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

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Inequality of Rights and Power Proceeds from the Very Author of Nature

The Hierarchical Ordering of Society

The symbiosis that tied various social strata into a unit through the practice of *caritas* was an aspect of a social organicism that characterized Catholic thought. The perception of society as an organism went back to medieval, and specifically Thomistic, trends in philosophy.¹ These were reinforced during the nineteenth century by Romantic thought, which also emphasized the organic nature of society. However, the body analogy, the centerpiece of Catholic social organicism, was, in fact, a carryover of traditions even older than the thought of Aquinas, for the church had traditionally been called a “mystical body.” This perception of the community of the faithful was transformed into an image of society as a “body.”² In turn, this analogy suggested a division of society into “arms”—those who performed the manual tasks—and a “mind” that directed the activities of the other “members” of the social body, with all contributing according to their “natural” capacities.

The organic analogy per se was not hierarchical because it stressed the indispensability of all the members, the dependence of the whole on the parts. It was a paradigm expressing the need for social solidarity, and had, in fact, a pull toward egalitarianism. But Catholic sociologists at the turn of the century tended to disregard the implications of egalitarianism in the organic analogy.³ Rather, it was more consistent with the hierarchical notions manifest in Catholic theology to argue that certain groups performed functions of a higher order than others. Thus Count Stanislao Medolago Albani (1850–1921) suggested that there was a division of labor of a particular kind within the organically ordered social body, and that there were the “hands to do the [physical] work” and the “mind to provide
direction.” Not surprisingly, the count considered his own kind, the landowner, the “mind.”

This major division of society, as reflected by Medolago, was the most important element of Catholic social thought at the turn of the century. Writers used a variety of terms to define the two basic social groups of this division. Theological treatises on charity recognized them as the “rich” and the “poor,” whereas Catholic sociological and political literature referred to them as the “superior” and “inferior” classes (or “low people” basso popolo). In Catholic sociology the “people,” the socially “inferior,” were the working classes employed in agriculture and industry. It was indicative of the influence of Thomistic theology that the terms poor and inferior classes were used interchangeably, just as rich and superior classes were.

The identification of the poor with the inferior classes, the people, characterized the outlook of Giuseppe Toniolo (1845–1918), the major Italian Catholic sociologist of the era, whose theoretical works contributed substantially to the social outlook of Catholics. With the warm approval of the future Pope Pius X, then Cardinal Sarto, Toniolo announced during the 1890s that the “elevation” of the inferior classes could not be entrusted to the people alone. Working people, Toniolo argued, could take care of their own problems only in exceptional cases. Their “salvation” was to come through the upper classes, which had “the natural historical mandate for the initiatives and the normal direction of civic life.”

The “tutelage” of the interests of the inferior social stratum by the superior classes remained the keynote of Catholic social action after Cardinal Sarto became Pope Pius X. He followed the Leonine tradition in sending Catholic activists “to the people” and urging them to endeavor “to dry their tears, to alleviate their sufferings and to improve their economic condition by wise measures.” And like his predecessor, he never failed to emphasize that the problems of the inferior classes were primarily religious and moral, and not material ones.

For their part, Catholic publications faithfully followed the arguments of Pius X. L’Osservatore Romano, for instance, pointed out that Catholic activists cannot approach the people “with empty hands, but [they] do not have to go with hands exuberantly and
exclusively full of earthly goods and material advantages.” The “moderation of the [people’s] intemperance” and the mitigation of their “excesses” was the task of Catholic activists as well. A Catholic handbill became still more specific about the tutelage of the people by warning the rich to be sure to “teach [the people] Christian resignation, teach them the love of work, teach them the love of saving risparmio], help them in their need. Speak to them … of their duties toward themselves, their families, their companions, their neighbors, toward God.” A Catholic pamphlet published in 1911 went so far as to suggest that the “surveillance” of the conversations of the workers was the duty of the padrone, the owner of industrial enterprises. If he heard talk against priests, religion, or morality, he was to “impose silence” on the workers. Another writer, the Jesuit Father Giuseppe Biederlack, was even more to the point, charging the padroni in the name of caritas with the obligation to “prevent the sins of the workers.” The idea that the obligations of charity, supposedly mutual, may impose on the workers the duty of preventing the sins of the capitalists did not occur to either Biederlack or any other Catholic writer. It went with the hierarchical understanding of the social order that an overwhelming share of responsibility was attributed to the superior classes. They were responsible not only for their own but also for the working classes’ sins and omissions. Thus Medolago:

