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

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The Reorganization of Catholic Action under Pius X and the Suppression of Democratic Tendencies

The debate about the usefulness of the mixed union may have been over in 1903, as the historians of Italian Catholic Action claim, but the victory of the activists in Bologna proved to be short-lived. Far from convincing the conservatives that the insistence upon the *misto* was leading Catholic Action into a dead-end street, the activists aroused conservative outrage. It was not that conflict between the activists and the conservatives was new. Leo XIII noticed, and spoke up against, a “sterile discord” within Italian Catholic Action.\(^1\) In fact, *Graves de communi* was an effort on his part to settle disagreement by defining the meaning of Christian Democracy and the aims of Catholic activism. But Leo XIII did not go beyond declaring general principles, apparently expecting that the details of a blueprint for Catholic social action would emerge from the clash of opinions.

Even if he shared his predecessor’s tolerance for conflict, Pius X, who followed Leo XIII to the papal throne in 1903, had to act. The “discord” in Italian Catholic Action reached an impasse during the last years of Leo’s papacy. By the time Sarto became pope, both sides had shown themselves utterly resistant to compromise, and the clash of conservatives and Christian Democrats became an either/or proposition. When the apparent victory of the activists came in Bologna and a conservative sabotage threatened to immobilize Catholic Action, Pius X made his move. He was, in fact, asked to step in and settle the conflict by a resolution that received a majority vote at the July 2, 1904, meeting of the Permanent Committee of the Opera.\(^2\) The pope decided to dissolve the Opera and reorganize Italian Catholic Action.

A year later, in the encyclical *Il fermo proposito*, Pius X etched
out a blueprint for the organized activities of Italian Catholics. According to the encyclical, the authority of the church covered everything that “touched upon conscience in any manner.” Thus the pope asserted the right to speak with authority binding on all Italian Catholics not only on religious matters but on political, social, and economic issues as well. As the new organizations began to take shape, he made it clear that he was “imposing” the tasks on Italian Catholic Action and demanded “unconditional” obedience in connection with these tasks. The historian Arturo Jemolo aptly noted that Pius X insisted on telling his Italian followers “not only what they had to believe, but also what they had to do.”

Under the pope’s watchful eyes, the new organizations of Italian Catholic Action appeared one by one: the Unione Popolare to direct propaganda and the Unione Elettorale to coordinate political action. Although the Second Section of the Opera, which after the reorganization took the name of the Unione Economico Sociale, was specifically exempted from the dissolution, the activities it directed suffered from the shock and disruption that followed the dissolution of the Opera. Labor organization was especially hard hit and appears to have gone into a nosedive. In 1903 there were 229 Catholic unions. Their numbers went down to 170 in 1904, and to 135 by 1907. In the uncertainty that followed the dissolution of the Opera, the Economic Social Union apparently turned to safer and less controversial activities such as banks and credit unions, which registered a greater growth than the labor movement even after it recovered from the massive decline experienced during the years 1903–1907.

The decline and disarray, including the collapse of a large number of union locals, left the Catholic labor movement weak and ill prepared to compete with the Socialists during a new wave of labor unrest similar in magnitude to the one in 1901. It began in 1906 and peaked in 1907, when there were 377 strikes in agriculture involving 254,131 workers, and a staggering 1,881 in industry and services with 321,499 participants. The pope, of course, could not have foreseen the confusion and uncertainty that was to overtake Catholic Action following the dissolution of the Opera. Even if he had,
however, it is questionable whether he would have opted for a less drastic action given the paralyzing conflict within the organization.

In breaking up the Opera, Pius X probably intended to create conditions for rebuilding Italian Catholic Action by disabling both contending sides, which had worn each other down into an impasse. But the new pope’s reputation for orthodoxy and conservatism created the immediate impression that, rather than condemning the conservatives, he wanted to censor the activists and their drive to gain social autonomy for the working classes. Pius X was in fact clearly irritated by the tendency of the activists to talk of not only social but also political autonomy, and by their inclination to push the meaning of Christian Democracy beyond the Leonine definition as *actio benefica in populum*, a social action “in favor of the people,” by giving the concept a political meaning. The word *democracy* meant to them the active participation of the people in the government. The direct implication of such a position was that Italy’s Catholic citizens should gain a share in the political life of the country. The pressure for the lifting of the Non Expedit and for permission to organize a Catholic political party was setting the Christian Democrats on a collision course with the pope.

Yet the implications of the activists’ concept of democracy went beyond the demand for Catholic political participation and a political party. It countered the hierarchical concept of society that subjected the lower classes to the perpetual tutelage of their presumed social superiors. Authentic democracy, Murri argued, was inconceivable without “the direct, effective, and organic participation of the people in the government of their affairs.” He added that rather than being “generously granted by the superior classes,” the participation of the people “will have to be conquered by the people themselves.” He indicated as the task of Christian Democracy the awakening of the people to their rights as well as to their strengths, so that they could “conquer” their rightful place in society.8 Murri was not alone with such opinions. Many young Christian Democrats shared his view that the “people,” the working classes, were the “arbiters of tomorrow” and that the idea of democracy should be reconciled with Christianity.9
The pope’s response to such proposals was overwhelmingly negative. The Lega Democratica Nazionale, a group organized in 1905 under Murri’s informal leadership to promote democratic ideals, was pursued by a papal anathema. The Lega’s conspicuous failure in recruitment was at least in part the consequence of the continuous objections of ecclesiastical authorities to its ideals and of their bans on the attendance of Christian Democrats, especially priests, at its meetings.

The aversion of Pius X to the Lega was motivated by several considerations; clearly one of these was that the Lega was a rival of the official church-sponsored organization the Unione Popolare. Another cause of the pope’s hostility toward the Lega involved its claim to “autonomy,” independence from ecclesiastical authorities, on the grounds that its aims involved not religious but social and political matters. Pius X also objected to the orientation of the Lega toward political action. Its political involvement tied the fate of the Lega Democratica Nazionale to the Roman Question and the Non Expedit. The pope’s objection to the aims of the Lega and of the young Christian Democrats in general came to be connected with his refusal to allow the unconditional and full political participation of Italian Catholics until the church’s claims involved in the Questione Romana were settled. Consequently, it could appear that the pope’s objection to the proposals of Christian Democrats was primarily due to practical considerations concerning the Roman Question.

This might have been the case; yet a difference in social and political philosophies was also involved in the conflict between the pope and the young Christian Democratic activists. If we want to fully examine this conflict of social and political ideas, we have to take advantage of the fact that nascent Christian Democracy was not restricted to Italy. In France, for instance, there was no ban on the political activities of Catholics. The Sillon, a loose organization of French Christian Democrats similar to the Lega Democratica Nazionale, was free from the restrictions the Roman Question imposed upon the activities of Italian Catholics. Yet the Sillon shared the fate of the Lega: the severe disapproval of Pius X.

