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

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Catholics Confront Socialism

Their unwavering defense of the principle of private property set Catholics on a collision course with the socialists and drove them toward the alliance between wealth and the altar that was the denouement of the Catholics’ war on socialism. In spite of this hostility, many Catholics retained a basic sympathy toward the Socialists’ struggle to improve the lot of the working people. Even Toniolo opined in 1897 that Catholics and socialists should “march separately” but “fight united.” The suggestion, which provoked a howl of protest by Catholic conservatives, for once was not off the mark. In 1897 the Socialists sat together with the Catholics at an international conference in Zurich. The theme of the conference was the legislative protection of the interests of the working classes. This experience, which constituted the backdrop to Toniolo’s remark, led to arguments in favor of cooperation with the Socialists on their minimal program, which, stressing social legislation, coincided with the traditional Catholic demand for social injustice.

In 1898, a year after the Zurich conference, Italian Catholics shared with the Socialists something else: persecution at the hands of a government bent on destroying opposition; but the experience affected the two groups differently. The persecution made the Socialists more defiant. For the Catholic camp, it marked a significant advance in the direction of the Programma di Milano, the move toward an antisocialist alliance between Catholics and the bourgeoisie. Thus instead of talking of similarities between themselves and the Socialists, the Catholics emphasized the differences by contrasting the revolutionary threat represented by the Socialists with the conservative orientation of their own organizations. They styled
themselves the “party of order,” manning the bastions against socialism, “the modern Attila.”

Provincial Catholic papers issued rousing calls for a new crusade as the pope too raised his voice to stop the advance of Attila on Rome. Considering that he used to refer to Socialists as “barbarians” who carried a “deadly pestilence,” Leo XIII’s statements about them in *Graves de communi*, the encyclical issued in 1901, were surprisingly moderate in tone. The pope mentioned them in connection with the practice of charity and almsgiving, which the Socialists objected to but which the pope defended as absolutely necessary for maintaining a Christian community. This and other remarks defining the meaning of Christian Democracy as not political but social in nature, a social “action in favor of the people,” firmly placed Catholic Action within the forces of order, giving them an essentially reformist orientation.

With *Graves de communi* the Leonine expansion of Catholic social theory ceased and the experimentation Leo had encouraged stopped. As for cooperation with the Socialists, Leo reminded the faithful that whatever the meaning and aims of the Socialists’ minimal program, their ultimate goals represented a threat to the church. Accordingly, the *incontro-scontro*, the Catholics’ encounter with socialism, tended to become an increasingly angry conflict; the love-hate relationship that a historian detected between them was not developing very strongly in favor of love. In spite of a basic sympathy many Catholics felt for the moral concern involved in the Socialists’ drive for social justice, the earlier cooperation between Catholics and Socialists in municipal politics became rarer and cooperation with liberals more frequent. Suggestions for coordinating actions between their respective organizations of labor, as these were built up, ran into strong resistance on the part of the leadership on both sides. A war on socialism (*guerra al socialismo*) was on for good.

The Catholics for the most part joined the war with a remarkable lack of knowledge about the enemy. Medolago had bitter words more than once about the Catholics’ lack of concrete information when they discussed economic and social issues, but he was no less culpable than the others when it came to knowing about socialism.
His library, which apparently included virtually nothing written by those who represented the idea-world of socialism, was amply supplied with works by Catholics critical of socialism.\textsuperscript{11}

In their secondhand knowledge of socialism, the Italians were not unlike the Catholics in other countries.\textsuperscript{12} What was surprising, however, was that their abysmal ignorance, which often led to caricaturistic presentations of socialism, persisted for so long. Furthermore, these presentations tended to degenerate as time passed. Ugo Boncompagni Ludovisi’s early 1880s statement suggested that the world made by socialism “will not have the family, will not have property, will not have genius because [socialism] will kill that off with equality; it will not have affection, generosity, and self-denial or gratitude because these qualities appear absurd and even crazy in the light of their principles.”\textsuperscript{13}

This was mild in comparison with the 1908 argument by Chiesa: “Do you want to know what the Socialists would like to do to priests? If they could, they would cut them up into pieces, every one of them. The only thing that would bother them would be that we don’t have, all of us [priests] together, one single head so that they could chop it off with a single blow.”\textsuperscript{14}