Who taught the people to love idleness and to avoid work? From whom did they learn those principles which now show their logical and terrible consequences? Who planted in the people the seeds of insubordination, the germs of revolt? From whom did they learn to scorn authority, to sneer at the law, to jeer at the greatness of priesthood, the sacredness of the sacraments, and the majesty of God? Oh, gentlemen, let us beat our breasts and confess in shame: every one of us who belongs to the educated class, to the high class, to the rich class can repeat with the poet, me, me adsum qui feci.10

Such a low estimate was typical of many Catholic writers, for they often viewed the people as so irresponsible that they apparently
could not even sin on their own, and had to be told even about duties toward themselves. Some writers like Salvatore Talamo pointed out how Christianity honored manual work through the example of the Carpenter’s Son. This was to show that the church ennobled the role of the workingman. Still, Catholic intellectuals were rather slow in extending this honor to the workers who were their contemporaries. Even Toniolo, who sincerely believed that the elevation of the people to a “major participation in the benefits of civilization” had to be the aim of Catholic Action, consistently betrayed a low estimate of the workingman. For him the people were an impassive, gray mass, waiting for the superior classes to “descend” to them and “conquer” them for the church.\(^1\) The social and political initiatives belonged to the upper stratum of society, to a hierarchy, which according to Toniolo was “instituted immediately and positively by God.”\(^12\)

Elsewhere Toniolo called the hierarchical ordering of society “natural,” applying the Thomistic theological principle that equated with “nature” the immutable laws that God, “the Author of the social order,” built into His Creation.\(^13\) Characteristically the defense of the hierarchical social order by conservatives like Toniolo often trailed off into a defense of the church’s own hierarchical ordering. These intertwining series of arguments, which appeared both in sociological treatises and in papal encyclicals,\(^14\) gave an important clue to the persistence in Catholic thought of the hierarchical understanding of society. Obviously challenges to hierarchical social order hit a raw nerve because they were thought to represent the initial stage of an eventual challenge to the hierarchical principle governing the church leadership.

Because of this threat to the very existence of Catholic Christianity, the principle of a hierarchical ordering of society manifest in the thought of Aquinas\(^15\) struck an especially receptive cord in the minds of orthodox Catholics at the turn of the nineteenth century. At that time the leadership of the church felt under siege by waves of anticlericalism, secularism, and modernism. But even without these challenges, the hierarchical understanding of society was expected to die hard, if ever, among Catholics. In the church they have as perfect a model of hierarchy as any. Especially when it came to
churchmen, how could their perception of society not be influenced, if not overwhelmed, by this model? But this transference of a religious idea into the social realm involved more than just churchmen. Toniolo, for instance, insisted throughout his life that the social order was a “pyramid with its top pointing to God” and never seemed to have given up the principle of *gerarchia*, the hierarchical ordering of society.\(^1^6\)

With the hierarchical perception of society went the notion of a hierarchy of obligations for the well-being of society. In this way the hierarchy of duties sustained a hierarchical understanding of moral responsibility that charged the rich with the sins of the poor. Thus the paternalism implied in the Thomistic social symbiosis took on a full dimension, for the greater one’s wealth, the greater his responsibility for the well-being of his fellow men. A heavy burden fell on the rich, who, according to Toniolo, owed a “special tutelage and aid” to “the weak, the poor, the have-nothings.”\(^1^7\) Toniolo connected the tutelage of the lower classes’ interests with the upper classes’ higher education; in doing so, he made a claim for society’s leadership by the superior, the educated class. He seems to have assumed that better education gave superior qualifications in the social, political, and even moral realms of life, qualifying the upper classes as tutors in ethics to the poorly educated masses. Thus Toniolo often described the need for the tutelage of the inferior classes by their social superiors as the moral education of the people, their elevation to “Christian consciousness” by those who had the benefits of a superior education.