It would be easy to line up statements by the Sillonists that would match almost word for word those made by Murri, who in
1901 told a regional Catholic congress: “The hour of democracy is here, a new force, the class of the humble surges forth to claim justice.... We must prevent our adversaries from gaining a monopoly over the vindication of the people[’s rights]: we must prevent that the call of the church finds us again unprepared. Let us make common cause with the people, because the vindication of freedom is a cause we share with the people.” As he observed the conservative leadership of Catholic Action calling for something other than an alliance with the working people, Murri criticized the conservatives’ mentality “that considered the worker and the peasant natural subjects of their masters” and, with a warning tinged with regret, began to talk of the social policy of the church as “unfair toward the popular classes” and consequently “ruinous for the interests of the church and of Catholicism in Italy.” As the initiatives represented by the Lega Democratica Nazionale were grinding down to a sad failure, leaving behind broken hopes and destroyed clerical careers, one of the legisti remarked with bitter sarcasm that instead of an alliance between the church and the working people, a connubio, “a loving union between a pseudo-religious conservatism and the pseudo-constitutional vestry” was taking place.13

The Ban on the Social Activism of the Clergy

The withdrawal of the priests from active involvement in the labor movement, which the pope ordered, was an aspect of the union of political conservatism and the church, the alliance between wealth and the altar, that increasingly became a reality during the papacy of Pius X. As he saw it, the priests who were active in organizing labor would inevitably get caught in strikes. The involvement of the clergy in social conflicts jeopardized the universality of their ministry and threatened their effectiveness as priests. It also violated the principles of caritas, which the pope considered absolutely essential in the life of the Christian community. Even though he saw challenges to the “superior classes” as an offense against the very spirit of Christianity, Pius X moved slowly on the issue of priests leading labor unions and actively participating in strikes, showing caution that was quintessentially his own. It was not until 1905 that he stated
clearly that priests had no place on the picket lines: “The priest, raised above all men in order to accomplish the mission he has from God, must also remain above all human interests, all conflicts, all classes of society.” Once he got going, Pius X moved in a style that was as much his own as was caution, with a Byzantinism that gave a basic characteristic to his papacy. This style involved secret investigations and condemnations without trials that were aimed at stamping out the modernist heresy, with which taking the side of the workers came to be associated under the code name of “social modernism.”

After the experiment with the workers’ chaplains was quietly terminated, Father Dalmazio Minoretti fell under the suspicion of modernist heresy. Minoretti was the theologian-turned-sociologist who suggested it to Cardinal Ferrari, providing theoretical arguments in favor of instituting *cappellani del lavoro*. But the historian trying to unravel the story of Minoretti’s heresy found only insinuations about the “negativism” of his work as a sociologist. His social criticism, according to some, did “more damage than good.” The apostolic visitor sent to his diocese by the pope denounced Minoretti as “not as securely papal and scholastic as he should be.” The accusation, with its innuendos and guilt established without trial, was typical of the antimodernist campaign under Pius X. The fact that Minoretti publicly accepted class conflict as a fact of life and strikes as extreme but nevertheless employable and unavoidable weapons to be utilized in *actio benefica in populum* was not mentioned. Opinions such as Minoretti’s—who incidentally was doctrinally sound enough to eventually become an archbishop—were demonstrably the cause of antimodernist persecution dealt out by the Vatican to other priests in a style similar to the one that pursued Minoretti. During the papacy of Pius X, advocating strikes and supporting the side of the working classes in them—even the thought of it—became a capital sin for priests.

The nightmarish quality of another series of events during the era of Pius X is due exactly to the fact that they involved not so much action as thought. Lorenzo Bedeschi told this story, documented so as to make it unquestionable. It involved a group of young priests from Cesena, not far from Rho. These priests were not involved in
the labor movement themselves; they followed the letter of papal instructions and stayed out of labor conflict. They merely expressed thoughts about it; and in expressing their thoughts, they followed the lead of their young bishop, Giovanni Cazzani, who was intensely interested in social problems. Among Cazzani's papers in the diocesan archives, Bedeschi found a long, unsigned essay about the genesis of labor organizations. The unknown "sociologist," probably one of his priests, told Bishop Cazzani that the local labor organizations were developing under the leadership of the Republican party, which was radical and anticlerical like the Socialist party. Lack of Catholic initiative in organizing unions left the Catholic workers no choice but to join the locals led by the Republicans. They had to unite not only because the spirit of class solidarity was strong among them but also because the landowners who confronted them had united.

The young bishop evidently stated the facts of life in 1906 when he reaffirmed in a pastoral letter the right of the "working classes" to organize in the defense of their "common interests." The workers' rights to their own organizations had been confirmed by Pope Leo XIII more than a decade before. Hence Bishop Cazzani's arguments appeared safely within the confines of the official social doctrine of the church. Toniolo printed Cazzani's pastoral letter as one of the publications of the Unione Popolare. Even Pope Pius X seemed to have agreed with it: through his secretary he sent a message to Monsignor Cazzani that appeared to include "comforting expressions."

It would have been a happy ending for a story about a bishop if the story had ended there, but it did not.

Catholic laborers, who sent to Cazzani letters of moving gratitude for "vindicating" their "rights," read the pastoral letter as lifting the long-standing ban of the church upon their membership in Republican-led labor leagues. Even some of the diocesan clergy came to similar conclusions and encouraged the workers to join these organizations.

The Cesena episode illustrates a problem of leadership that became acute in Italian Catholic social action during the papacy of Pius X. The tight central control over Catholic Action by the church hierarchy discouraged the development of a lay leadership that
would have replaced the aging aristocratic leaders. Even if these had not yet reached the age of retirement, they could not be successful labor organizers because the workers detested their paternalistic attitude of superiority toward the working classes. Under the benevolent eye of Pope Leo XIII, a group of young Catholics were readying themselves for just this eventuality. An intense and realistic discussion of social problems prepared these young Christian Democrats for successful leadership of the labor movement. But they were to be disappointed after Cardinal Sarto was elected pope. Rather than giving them new places in leadership when Italian Catholic Action was reorganized, Pope Pius X forced them out of the positions they already occupied. The papal ban on the participation of priests in the labor movement gave the final blow to the hopes of young Christian Democrats, for many of them were priests who hoped to become workers’ chaplains, like Rusconi, if they were not already. But during the papacy of Pius X, their concern with the misery of their flocks increasingly had to find expression not in action but in worried thoughts, expressed in occasional writings.

The young Christian Democratic priests of Cesena poured out these thoughts on the pages of a local Catholic paper, *Il Savio*. Their acknowledged leader, Canon Giovanni Ravaglia, one of the close associates of Bishop Cazzani and an instructor of theology in the local seminary, expressed especially strong concern about the working class. As he explored the problem of class conflict, often by commenting on short pieces written by Catholic activists from Germany, Belgium, and the United States, he stressed the need to elevate “the proletariat to the dignity of a class.” He seemed to consider confrontations between the workers and the *padroni* inevitable, and did not hide the opinion that those priests who took the side of the landowners “betrayed the people.” He was also one of the priests who, in the silence of the bishop, interpreted the pastoral letter as suggesting that Catholic workers could join non-Catholic organizations. If the outrage of local landowners and their pressure through the conservative cardinals in the Vatican was not enough to bring a papal investigator to Cesena, the suggestion of Ravaglia obviously was.