Then there was the 1910 masterpiece by Burroni, complete with a mock Socialist catechism, including a prayer to “Father Ferri,” the Socialist leader, who lives in the heaven of wealth. It presented the Socialist as one who enriches himself at the expense of the workers, and the Socialist union as an organization that “entrap[s] the worker and forces him to pay [dues] and strike.”\textsuperscript{15} Showing that Chiesa and Burroni represented something like a style of talking about socialism, \textit{Azione Sociale}, the official publication of the Economic Social Union, reporting in 1911 on the latest Socialist congress, referred to the participants as \textit{condeliquenti camorristi}, linking them to mafia-like organizations, and talked of insolence and vulgarity as the characteristics of the meeting.\textsuperscript{16}

These rather vulgar accusations matched the anticlericalism of the Socialists, their mock catechism, the caricature of fat and grabby priests and, what was a worse “blasphemy” for Catholics, the figure of “Christ the Socialist.”\textsuperscript{17} The Socialists, increasingly considered as the enemy, have been tarred and feathered for acts of puerile anticlericalism that others such as Freemasons committed, but their
own stance was uncompromisingly anticlerical as well. They introduced customs such as Socialist funerals and advocated civil marriage; they posted flags in front of churches announcing “neither God, nor padroni”; they loudly proclaimed the conviction that religion served as opiate for the people, keeping them in the exploitative grip of the owners of wealth.

As Italian Catholics became deadlocked into a confrontation with socialism, it in turn largely defined the thematics of Italian Catholic Action. Thus it was in response to the challenge of socialism that the program eventually known as Christian Democracy emerged. Characteristically, the term first appeared in the antisocialist manifesto, the Programma di Milano. And Toniolo, who was the father of Italian Christian democracy, worked out the details of the concept in connection with his studies of that social “pathology,” socialism. Others were driven into the concerns and hopes that Christian Democratic activism represented by events such as the fasci episode in Sicily. Since the Socialists, claiming to represent the aspirations of the working people, were active in organizing labor, they established this as a major concern of Christian Democracy. Probably no other conflict within Italian Catholic Action matched the intensity of the clash between the conservative leadership, insistent upon the mixed union as the organizational framework of Catholic labor, and the activists, who saw that as the epitome of impracticality.

Since Rerum novarum clearly did not charge Catholic Action with the defense of the privileges of the upper classes but rather with the saving of the proletariat, the activists represented the spirit of Leo’s “labor encyclical” better than the conservative leadership. Toniolo, who always attempted to strike a balance between opposing tendencies, was increasingly left behind as the activists took more and more radical positions and felt that those held by the founding father of Christian Democracy were turning into hindrances.

The more important socialism became in Italian life, the more radical the Christian Democrats sounded and acted. How tiresome Toniolo’s approach of tracing problems back to the distant past appeared when compared with the directness of the activists. Murri’s response to the fasci was immediate, the point being that the Catholics would have to meet the Socialists head-on: “Socialism advances threateningly. Hundreds of thousands of workers joined the
fasci, and these men and women desert the churches en masse to go to the meeting halls of the fasci. Let us take the lead in this movement and convince the people that the church is its salvation: we will thus prevent [them] from falling into the jaws of socialism and anarchism.” Eventually a leader who was increasingly led, or better put, dragged along, Toniolo too would arrive at a similar conclusion and understand Christian Democracy as Murri and the other young activists did, as a means through which to take on socialism and “conquer the proletariat” for the Church.

It took time and the trauma of witnessing the Socialists’ success in reaching the working masses for the conservative leaders of Catholic Action to come around to Murri’s point. But eventually they did: a 1907 circular of the Unione Elettorale was even more blunt than Murri in stating that “it was convenient to imitate Socialist propaganda.” The desire to “imitate” the Socialists’ propaganda methods became so intense that some appear to have worried about the differences between Catholics and Socialists disappearing. Thus the first competition announced in 1908 by the newly organized League of Italian Catholic Propagandists involved essays defining the “differential criteria between Catholic and Socialist propagandists.”

