next year was still asking for suggestions as to how to organize the *padroni* indicates that Medolago, who did not manage to perform the magic of pulling one mixed union after another from his hat, was failing his taskmaster in the Vatican once more when the pope demanded that he organize the *padroni* in order to parallel the organizations of the workers.

It was not that the worthies of industry and agriculture did not see the need for organizing. For the landowners there was the Asso-
ciazione Agraria, which gave such an excellent account of itself with armed terror squads during the Parma strike in 1908. For industry, associations representing particular lines of production were rapidly being consolidated into organizations gathering the employers of more than one industry. An example of such organizations was the Piedmont Industrial League, which was established shortly before the General Confederation of Labor was called into being in 1906. Then the regional confederations of employers were in turn consolidated into a single national unit. When in 1911 the Associazione fra le società per azioni, a national body, held its first congress, the delegates represented more than half of the corporate capital of all Italy.