Ravaglia’s personal troubles were, by a superb irony, those of Neo-Thomism, for he was a convinced Thomist who accepted
Aquinas as teacher and leader, as Pius X wanted him to do. He was one of those who responded to Pope Leo’s call about renewing social science and society through the study of the works of Aquinas. But he had too good a mind and too much intellectual independence to do what became the practice of “safe” Thomists during the papacy of Pius X, which was to mouth what the pope had to say about Aquinas’s wisdom and quote the sayings of the Angelic Doctor the pope quoted. Ravaglia struck out on his own and achieved a reputation by a bold application of the Thomistic principles to modern society. In so doing he reached conclusions that went beyond his original inspirations, Leo’s *Aeterni Patris* and *Rerum novarum*.

Taking off from the Thomistic theme of the social function of property, he pushed on toward asserting that the workers’ right to the necessities of life was just that, a right, and not the subject of the charitable acts of the padroni, which they may or may not grant, depending on how far they were willing to go in alienating their superfluous. What followed logically, and Ravaglia stated this openly, was the workers’ right to gather in organizations of their own and to strike if they felt they were shortchanged for their labor. Certainly this went a long way to focus the anger of the local landlords on him, especially since they were trying to prevent local Christian Democratic laymen from organizing simple unions. The mixed model was, one can safely assume, nonexistent in the area, nothing but a figment of the imagination of conservative minds bent on maintaining old-style paternalism intact. The apostolic visitor sent by the pope in response to the local landlords’ pleas noted in his report that they were “cold” toward religion and “not one of them” was inclined toward “Christian zeal manifest in concrete action.” The *Visitatore Apostolico* was a Dominican monk by the name of Tommaso Pio Boggiani, who, according to one of the witnesses he examined, “instilled fear with his looks and left his audience cold and terrorized.” The Dominican, it seemed, went after heretics with the zeal of the “bloodhounds of God” of olden days.

His presence frightened the young Christian Democratic priests, but he obviously consoled the local landowners who managed to get his ear. They seem to have convinced him that Bishop Cazzani’s pastoral letter was the “spark that ignited the fire” of strikes in Cesena, in spite of the fact that the zone was notorious for strikes even
before the bishop set his foot in Cesena. The *Visitatore Apostolico* also reported back to Rome that the condition of agricultural laborers was “fairly good,” and he seemed to suggest that there would probably not have been strikes if it were not for Cazzani, the “Socialist bishop.” Boggiani faithfully quoted the title that the local landlords had given to Monsignor Cazzani, together with their opinion that the bishop incited hatred against them “among the inferior classes.” He was also accused of being a failure for not “censoring” *Il Savio* and the Christian Democratic priests who wrote for it.

As for the priests, and Ravaglia specifically, the major charge against them was that of *murrismo*, which was by then equated with the modernist heresy. Although Ravaglia was declared by the apostolic visitor *di ottima condotta morale*, “not wanting in moral conduct,” since he could not be accused of the kind of rebellion against the church authorities that Murri was by then drifting into, he was nevertheless a *murriano* in that he viewed the proletariat as an autonomous social force. His and the other priests’ approval of the previous year’s strikes by agricultural laborers thus became an indictment in connection with *murrismo* and *modernismo*. According to Boggiani’s report, they “proclaimed the [religious] neutrality and non-confessional nature of labor organizations as the condition of the success of their action in favor of the people. They [the Christian Democratic priests] are intolerant of any opposition to their views and go as far as to pass a low judgment even on the supreme church authorities when these take positions contrary to their ideals.”

Father Boggiani had apparently forgotten the Leonine call to the priests to “get out of the vestry,” for he seemed to have held against the Christian Democratic priests that they created a conflict with their conservative colleagues, “who are content to be simple ministers of the cult and do nothing for the people.” Another recurring point of the apostolic visitor’s report was the dislike of the upper classes, especially of the landlords, by the Christian Democratic priests, who were referred to throughout the report as “modernists.”

The use of this term to brand those who expressed opinions about action in favor of the people and hostility toward propertied interests was a typical doctrinal aspect of the antimodernist witch hunt conducted during the papacy of Pius X. Also typical was the
sentence of guilt by association and without a proper trial, such as a
detailed examination of the doctrinal outlook of the accused. The
studied distortion of the workers’ material conditions in the report
left little doubt as to whose side Boggiani took in the labor conflict
of Cesena. All the available evidence seems to suggest that Pius X
let himself be guided by Boggiani’s report, as he personally super-
vised the disciplinary action taken against the priests of Cesena. The
secrecy in which Pius X shrouded the action can probably be ascribed
to a bit of bad conscience about the whole affair on the pope’s part.
If his feelings were not equivocal, this obviously did not mitigate the
severity of the pope’s reaction.

The purge that followed among the diocesan clergy of Cesena
hit Canon Ravaglia the hardest. If the main point of accusation
against Ravaglia seems to have been that he was a friend of Romolo
Murri, this was for the pope the worst that could be said against
anyone. The name of Murri was by 1907 already firmly connected
in the pope’s mind with the modernist heresy. This was especially
ture when—as in the apostolic visitor’s report on Ravaglia—the
suspicion of murrismo appeared together with the questioning of the
validity of the pope’s judgments concerning social issues.22

Pius X ordered that Ravaglia resign from his position as instruc-
tor of theology, but Ravaglia had to keep the real reasons for his
resignation secret. The pope’s personal letter to Cazzani about this
was little short of being bizarre, for he told the bishop that Ravaglia’s
resignation had to occur “spontaneously and without anybody dis-
covering or even suspecting who desired it.”23 As for Bishop Caz-
zani, his humiliation was complete. Not only did he undergo the
ignominy of an inquisition but he ended up denouncing the young
priests with whom he obviously once felt a basic sympathy. He
reported in a letter to Pius X that the papal order about Ravaglia had
been carried out, but he made a last, moving attempt to defend him.
The closing sentence of the letter should have been engraved on the
bishop’s tombstone as his epitaph and as a testimony to his quality
as a churchman. But Cazzani’s words were also a commentary on
the style of leadership established in the church by Pius X, for Mon-
signor Cazzani declared himself the Pope’s strumento senza ragione
e senza volontà: his “instrument without reason and without will.”24
For another tale involving a strike and a bishop, one may quote no less an authority than Pope John XXIII, who as a young priest was personally involved in the strike that was called by Catholics in Ranica near Bergamo in 1909. Another protagonist was Monsignor Giacomo Radini Tedeschi, a close associate of Leo XIII and his adviser on social matters. When the local bishop died in 1905, Pius X picked Radini—against the advice of curial prelates—to fill the episcopal see of Bergamo, which the Pope called the “first diocese of Italy.” To emphasize this decision, Pius X personally consecrated the new bishop, who asked Father Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, to become his personal secretary.

It is safe to assume that Radini’s social activism had to do with the aversion of the pope’s conservative advisers towards him. His arguments about the social mission of the clergy must have been particularly irksome, for he unequivocally stated in 1896 that “the priest absolutely has to enter into social life” and in so doing he “carries out his mission as Jesus Christ did.” He referred to the seclusion of the priest in the vestry and the restriction of his work as nothing but preaching a “false notion of priesthood” that liberalism propagated, in its hostility to the church, in order to confine the role of religion in the life of society. The French edition of Radini’s 1896 speech carried a preface by Chanoine Dehon, the Catholic sociologist, who informed the readers that Pope Leo highly approved of what Radini said, adding that the text “expresses [Leo’s] thought and describes the action priests have to undertake and the organization of Catholic Action as the pope wants it.”