The need for defining the differences between themselves and the Socialists became rather acute by the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century because their attempts to match the Socialists’ efforts item by item often led to failure. Yet because the obsession with the need to beat the Socialists in their own game persisted, Catholic organizational and propaganda initiatives tended to be hasty reactions rather than carefully planned and tactically prepared actions. This is suggested by statistical information about Catholic labor organizations. The number of Catholic locals was 374 in 1910. This shows a nearly threefold increase since 1907, demonstrating a remarkable recovery from the decline during 1903–7. The average membership, however, which was 378 in 1906, went down to 280 per unit by 1910. The Catholic organizers appear to have scattered their efforts by trying to take up the challenge of the Socialists in every possible location. This argument can, of course, be turned around by saying that an organization, however small, was a proverbial foot in the door, a crack in a local Socialist monopoly in organizing labor, which was the driving motivation in the
Catholics’ uphill battle against socialism. Yet, without doubt, the numerical weakness of Catholic organizations reduced their effectiveness not only with regard to the Socialist unions but also insofar as gains for their own members were concerned. Often very small in membership, Catholic unions more than once played the role of fence-sitters, especially when strikes were called against enterprises that involved both Catholic and non-Catholic organizations of labor. “Wait and see” was an attitude that betrayed weakness, and it also gave away something beyond the tactical situation. It bespoke the hesitation of the activists about involvement in “class struggle,” which was, to say the least, frowned upon by the Vatican. But neutrality in a labor conflict, however benevolent toward the workers, risked the appearance of benevolence toward the padroni.

If its tactics indeed betrayed the weakness of the Catholic labor movement, so did membership statistics. In 1906 the combined enrollment of Catholic locals, reported at approximately 70,000, was only about 12.3 percent of the 570,000 inscribed in the organizations of the General Confederation of Labor (CGL) and the Chambers of Labor, both Socialist in orientation. By 1910 the Catholics’ enlistment went up to 104,000, but this was still only about half of the CGL membership, which in turn represented less than 50 percent of the total number of workers in Socialist unions. When compared with the Italian national total of the organized labor force (exclusive of the Catholics but inclusive of all the other organizations), which was 817,000 in 1910, the Catholic unions, after an impressive growth during the years 1908–10, still showed no more than 12.7 percent.

**Catholic Labor in the Industrial Sector**

Statistical data suggest that during those years of growth Catholics exerted a greater organizational effort and succeeded in gathering larger numbers in industry than in agriculture. There was an especially heavy concentration of Catholic unionism in the textile industry, which provided wages far below the average because it employed women and youth in large numbers: 33,402 (41.5 percent) of the membership of Catholic industrial unions, came from the textile industry, with 22,397 (67 percent) of these women and 6,168 (18.5 percent) youths below 18 years of age. If one were to ascribe the
large number of females in Catholic unions to the fact that women generally went to church more frequently than men and thus were more easily influenced by Catholic organizers, one would make a mistake. The Catholics might have gone the way of least resistance in organizing women, but they also committed themselves to gain improvement for a segment of the industrial working class that in Italy was both rapidly growing in numbers and outrageously poorly paid when compared with males employed in both industry and agriculture.\(^{28}\) Of the 99,969 members of all the Catholic unions whose age and sex Chiri could identify, 35,841 (35.8 percent) were women and 10,268 (10.3 percent) were youths. These groups were in special need of improvements in both pay and working conditions.

As the Catholic effort to organize the industrial working class began in earnest, Medolago seems to have been somewhat hesitant because he felt the Socialists had already beaten him and his troop of organizers to it. At least, such was the impression he gave to Caissotti in 1898.\(^ {29}\) This initial hesitation, however, did not prevent a rather creditable performance, although the credit might be due more to the activists than to Medolago, depending on whether one is inclined to attribute a victory to the general or to the foot soldiers, or both. Nevertheless, during the nine-year period from 1901 through 1909, no less than 180 Catholic industrial unions were founded, and this represented 58.1 percent of the total of 310 established by Catholics. In 1910, 67,466 (64.5 percent) of the total membership of 104,614 came from industry. With 37,148 members (35.5 percent of the total) and 140 organizations (as opposed to 234 in industry), Catholic organizational effort among the peasantry remained below that of the Socialists. At the end of 1909, the CGL alone enlisted 130,000 rural people, 43.3 percent of a total membership of about 300,000. Data that excludes the Catholic organizations indicate that, in 1910, 48 percent of the organized Italian labor force of 920,000 came from agriculture and 52 percent from industry, far above the Catholics’ 35.5 percent.