On the basis of the information currently available, the insistence of Pius X on appointing Radini to the bishopric of Bergamo, the center of Italian Catholic social action, remains an enigma. The statements he made as bishop show Radini insistent upon retaining a role in social activism. And this was precisely what he did in 1909 in a very striking and, by then for the clergy, very unusual way. During that year workers employed in Ranica, near Bergamo, asked for the right to organize a union while simultaneously demanding the reduction of the work week from six days and ten and a half hours a day, as well as a wage increase. When these demands were refused, a strike broke out, apparently led by Niccolo Rezzara, a layman and close associate of Medolago.
What outraged the *padroni* even more than the involvement of the Unione Economico Sociale in a strike was that Bishop Radini also openly supported the strike in words and deeds. The long strike, “sustained by the solidarity of the Christian proletariat of Italy,” in the words of Mario Chiri, another functionary of the Economic Social Union, ended with a victory for the workers. Angelo Roncalli, yet another *rapporteur* of the event, actively participated in bringing the conflict to a victorious end by rounding up material support. He reflected some years later:

It was good to see that the cause of workers was defended by the bishop, not only from the heights of the episcopal pulpit but openly in the public square, in capital-labor conflicts, and in the workshops. Monsignor Radini felt that it was his duty to give an example and he had the courage to do it.

When the strike began, Radini was among the first to put on the list to help the workers; and he was among those who gave generous sums to assure the daily bread of the striking workers. Then from all sides this was called a scandal; unfriendly reports were sent to higher authorities. . . .

At Ranica it was not a problem of wages or persons that was at stake but a principle: the fundamental question of freedom of the Christian organization of labor, as opposed to the powerful organization of capital. He resolutely took the side of the striking workers because in doing so he fulfilled a highly Christian duty and acted for justice, charity and social peace. He let the shouters go on shouting and went calmly on his own way, taking an active part on behalf of the striking workers.

Roncalli, who clearly never had any doubt about the righteousness of Bishop Radini’s or his own action, reported that, when the strike was over, his bishop received a note from Pius X: “We cannot disapprove of what you have thought prudent to do since you were fully acquainted with the place, with the persons involved, and with the circumstances.” Yet in spite of this reassuring letter and the pope’s continuous declaration of the bishops’ right and duty to take a directive role in Catholic Action, a strange and disconcerting fact crept into Roncalli’s tale, giving it anything but a happy ending. The future Pope John XXIII reported that after the strike Bishop Radini
“found himself in a state of uncertainty and doubt as to whether he still deserved the complete confidence of the Holy Father.”

Thus the historian is left once more with a personal tragedy and a series of questions as well. How much of Bishop Radini’s self-doubt and anguish was due to those “unfriendly reports sent to higher authorities”? Was the Bishop made to feel guilty for siding with the workers through a reflex reaction that was clearly out of style during the papacy of Pius X? Was the suspicion of modernism that hung over Angelo Roncalli for some time connected with his support of the striking workers? The answer to these questions awaits the examination of materials in the Vatican Archives. In the meantime, the only thing one can do is to search for parallel occurrences in the life of Pius X, the most important of the *dramatis personae*. The only biography of the pope that may be called official, since it was written by a close associate in 1905, and read and “corrected” by Pius X before its publication, offers a description of an act strikingly similar to Radini’s, yet at the same time utterly dissimilar as to the role Sarto, then the patriarch of Venice, played in it. It happened only two years before his elevation to the papal throne; thus what he did cannot be ascribed to either youthful folly or to an impulsive act. This is the way Angelo Marchesan, the biographer reported the episode:

A real friend of the people, for whom he sacrificed himself always and everywhere, he trembled with sacred indignation when he saw that under the disguise of false economic advantages, the usual trouble-makers inspired the workers to rebellion and anticlericalism. Thus when in August, 1901, a group of comrades, announcing a public meeting, tried to draw the women workers at the tobacco processing plant into the federation of state employees, of which the workers at the arsenal were also members, the patriarch, convinced that such meetings are held with discontent and strike in mind, to prevent from happening in Venice what had been deplored in other localities following such meetings, he thought that the office of charity demanded and it was also part of his duty to prevent these poor women from accepting the invitation to attend such meetings, or even worse, give their names to an association about which they knew nothing. To this end, with the permission of the director, he himself went to the plant and with his
good and persuasive words exhorted the working women to establish a league only among themselves and without getting mixed up with public meetings where perverse instigators, instead of improving their conditions, could only worsen them. And if they desired something justifiably, as in the past, now too they should come to him who would be ready for the tutelage of their interests.28

We clearly cannot say that the cardinal was trying to prevent the women workers from joining the union, for he suggested to them to form one of their own, presumably a Catholic one. But he certainly did his best to persuade them not to join an unspecified nationwide organization that one may presume was a Socialist-inspired one, although this is not clear from the narrative. If indeed it was, then the case throws more light on what happened to Ravaglia than on Radini’s troubles. At the same time, we cannot see Sarto’s act of paternalism as a manifestation of neutrality, of staying above all classes and conflicts, as he later demanded clergymen do.

Ambivalence remains in the case, since a degree of uncertainty about the issue of class conflict involving Catholic unions continued even after Sarto became pope. He was clearly determined to keep the clergy out of it. Eventually, they were enjoined from participating not only in organizing unions or giving their names to employers’ associations but even from taking a leading role in credit unions, an activity that was first opened to the clergy by Leo XIII, who told them to act there “with the greatest of freedom.” Ironically the withdrawal of priests from the labor movement aided the Socialists because it deprived Catholic Action of the enthusiasm, talents, and leaders badly needed to stem the tide of socialism. Even the ban on leading economic institutions such as credit unions was apparently harmful. Pointing to the lack of trained laymen to take over the positions occupied by priests, the Unione Economico Sociale had to beg the Concistorial Congregation, which issued the relevant decree, for a period of grace before it was put into effect.

The withdrawal of priests from social action, clearly damaging to the prospects of Catholic Action, has to be considered part of the decline of Catholic labor organizations that set in following the dissolution of the Opera. Yet the withdrawal cannot be said to have
been complete, for the figure of the assistente ecclesiastico, the clergyman advisor to Catholic organizations, became a standard feature during the leadership of Pius X. But the advisers, unlike Pope Leo’s priest activists who were told to act “with the greatest of freedom,” were appointed by the bishops to whom they were directly responsible for their activities, which presumably involved the traditional guardianship over morality and religion. Hence the ecclesiastic assistants represented a control over Catholic Action rather than action itself.

Doctrinal Adjustments

Thus Pius X nailed down some of the matters left loose by his predecessor in the practice of Italian Catholic Action. But he was determined to tie up the loose ends of Catholic social doctrine as well. In connection with this move, however, for lack of written evidence, we must often interpret the pope’s acts in order to arrive at some tentative conclusions about his intentions, which, contrasting with Leo’s attitude, the historian Bruno Malinverni described as “applying brakes, rather than innovating.” Freezing into solid ice what was in a state of liquidity and flux under Leo is probably a better way to describe what Pius X did. The changes introduced in the instruction of sociology at the Scuola Sociale of Bergamo are illustrative of this.

The institution came into being in 1910, after years of preparation that followed receipt of a “password” from the newly elected pope in 1904. It was first received by the Bergamasque lawyer Amilcare Martinelli, who reported that Pius X asked him to create “urgently” a center for social studies that would relate to the Holy See in a way of “absolute obedience.” Originally intended for both the clergy and laymen, the school, eventually raised to the rank of a Catholic university by Pius X because of the pope’s preoccupation with the indoctrination of clergy, had very few laymen among its first graduates. Its establishment in the “first diocese of Italy” was obviously one of the tasks expected of Bishop Radini, who called on Father Giuseppe Biederlack to teach sociology at the Scuola.
Biederlack, a former rector of the Gregorian University in Rome, had an international reputation and carried elements of a German theoretical outlook and experience with the organization of labor. This was rather ill-suited to the doctrinal perceptions of Italian Catholic conservatives, who often railed against the *Tedescheria* ("Germanism") Biederlack represented, since this included the unequivocal acceptance not only of the simple union but also of strikes. Although rejecting the principle of class struggle as such, Ketteler, for instance, accepted “the usefulness of the strike” as early as in 1869.32

In the lectures he delivered during the first academic year of the Social School, Biederlack not only advocated the legitimacy of the simple union but blasted away at those who resisted it by insisting on the mixed form of organization: “There are many rich, who associate with others in order to enrich themselves, but do not want the corporations of arts and crafts introduced and thus resist the rightful association of the lower classes and … [the] rights of their workers to autonomous organizations of labor *sindacati*.” There was even more to come, as the students attending Biederlack’s lectures heard him speak of the usefulness of the strike weapon for Catholic labor as well. Although he condemned class struggle as such, and restricted the use of strikes to contract negotiations, that is, to occasions when there was no binding contract in effect, he made no bones about strikes being needed in order to make economic gains: “A strike can generally improve the conditions of the worker since it arouses in the *padroni* the fear that their workers too may strike, and it is the fear of strike that prompts the *padroni* to accept the proposals of the workers.”33

The apostolic visitor did not come at this time because the pope decided to intervene personally. After a revision of the curriculum and the reassignment of the faculty in 1912, probably adding substantially to Bishop Radini’s self-doubt, the teaching of Biederlack’s old course went to Giulio Monetti. Pius X found Monetti’s lectures “of secure doctrine and indispensable utility.”34 What the pope deemed doctrinally safe was certainly different from Biederlack’s opinions, so much so as to induce the historian Bruno Malinverni to
talk of bestemmie, “swearing,” as he related what Monetti might have thought of Biederlack’s propositions. Father Monetti also proved himself useful to the pope by detailing for the students of the Scuola Sociale “the modernist errors in the practice of Catholic Action.”

Monetti was a firm believer in the “reestablishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.” As expected, bringing back the golden age of the Middle Ages implied for him the revival of the medieval corporazioni. The trouble was that, by the second decade of the twentieth century, expectations that the mixed union could work had become utopian. Monetti described how the mixed union could morally unite the “rich and the poor,” with the workers always maintaining proper “respect” toward the padroni. But he had to ask, somewhat pathetically, Why was it that, if the mixed union was so good, it did not work? In attempting to answer the question “why the mixed union failed to spread,” he pointed to the diffidence not of the workers but of the padroni. According to Monetti, the padroni, “embittered by socialist violence,” did not see fit to grace the mixed unions with their presence, preferring to establish organizations of their own. The mixed unions, when possible “always preferable,” were deemed by this sociologist somewhat impractical “in large-scale industry where thousands of workers are under the command of a single capitalist.”

Properly entitled digressione, a digression, Monetti’s treatment of the organization of labor was matched by a similarly old-fashioned perception of class conflict and strikes, which he considered absolutely unnecessary. Outside agitators, the sinful inclination of the workers to “substitute brute force for rights,” and the lack of mutually binding charity emerged as the major elements in another digression, which implied that strikes and class conflict, a “sword of Damocles that hangs as a continued menace over contemporary society,” would just go away if there were no outside agitators, if charity reigned and superfluous were distributed as the law of caritas required.
Neutrality in Labor Conflict

Monetti’s lectures and the two volumes that reported them could have been perceived as an exercise in wishful thinking about the old Catholic utopia if it were not for the fact that they included the texts of circulars Medolago sent out to the member organizations of the Unione Economico Sociale. These documents clearly contrasted with lectures delivered by Biederlack at the Scuola Sociale. Pius X replaced Biederlack with Monetti because the pope expected the latter to say what he wanted said. Monetti’s lectures were indeed “of indispensable utility” because they expressed what the pope wanted to establish as the official policy of the church. As Pius X formulated this policy, it seems to have demanded the avoidance of strikes and strict neutrality when they arose. This might be expected in connection with the role priests played, but the pope seems to have extended the demand for neutrality to Catholic labor organizations as well.

Thus one step taken forward in Catholic labor theory and practice during the papacy of Leo XIII—the recognition of working class autonomy—was followed by two steps backward by Pius X, who insisted on the mixed union and neutrality in labor conflict. And doing just what the pope appears to have demanded, articles in Azione Sociale—the official publication of the Unione Economico Sociale—reviewing a series of strikes that occurred in the Parma region in 1908 described how the Catholics adopted an attitude of neutrality in the clash of “two armies, organized solidly, those of the padroni and of the workers.”

Neutrality in a conflict involving revolutionary syndicalists, as was the case in Parma, was one thing, but to declare neutrality as a principle for a movement that intended to reach the workers was something else. Clearly, the Unione Economico Sociale was to be involved in conflicts and strikes. This, as the events in Ranica showed, was unavoidable; and here was a conflict between ideals and reality, between directives coming from above and the demands of life imposed on the activists of the Economic Social Union. They tried their best to compromise. G. Molteni, who wrote on the subject of strikes in Azione Sociale, argued that “probably the country
where there are no strikes is the island of Utopia.” Yet he echoed the 
words of Sarto as well with the “heartfelt and spontaneous wish that 
workers and padroni, proletarians and capitalists, rich and poor 
learn the way to live in harmony, brotherhood, and economic and 
social solidarity, sustained by a strong sentiment of Christian 
charity.”