One obvious explanation of the Catholics’ focus on the industrial sector in their organizational efforts is the rising concern with which they observed an increase in the numbers in the ranks of the industrial working class. Toniolo, who was then still acknowledged
as the leader and chief ideologue of Christian Democracy, registered this alarm when in 1901 he declared that the very existence of the industrial working class, which was profoundly “antisocial” in nature, represented an evil that carried the threat of “an attempt at hand of overthrowing the whole social order.” The shrillness of the statement reflected a massive growth of urbanization and industrialization in Italy at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Those who lived in towns with populations of 20,000 or more represented 10.6% of the population of Italy in 1870, 15 percent in 1890, and 27.5 percent in 1910. It might be argued that such statistics do not give a true picture of urbanization, since, especially in the southern part of the country, population centers with 20,000 or more inhabitants were nothing but overgrown villages, with the vast majority of the inhabitants deriving their livelihood from agriculture. Yet in these population centers, urban aspects of life often coexisted for centuries with elements of a rural life-style. Besides, the population living in urban centers of over 50,000, which undoubtedly represented an urban way of life, nearly doubled in Italy between 1871 and 1901: it rose from 2,820,446 to 4,669,909, and went on growing as a result of increasing industrialization.

Industrialization was on the upswing to such an extent that economic historians talk of an “industrial revolution” at the turn of the nineteenth century. If we take 1938 as the base, the production of Italian manufacturing industries during 1891–95 represented 28 percent of 1938 output, and 59 percent during the years 1911–15. The period between 1896 and 1908 registered an especially marked increase in industrial output, with an annual average growth of 6.7 percent. The development of industrial production coincided with a European-wide economic upswing, but the growth in Italy was especially dramatic: per capita industrial production increased in that country by two-thirds during the 1901–13 period alone, and total production grew 87 percent. Italy’s share of the world’s industrial production rose from 2.7 percent during the last five years of the nineteenth century to 3.1 percent during the period 1906–10. The Catholics’ anxiety about the growth of the industrial working class was apparently built on the social reality of Italy. In 1861 there were only 9,000 industrial concerns in the kingdom. In 1903 there were
117,000, and by 1914, 244,000. The number of those employed by them was 188,000 in 1861, rose to 1,275,100 in 1903, and nearly doubled again to 2,304,500 by 1914.\textsuperscript{36}

**Rural to Urban Migration**

A consequence of growing industrialization was a large-scale rural to urban migration. Because this involved social dislocation, it alarmed Catholics, especially those of conservative persuasion, many of whom seemed to have been convinced that the good life could be had only in the country. They saw the peasants who left the villages for jobs in the urban centers as committing an act of folly. They also labeled them “deserters.” How widespread and lasting this perception was is shown by the fact that the term was applied to peasant migrants by \textit{Azione Sociale} as late as in 1913, making the folly of the “deserters” fully clear:

Leaving their villages, the migrants [to urban centers] often abandon religious practices and sometimes even the morality that these include. It becomes increasingly difficult to provide them with religious services; the family, the cell of social organism, disintegrates; the village of birth, with its old church tower, the house and land of the ancestors, its memories and traditions, are lost, and little by little even the idea of patriotism disappears.… The moral consequences of the urban agglomeration are disastrous. Certain theaters, cinemas, a variety of attractions, the bad newspapers with large circulation, and other forms of dishonest propaganda, all contribute to the ruin of people. Not only their morals but almost always their health too are wrecked as licentiousness and illness in most cases bring overwhelming, frightful misery.\textsuperscript{37}

The \textit{Azione Sociale} was voicing the constant conservative concern about “keeping them down on the farm” and away from the evil that awaited the peasant migrants in urban centers. This was a recurring theme at Catholic congresses and also the subject of circulars sent out by Medolago. The famous 1879 speech by Sassoli, which set up the landlords as little “kings,” also displayed concern about them remaining without “subjects” because “the agricultural population
deserts work in the fields.” This was a sideline only, with the marquis’s attention unselfishly concentrated on the damage the “deserters” did to themselves.38 That concern was apparently shared by most village priests at the turn of the century. The priests, usually of peasant origins, saw in the urban center everything that was wrong with modern life—the seat of error and corruption, the kingdom of Satan, as their bishops perceived it as well. After moving to the towns, the peasant migrants, the clergy argued, ceased to keep their religious practices; they worked on Sundays and ate meat on Fridays. The *centro urbano* was seen by the clergy, as it was by Catholic conservatives in general, as the hotbed of religious indifference and even of downright hostility to religion, where Protestant missionaries, liberal ideologues, Freemasons, and Socialist agitators threatened the unsuspecting and innocent souls of the peasant migrants.39 A priest reported from Turin that those coming from small rural communities carried the “Christian traditions of their villages”; but in the urban environment, they “come into contact with other people who are perverted and corrupted and who lead them into the ranks of the Socialists.”40