In trying to bridge the unpleasant reality of strikes, which Mol-
tení said often were not only “legitimate but necessary,” and a utopia 
that defined them as both unnecessary and against God’s order, Mol-
tení not unexpectedly turned to those who had traditionally been the 
mediators not only between men and God but also between men in 
conflict with each other:

The clergy, especially the parish priests, can contribute in a conclusive 
way to the good outcome of workers’ agitations by preparing, promot-
ing, and favoring professional organizations without which the masses 
of workers go to war, as a rule, to be defeated.…

The parish priest can and has to be of help in strikes, attempting 
to induce the entrepreneurs, who by chance are deferential to him, to 
recognize as their obligation to listen to and discuss with them what 
the strikers have to say…. Nobody … can deny the obligation and 
convenience for the priest, and especially the priest in charge of souls, 
of getting involved in such controversies.40

The involvement of the priests in putting pressure on the padroni 
was a role not only tolerated but demanded by Pope Leo. But during 
the papacy of Pius X, it became other than a “convenience” for 
priests, especially since L’Osservatore Romano was less than com-
plimentary toward strikers. In reacting to the 1906 wave of strikes, 
the word hooligans (teppisti) was one of the milder ones used by the 
paper to describe strikers. The terms mob (plebaglia), and scoun-
drels (barabba) were also employed in reference to the “social sub-
stratum” (sub-strato sociale) involved in labor unrest. Strikers were 
also compared to the brigands (briganti) of decades past.41 The edito-
rial writers of L’Osservatore Romano were clearly venting an 
upper-class contempt for the workers. Their sense of charity led them 
to declare that the strikers were acting against their own inter-
ests: after all, the workers had stepped outside the limits set by their tutors. The editorial writers were not above expelling the strikers from the human race—the “authentic people”—and presenting them as common criminals.

With its rejection of the workers’ right to strike, the newspaper of the Vatican showed the church on the side of the capitalists in labor conflicts. This seriously jeopardized the church’s efforts to counter Socialist propaganda and organizational gains among the Italian workers. It also gave the proletariat a clear idea of the limits of the “tutelage” that conservative Catholic social doctrine proclaimed as the duty of the superior classes: it obviously excluded any encroachment on the material interests of the upper classes.

In accusing Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti of “encouraging” labor unrest by refusing to suppress waves of strikes in 1906 and 1907, for instance, the editorial writers of L’Osservatore Romano found themselves in very strange company, that of their traditional opponents, the conservative liberals, who also urged Giolitti to break up the strikes by force—if necessary, by the use of arms. Like Giolitti’s conservative opponents in Parliament, L’Osservatore Romano argued that it was the duty of public authorities to repress strikes and dissolve the workers’ organizations, especially the local Camere di Lavoro, which coordinated strikes and gave aid and comfort to striking workers. L’Osservatore Romano issued a call to the “ruling classes” to defend the principle of “authority” by suppressing the strikes, and darkly hinted about the possibility of a civil war if the strikes continued. “The patience of authentic people, of those who are not hooligans, has a limit and a measure beyond which it is not prudent to go,” the paper stated.42

Where did all this leave the hapless Catholic labor activists and the priests for whose mediation Azione Sociale cried out? Incidentally, Pius X went on encouraging the priests to “become apostles of social action and the pope will always be with you,” as he told a group of priests, graduates of the Scuola Sociale, in 1910. During the same year, L’Osservatore Romano approvingly reported Bishop Cazzani’s proposition that clergymen should “promote” Catholic labor unions but “without taking a leading role” in them.43 But what was the point of “promoting” labor unions without allowing for
strikes? In trying to unravel what must have appeared a contradiction to at least some of the priests, one may point out that the strikes *L’Osservatore Romano* so resoundingly condemned were led by Socialists and other assorted envoys of the devil. Yet Catholic activists too called for, and conducted, strikes. But by and large, they must have tried to avoid them if they could help it. This, of course, did not endear them to the working classes, who, fortunately for the Catholic labor organizers, had not spent much time reading *L’Osservatore Romano*. Some of the local Catholic papers, such as the one in Turin, also took a view of the striking workers that coincided, point by point, with that of the local employers’ association.44

It became *de rigueur* for Catholics, even the activists, to urge the padroni to parallel the simple unions by establishing their own organizations.45 Molteni, for instance, concluded his treatise about strikes with a ringing call to the employers to do that. Catholic mediation, that of the priests and of the activists of the Economic Social Union, was conceived to evolve by building a bridge between two classes—or better put, two camps, one of which, as the employers in the Parma region had shown, was indeed heavily armed and whose terror tactics had to do with the collapse of the strikes. The Catholic activists’ success as mediators was to be ensured by neutrality, which the Unione Economico Sociale proclaimed in tones reminiscent of Pius X’s remarks about priests standing “above all social classes.”

But the Catholic stance, at least as manifest in the pages of *L’Osservatore Romano*, could not be described as neutral any more than Bishop Radini’s acts at the time of the Ranica strike could. Then there was the issue of “right to work,” which Catholics proclaimed as inviolable. Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini put it thus in 1899: “The right to strike is a corollary of freedom, but it ceases to be a right and becomes a crime when to the right to strike, limiting the freedom of others, [the right to] impose a strike, even through violence, is added.” This “right to work” policy, an attempt to show evenhandedness and neutrality in class conflict, was solidly maintained even by Catholics of such overwhelmingly “liberal” reputation as Bishop Bonomelli.46

This stance, which was assumed by Catholics of both conservative and activist orientation, coincided with the policy of the liberal
bourgeoisie represented by Prime Minister Giolitti. Historical experience from Italy and elsewhere suggests very strongly that the insistence upon the “open shop” and the “right to work” was a sign of intentions to limit the social importance of the labor movement. During the Giolittian era, it may have made sense for the government, intent on maintaining a balance of social forces, to use troops and police to get strikebreakers across picket lines. But given the fact that those were the very acts that led to the explosion of violence, even this can be questioned and Giolitti’s policy declared a folly, especially by anyone with the workers’ interests in mind even to a minimal extent. As for the Catholics, the preaching of the “right to work” in Italy, ravaged by unemployment and underemployment, in practice meant strikebreaking and defeats for strikers. This was asking for trouble by would-be labor organizers, as the Catholics fancied themselves to be. Their intention to take the workers’ interest to heart appeared double-talk, and the Catholics were exposed to the accusation of crumiraggio, strikebreaking on principle.

The Catholics vehemently denied that they ever committed an act of strikebreaking. The responses returned to Mario Chiri in 1910 when he compiled his classic statistical work on the development of Catholic social organizations were emphatic about that. As for the strikes themselves, Chiri listed a large number that were called by Catholic unions, but his tabulations as well as the descriptions he provided do not allow for a comparison between the frequency of the Catholic unions’ use of the strike weapon and that of other organizations of labor. Chiri mentioned that Catholic unions on several occasions supported strikes called by non-Catholic unions. But he distinguished the strikes called by other unions from those initiated by Catholics by saying that the latter were characterized by the “lack of the principle of class struggle,” adding that in a large number of cases, but not in all, this led to an “amicable solution” of the confrontation between the padroni and the workers.

Here we have a key to the interpretation of the Catholic attitude toward strikes: they were seen as class struggle only if their Socialist opponents called them. In those cases the Catholics’ obsession with the need to differ from the Socialists predisposed them toward a neutral attitude, which in turn reinforced the Socialists’ suspicion
that the Catholic unions were the “long hand of the padroni.” The Catholic inclination to neutrality, which really amounted to opportunism in labor conflicts, thus added to the weight of the old anticlerical argument that religion was an opiate for the people, an argument that the Catholic emphasis on the workers’ needs for spiritual rather than material gains helped to sustain. Seeing the Catholic activists criticized for “materializing” Catholic Action by insisting on material gains for the workers even at the cost of bringing down the strike weapon on the padroni, the Socialists were not the only ones to talk of the church siding with the padroni.

Pius X countered the argument in *Notre charge apostolique*, a letter issued in 1910, by saying that the church “never betrayed the goodness of the people by compromising alliances.” Yet in the same document, he condemned the activists’ attempt to “escape the direction of ecclesiastic authorities” in connection with economic, social and political issues. The pope judged this a “subterfuge.” Social action, he argued, inevitably carried moral consequences; hence, it was the subject of the vigilance of ecclesiastic authorities.

Pius X clearly was not inclined to recognize any limit to his authority and demanded absolute and unconditional obedience in connection with not only religious doctrine and practices but social matters as well. Thus, the principle of *confessionalità*, the religious orientation of Italian Catholic organizations, including those of labor, was maintained during his papacy. The principle acquired a special dimension when Pius X gave it a concrete meaning:

… In these days hostile to Christ, it has become more difficult to apply the powerful remedies which the Redeemer has put into the hands of the Church in order to keep peoples within the lines of duty… It is still more necessary to inculcate properly in the minds of all the moral maxim taught by Jesus Christ, so that everybody may learn to conquer himself, to curb the passions of his mind, to stifle pride, to live in obedience to authority, to love justice, to show charity towards all, to temper with Christian love the bitterness of social inequalities, to detach the heart from the goods of the world, to live contented with the state in which Providence has placed us, while striving to better it by the fulfillment of our duties, to thirst after the future life in the hope of eternal reward.
The arguments presented by *Papa* Sarto in *Iucunda sane*, a 1904 encyclical, represented the continuation of his earlier views. As cardinal he stated in 1895 that “only in faith can we find tranquility and peace: through faith comes resignation to tribulations and succour for social inequalities.” And again in 1896: “an open confession of Christianity … will always be the most insurmountable obstacle to disorder, the most determined opponent of all excess, of all errors, the incorruptible guardian of all truth, divine and human.”

The consistency of Sarto the cardinal and Sarto the pope was consistency in a peculiar Catholic tradition. Pointing out that religion kept “peoples within the lines of duty,” that it contained the social and political restlessness of the working classes, was the traditional method of selling religion to the upper classes, inclined toward an areligious if not antireligious stand since the eighteenth century. Toniolo’s 1888 letter to the industrialist Alessandro Rossi extended the offer of an “alliance” between the clergy and the “superior” classes. In his 1901–2 articles, he offered the services of religion in preventing a “social conflagration” in return for the bourgeoisie’s acceptance of the guidance of the church.

**The Alliance between Wealth and the Altar**

What Toniolo talked about was becoming reality during the papacy of Pius X as an alliance against the working people was being forged. Leone Caetani, a contemporary observer, not unsympathetic to the church, remarked that it seems to have “forgotten its ancient popular traditions… The church does not exist any more, as once it did, to defend the poor and humble against the rich and powerful of earth; it has become worldly, rich and powerful, attempts only to preserve unchanged the state of things, abhors every innovation and to the poor, to the humble preaches resignation to their destiny.”

Whether the inclination of Catholic leadership was due to power or to weakness and the threat represented by socialism is arguable. But what Caetani suggested was so strongly evident in historical data and the opinions of contemporary observers that it has become one of the major theses of the historiography of the era of Pius X.
The historian Arturo Jemolo, whose study was not, like Cae-
tani’s, focused on the issues of modernism but remained general and
pathfinding because of its broad spectrum, spoke nevertheless with
a degree of regret of the church’s alliance with the “rich classes” and
the modernists’ drive to free it from this and “to make it the advocate
of the poor against the rich in a vindication of rights and not the
petrification of charity.” The modernists were condemned because
what they suggested ran against the “long tradition of teaching the
necessity that the poor exist, that poverty was an indispensable ele-
ment of a Christian society.”

The personal tragedies of people who, like Murri and Ravaglia,
fell under the suspicion of social modernism because they spoke out
against an obvious alliance between wealth and the altar lend them-
selves to high drama. But they are a small part of the historical evi-
dence dealing with the alignment of church policy and Catholic
Action that shows Catholics on the side of the rich. The limited range
of this study dictates caution about trying to settle the debate about
the Catholics’ “insertion” into the liberal-capitalistic system that, his-
torians of Marxist orientation are especially adamant, occurred
during the papacy of Pius X. Nevertheless, one does not hesitate to
say that Catholic labor theory and the practice of Catholic social
organizations point strongly in that direction, at least as far as inten-
tions were concerned. A recapitulation of evidence previously pre-
sented shows the leadership of the church insistent on the mixed
union, the purpose of which was to prevent the working classes from
gaining social autonomy. When this organizational form failed to
materialize because of the refusal not only of the working classes but
especially of the padroni to join, when utopia did not materialize, the
Catholics moved to organize the capitalist and landowners. A sug-
gestion thrown in for good measure by an editorial in L’Osservatore
Romano in 1906 advocated that local “civil guards” be created and
armed to defend peace and property. Furthermore, the leadership
of the church was talking of neutrality in class conflict, but L’Osser-
vatore Romano clearly stood behind the propertied classes when
their power was thought to be challenged by a wave of strikes. How
much evidence does one accumulate before coming to the conclu-
sion that there was a policy alignment on the part of the pope—or rather, a realignment—during the papacy of Pius X?

As socialism transformed itself from the ominous foreboding it was during the times of Pope Leo XIII into a real threat, the old hostility toward the liberal bourgeoisie was abandoned in order to pave the way for an alliance with the propertied classes, an alliance against the industrial and agricultural proletariat. The have-nots, the proletariat, were closely associated in the minds of the church leadership with socialism and thus were the social component of the threat socialism was conceived to represent. The alliance between wealth and the altar was not something that sprang up on the spur of the moment, but was in the making for some time, not only through the church’s defense of the principle of private property as manifest in Thomistic theology but also through a growing obsession with the “Socialist menace,” which was but a corollary of a perception of socialism as a wave of the future. Thus De Mun, the apostle of the corporativist revival, said in 1878: “Socialism is the revolution and we are the counterrevolution. There is nothing in common between us. Between these two termini there is no place for liberalism.”

It was not only the conservatives who took to prophesying about socialism becoming the main target for the Catholics’ fire. Filippo Meda, too, predicted somewhat cryptically in 1898 that the appearance of socialism on the scene “will very much simplify the struggle for Catholics.” Sturzo also argued in 1902 that the choices for Italy’s citizens were being narrowed down to two—socialism and Catholicism. By 1907 this must have become a commonly accepted position, since a circular of the Unione Elettorale stated that “many predict that in the future there will be only two parties: a Socialist and a Catholic.”