**Pastoral Work among the Migrants**

The “dechristianization” of rural folk in an urban setting remained the dominant theme of the Catholics’ discussion of the ruralurban migration. Their missionary zeal, attempting to save souls from the devil’s grip, certainly had to do with all those agents of Satan who were out to ensnare souls, but it was also rooted in rapid industrialization and the attendant fast growth of urban centers. As cities like Turin burst at their seams and expanded outward, the new quarters of the towns were without religious structures. The priests who attempted to minister to the religious needs of the populace in these new *quartieri*, almost always inhabited by the working classes, were missionaries wandering among strange people. Such was not the condition to which the clergymen, often of rural origins, were accustomed. Their life-style demanded that they know their flock intimately, and their parishioners who were former peasants expected this. But because of the extreme stringency of the finances of
the post-Risorgimento church, stripped of most of its economic assets, there was no money for the construction even of vestries, let alone of churches.

For lack of places to worship, those people in the new industrial suburbs who wanted to go to church had to travel to the central city, where large and splendid structures raised in the church’s earlier and more prosperous times bespoke the glory of God but were largely empty during services. The peasants-turned-workers, used to the intimacy of small churches filled with folks they knew, must have found these houses of God strange and intimidating, especially since the upper-class people who worshiped there, ladies in fancy hats among them, looked down on them.

New parishes were gradually established in the working-class periphery of cities. Turin, for instance, registered four of these during the period 1897–1906, and seven during the ten years that followed. But the expansion of the church organizations and structures was not fast enough. Besides, it came in an ad hoc and haphazard manner because a strategy for dealing with the pastoral problems related to the growth of the industrial working class was lacking. That was the price paid for the wishfulness involved in the Catholics’ hostility toward capitalistic development and their tendency to hide their heads in the sands of the past, hoping that industrialization, perceived as utterly unfitting for human nature, would somehow just go away.

The lack of financial resources and the weight of a negative view of social reality were not the only problems that held back the church’s penetration into the ranks of the industrial working class. As the oldest bureaucracy in existence, the church was also burdened with the mentality that emphasized the interests and rights of those leading the bureaucratic structure, often at the expense of those the bureaucracy was called into being to serve. Thus the archdiocese of Turin, instead of providing leadership for an aggressive expansion of the church’s presence in the new quarters of the city, was constantly bogged down with jurisdictional issues involving alleged violations of the territorial rights of the leaders of existing parishes as the newly established ones had to reach into areas under the control of old ones. These disputes demonstrated over and over
that, aside from a bureaucratic mentality focused on defending bailiwick, the clergy also had a tendency to alienate the faithful because of its inclination toward a relationship with parishioners based on power and authority. The immense respect awarded to the village priest who “reigned” over the peasants was ill-fitting to urban situations, if not for other reasons, because it required time to be established among the newly arrived inhabitants of the urban peripheries.

The contadini in città (“peasants in the city”) apparently were unwilling to accept violations of their rights and interests even if this was done by men in clerical garb. The Jesuits, especially insistent upon their property rights and the legalistic assertion of their authority, were embroiled in controversies in Turin for a long time. The fathers claimed that ecclesiastic laws gave “the faithful no rights whatsoever to interfere in the reorganization of parishes,” but some of the parishioners wanted to break away and establish a new parish for themselves, eventually threatening to “invade” and “occupy” the church and throw out the Jesuits if they went on with their practice of “wanting to save only the souls of the rich.” “They want the poor children to play on the street during the service”; they refuse “to hear the confession of [these] children; they send them away ... ; they are busy with the confessions of all those signori and marchesi, the nobility of Turin.”

As these statements culled from petitions signed by working-class parishioners show, there was more to the decline of religion among the working classes than the influence of assorted agitators sent by the devil to corrupt the souls of those goodhearted but naive peasant immigrants. The disinclination of the Turin Jesuits to take an interest in working people was not an isolated phenomenon. Some priests became frustrated because they failed to reach the urban working class, through no fault of their own but rather because of a lack of financial resources, and apparently turned to blaming the victim, as we often do in situations involving failures in human relationships.