By 1907 it became “safe and doctrinally sound,” as the saying went during the papacy of Pius X, to venture such an opinion. Antonio Pavissich, one of the Jesuits of Civiltà Cattolica, who was known to be in close touch with the pope, suggested the very same thing in an article published by the Civiltà in 1904. That Pius X perceived socialism to be the main opponent is an assumption very likely to be borne out by archival evidence. His very first experience
as bishop exposed him to the threat of socialism as early as the 1880s in Mantova, a town that according to one of the pope’s more reliable biographers “was then becoming a citadel of socialism, the progress of which desolated the churches.”65 The word desolation is an interesting reminder of the religio depopulata, “the desolation of religion,” that was to haunt Pius X toward the end of his life.66

He sought relief from this nightmare by making a monumental change in policy, a change that could not be much less overwhelming for him than the threat of socialism was, for he chose not to announce it publicly. Il papa tacera, “the pope will remain silent,” was the way he announced, and to private ears at that, the decision to lift the Non Expedit, the ban on Catholic participation in national elections in localities where the victory of a Socialist or radical candidate could be prevented by Catholic votes.67 Since Pius X did not allow for a Catholic party, or even for Catholics to run as Catholic candidates, the lifting of the ban meant voting for candidates who rarely if ever identified themselves as antiliberal and often styled themselves as liberals. Thus, for all practical purposes, the war on liberalism ceased after Catholic fire aimed at the bourgeoisie stopped.

Once as cardinal, Sarto showed himself staunchly anti-liberal in the best tradition of Catholic conservatism by saying: “Priests should be on guard against accepting any of the ideas of liberalism that, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, pretends to reconcile justice with inequity.”68 In later allowing what often became in practice a liberal-Catholic alliance in election times, he may have thought that political cooperation did not carry the acceptance of the ideas and values of one’s allies. More likely what happened was that the hostility he once felt toward liberalism gave way as concern with the peril of socialism, and the need for all the forces to unite against the threat of revolution, grew in the Pope’s mind.

When in 1898 the regime that preceded Giolitti’s suppressed as “subversive” both the Socialist and the Catholic organizations, with mindless impartiality, Leo XIII indignantly declared that the Catholic organizations, by their very existence, constituted a “valid guarantee” of the “respect for social order.” The ruling class “will never find among Catholics conspirators, inciters of disorder, rebels against law and authority,” orators at the 1899 congress of the Opera
intoned, following up on the pope’s statement. As for Leo’s successor on the throne of Peter, his authorized biography speaks of Cardinal Sarto as “prudent, conciliatory and deferential, one who always advised the priests and the faithful he led to be also respectful of constituted authorities. He did all this not for the sake of appearance, but because he shared the real conviction of those who know that all power comes from God.”

Sarto’s position was not without contradiction. When rejecting the principle of democracy as pope, he would make use of the Neo-Thomistic argument according to which “all power comes from God.” The logic of this argument dictated that if indeed God was the source of all power and authority, then democracy and the principle of the sovereignty of the people represented a form of intellectual perversion. Nevertheless, Sarto was not only willing to accept “constituted authorities” whose power was based on popular vote, but eventually allowed Catholic forces to descend into the political arena and become part of the political system of an “Italian democracy in the making.” In the very first encyclical he was to issue as Pope, Sarto used the terms party of God and party of order interchangeably in connection with Catholic Action.

The perception of the need to respect the established order was rapidly growing in Catholic minds during the first decade of the twentieth century. It grew together with, and in proportion to, the concern about the “Socialist menace,” which became evident again and again in waves of strikes and attempted general strikes. This was so much the case that one is surprised to read in Monetti’s 1912 lectures that socialism and liberalism were “Siamese twins.” This represented a step forward from the old parable that attributed to liberalism a paternal relationship toward socialism. Toniolo used the “socialism, daughter of liberalism” metaphor, often tied to the description of socialism as “the latest form and degeneration of liberalism.” But by the turn of the century, even he talked of socialism as representing the “pathology of society.”

The argument about “socialism, daughter of liberalism” showed up in a propaganda pamphlet published by the Unione Popolare as late as 1909. This identified both liberalism and socialism as enemies on page sixty-four, but somewhat confusingly, after having cried out
on page fifty-five, “socialismo, ecco il nemico.” Socialism, that is the enemy!” neatly turned around Gambetta’s cry “Le cléricalisme, voilà l’ennemi!” It increasingly became the slogan as liberal-Catholic alliances became the order of the day at election times. By 1907 the Catholics’ enemies’ list left out the liberals even in the pages of the Civiltà Cattolica and L’Osservatore Romano, where socialism showed up in company other than liberal, such as that of the Freemasons and the modernists.

Tempora mutantur et nos mutamus in illis! The policy of the church changed with the times, but how absurd the change must have appeared to some. The Catholic veterans who fought for decades against the liberal bourgeoisie were now told to not only hold their fire but to go out and vote for a once despised enemy. It may be pointed out though that those old fighters often came from among the wealthy, and the need for the defense of social peace and property was something they shared with those inclined to be less Catholic than they. In fact, Catholics had experimented with alliances in local politics, where they had always been allowed to vote. Especially if the Socialists threatened to capture seats on municipal councils, the Catholics in case after case threw their votes behind conservative candidates and established tactical cooperation with them after they were elected, even if they confessed liberal beliefs. When he was the patriarch of Venice, Sarto allowed such an alliance in local politics.

Still, what he ordered Catholics to do on an increasing scale after he became pope—to make property safe for the bourgeoisie by voting for candidates who more often than not came from among the wealthy—must have appeared absurd to some of the parish priests. Tragically enough, these were the least able to say what they thought about the matter. But the priests knew that from among the local worthies came the mangiapreti, the priest-baiting anticlericals who did everything they could to make the life of the priests miserable and their ministry ineffective by turning their parishioners on them. The religious indifference or, worse, the downright anticlericalism of the padrioni, in part explains the failure of the Catholics to lure them into the mixed union, with all its implied obligations of religious origins. Such complaints are endemic in historical sources
from the turn of the century, suggesting that the old Catholic charges about the bourgeoisie were far from baseless.

Sturzo, a keen observer of things social not only in the south but also in the whole of Italy, remarked in 1901 that “the bourgeoisie for the most part is irreligious and greedy.” His sense of charity allowed him to add, echoing the biblical tale of Lot, that “there are some good, honest, and Catholic capitalists and landowners.” A year later Sturzo relayed the grievances of parish priests about the lack of respect among the wealthy Sicilians for religious customs, such as allowing for the observance of holidays by their workers.78

Sturzo was for once in agreement with Pope Leo XIII, who, in the aftermath of the 1901 strikes, blamed the landowners for a disinclination to practice religion, and for considering it only a tool useful “to defend the principles of authority, property, and order.”79 Evidence of the perceptions of Sturzo and the pope turned up en masse sixty-some years later, as the historian Angelo Gambasin sifted through immense archival evidence from the Venetian region at the turn of the century. Gambasin found as a recurring complaint of the parish priests the accusation of the “perversion of the minds and hearts of the ownership classes ceti padronali].” The ruthless exploitation of the poor parishioners was tied in these complaints to irreligious, and even antireligious, attitudes on the part of the wealthy. “What God! What Providence! For you I am god, I am providence!”80 The explanation by a local worthy to his workers of his own position in the universe, quoted at one of the congresses of the old Opera in a diatribe against “bourgeois speculators,” seemed to have retained validity well into the twentieth century. Thus the alliance between wealth and the altar, as far as the interests of the church were concerned, bordered on the absurd, since this marriage of convenience was a convenience mostly for those who represented wealth.