“How will we ever reach the world of the industrial worker who runs away from us, considering us his enemies, while we are his best friends.” This cry of a Catholic pamphlet issued in 1911 was ironic
in light of the fact that workers in Turin still had to threaten to occupy a church in 1917 in order to secure for themselves and their children a place at services. Maybe it was because they were in earnest—they occupied factories a few years later—that they aroused the hostility of the clergy, trapped in their wishful thinking about the presumed docility of the “inferior classes.”

**The Aversion to the Industrial Working Class**

The working classes’ unwillingness to relate to the clergy and the upper classes as children to fathers came as a shock to conservatively inclined Catholics. If this unwillingness went as far as standing up to the father figures, the shock tended to turn to hysteria. The very existence of organizations of workers, independent of the *padroni* and of the supervision of the clergy, was conceived as a threat “to the moral order.” The challenge these represented was decried as a sign of selfishness on the part of the workers. The conservative understanding of the industrial working class was clearly and unequivocally laid on the line by a Catholic paper published in Turin. If it had to be said, it was best said in Turin, a major center of industrial development, and said in the pages of a publication called the *Voce dell’Operaio*, the *Voice of the Worker*. No doubt trying to reach out to the industrial working class, the paper spoke in 1908 of the workers’ inclination to “work as little as possible and take the highest possible pay; and if they cannot get what they want, [they resort] to strikes, boycott, and now they are beginning to turn to sabotage. The less they work, the more they want to get paid, because they conceive work as suffering and pay as the most important coefficient of enjoyment.”

Those workers who wanted a clearer understanding of themselves could turn to another Catholic paper that detailed the problem with a neat summary at the end:

The industrial worker believes he is a victim of destiny; he sees in his superiors tyrants and in the capitalists greedy exploiters. [The workers] submit to work out of necessity, but they hate it because they are persuaded that it benefits the hated *padroni*. 
1. [The worker] is insatiable as far as pay goes and always discontented with his status.
2. His heart is full of bile and class hatred because he is convinced that the diversity of social classes is an injustice.
3. [He] does not like to work.
4. [He] has little patience and inclination to tolerate the miseries of life.\textsuperscript{46}

An upper-class fear of the industrial working class, which was becoming increasingly rebellious and disinclined to accept “tutelage,” merged with the hostility toward socialism in a Catholic publication’s description of workers who “are leaving the plants with an insolence, a provocative smile on their faces, swear words on their lips, contempt for religion [in their hearts], and hatred for the rich. [They are] vulgar, arrogant, domineering, insulting; the dregs of society who disseminate disturbances among the masses; cowards who knife in betrayal; who break the display windows of stores and prevent people from really working.”\textsuperscript{47} The historian Daniele Menozzi, who discovered these pieces of wisdom, also uncovered evidence that these characterizations of the industrial working class coincided word for word with statements made by Bonnefon Craponne, the president of the Association of Industrialists.

One might assign little importance to statements by Catholic publications in one Italian city, even if this was the heartland of industrialization, but there were numerous other manifestations of hostility toward the industrial working class in Catholic publications. A pamphlet released in 1909 by the Unione Popolare, the propaganda organization of Catholic Action, depicted the operaio, the industrial worker, as a “vicious, nasty revolutionary in society, unfaithful to his employer because he had forgotten or rejected God, lost the idea of his proper dignity, lost his conscience.”\textsuperscript{48}

We might also recall the extremely hostile presentation of striking workers in \textit{L’Osservatore Romano}, quoted earlier. Toniolo, who asserted that the very existence of the industrial working class represented a threat to society, expressed a view common among Catholic leaders. Furthermore, the hostility toward the industrial working class manifest in statements like these did not cease as time went
by and very likely was a factor in the reorientation of Catholic labor organizing efforts toward the peasantry. The decline of industrial unionism and relative increase in the agricultural membership in Catholic unions that began in 1911 was not announced as an official policy. In fact, nothing was said about it at the most important Catholic congress in a decade, the meeting held in 1910 in Modena. But because it came in the immediate aftermath of that congress, the explanation of what appears to have been a change in the orientation of Catholic labor organizing has to be sought in what happened in Modena.