To some extent this educational elitism was shared by the Christian Democratic activists. Although they increasingly rejected the other provisions implied in tutelage, they too tended to see their own role in the moral elevation of the people, a form of tutelage with the activists sharing the fruits of their advantages in education with the working classes. The activists parted company from social conservatives in that they expected the people eventually to reach intellectual maturity and free themselves from the tutelage of the upper classes. Of course, conservatives like Toniolo considered tutelage a perpetual arrangement in the life of society.\(^1^8\)
The Rejection of the Principle of Equality

Suggesting that the poor constituted a permanent element of the social landscape was another way of saying there always had been and always will be inequality in society; or, as Medolago put it, society in every historical period naturally came to be divided into superior and inferior classes. Catholic writers defended this position with vehemence. Bishop Bonomelli’s was a typical argument: in 1886 he pointed out in a pastoral letter that insofar as bodily strength and spiritual gifts are concerned we are unequal: there are those who are robust in body and those who are weak, those who are healthy and those who are sickly, those who are smart and those slow-witted, those who are strong-willed and those who are weak, those who thrive on fatigue and those who detest it, the prudent and the reckless, the frugal and the intemperate, the thrifty and the spendthrift and so on. The consequence of all this is a diversity in attitudes, physical strength, intelligence, will, and moral conduct, which in turn leads to a diversity in work, production, and property as different causes bring on different effects.

Undoubtedly relying upon notions assumed to be commonplace, Cardinal Capecelatro too stated in 1901 that there exist among men “three inequalities: physical, intellectual, and moral. From these derive inequalities in possessions.” It was thought that Aquinas’s wisdom formed the basis for this prevailing attitude, for he was quoted as saying that equality in possessions “is in contradiction with the order of nature, according to which providentially, a certain inequality exists among created things, either with regard to nature or as regards capacity: consequently, to admit equality in temporal goods, such as possessions, is to destroy order in things, which, according to St. Augustine, results from inequality. For order is nothing else than the setting of equal and unequal things in their proper place.”

Later research was to throw serious doubt upon these particular lines. But the questioning of the authorship of the fourth book of Aquinas’s *De Regimine*, from which the above quotation was taken, did not invalidate the claim of Thomistic support by late-
nineteenth-century theologians. Other works of Aquinas, especially his *Summa contra Gentiles*, provided ample evidence to suggest that he did indeed think that a basic inequality among men existed. Whether this inequality was in the material realm of life or elsewhere later became the subject of debate. But at the turn of the nineteenth century, Italian theologians were not yet in the mood to question the permanence of the poor upon the social landscape by suggesting that Aquinas may have talked of spiritual and moral attributes and not of material possessions when he discussed “natural” inequality. Still, the debate among Aquinas’s interpreters indicated that he just might have been too good a philosopher to violate logic, as his late-nineteenth-century followers did by establishing a causal relationship between differences in physical strength, intellectual dexterity, inclination toward sinning, and a necessary and “natural” inequality in the possession of things material.

Italian Catholic Neo-Thomists called upon Aquinas once again to be their star witness when they put the idea of democracy on trial. In arguing that differences in physical, mental, and moral attributes preempted the possibility of democracy as a sound political system, Neo-Thomists executed the same leap over logic as they did in connection with economic inequality. Indeed, Thomistic Catholics tended to tie these two clearly separate issues into a single bundle of arguments; and in their writings, they fired broadsides against the principle of democracy alternating with shots fired in anger against economic equality. They saw not two targets but rather a single one, and this was socialism, which pressed for both political and economic equality. As a program of action, socialism did not become a serious issue in Italy until after 1900; but the more foresighted churchmen, Leo XIII among them, had identified it earlier as a threat to the church and all it stood for. Bishop Bonomelli addressed these issues as early as 1886 in his pastoral letter *Proprietà e socialismo*. The title as well as the range of the arguments presented in the *pastorale* were indicative of the Catholics’ concerns about socialism. Aside from its godlessness, the idea of abolishing private property agitated Catholics more than anything else in Socialist doctrine. The vehemence of their trying to press home the “natural” inequality among men clearly masked a deep anxiety about the survival of pri-
vate property as an institution. Thus Bonomelli skillfully employed the argumentative apparatus of Thomistic Catholic social philosophy:

There always will be rich and poor, there always will be material inequality because such is a natural necessity. If that was not the case, where would be charity, the queen of all virtues and fulfillment of the law of the Gospel? There have to be rich and poor, but in such a way that the rich improve a bit the lot of the poor and the poor accept the rich as their masters, their benefactors, their loving fathers; and rich and poor are held together by the sweet ties of Christian charity, which alone can give us the real and only possible equality. The head does not oppress the body upon which it rests but guides it and gives life to it, and the body does not rebel against the head but serves it, and through a harmonious relationship [between the body and the head] comes a shared well-being. The same thing happens in social life: you workers are the body and those of property, capital, and intelligence are the head.\textsuperscript{28}

The argument that “equality of earthly goods and enjoyments” is against nature and the well-being of society reoccurred in Bonomelli’s pastoral letter. One might add that this theme was repeated endlessly in other Catholic treatises as well. Should economic equality be established “through a frightful upheaval,” Bonomelli said,

it would not last, and would disappear in a few years. But there is another equality that is possible to establish, at least to a point. It is not the equality of rights and duties, of talents and wealth, but an equality that springs from the great law of charity promulgated by Jesus Christ: “that which remaineth, give alms.” Such is the judgment pronounced by Jesus Christ. Commenting on this, Paul the Apostle writes, “Let your abundance supply their want [so] that there may be an equality.”

It was a measure of the influence of Aquinas at the turn of the century that most Catholic writers on social subjects agreed with Bonomelli that the judicious use of the superfluous and the law of charity were useful means of social leveling, and a way of ending social tension. In spite of this agreement, Thomist Catholics eventually split over the issue. This difference was not in substance as much
as it was in emphasis. Some like Bonomelli took up positions on one end of the polarity, but agreed with those on the other end that there was a natural inequality among men, and that complete equality, if anything, remained an aspiration. However, instead of considering the idea of equality a human folly, as their conservatively inclined colleagues did, people like Bonomelli usually granted to such an aspiration a legitimacy not only in the eyes of men but even of God. Bonomelli certainly did this in his 1886 pastoral letter, which, addressed to the working classes, was also a dramatic appeal to the wealthy:

O proprietors, o rich, o gentlemen, do not disdain to lower yourselves and yield to those who suffer and work for you. *Ut fiat aequalitas:* “that there may be an equality.” If you refuse to do it voluntarily today, soon you may be forced to do it. If you do not concede now spontaneously, perhaps some day it will be snatched from your hands and you will not get credit for having granted it. The more the two classes, the rich and the poor, are separated by a cleavage, the more terrible the clash will be some day. But if the two classes are fused by Christian charity and come together as brothers, no clash at all will occur. If we think about the current state not only of Italy but the whole of Europe, if we consider the road we have traveled during the last fifty years, if we contemplate historical developments that accelerate as rapidly as falling bodies governed by the law of gravity, we are left with the conviction that the current movement toward equality is as necessary as it is irresistible, that there is no force strong enough to arrest it: monarchs cannot do that; neither can republics, nor politicians, nor armies, nor all the erudites of the world. The wisest thing to do is to regulate the course of this impetuous river so that it will continue to run within its banks. In its essentials the movement toward equality is good and holy: it comes from God who made man perfectible…. But it would be a disaster if this movement rushed ahead out of control and breached its banks. If they were not shortsighted, those living in France could have observed from 1750 on a nationwide social movement that pressed for the abolition of iniquitous and intolerable privileges, a movement that pressed for a radical transformation, for equality. An immense disaster could have been very much reduced in size if not completely avoided, if, instead of denied and resisted in often unwise ways, this movement
toward equality was given a smooth run to follow, if this river was channeled, this universal movement regulated. But this was not recognized in time because it was thought that changes could be prevented. What happened instead was that the river overflowed its banks, rivers of blood ran, and mountains of dead bodies were built. A transformation that could have been slow and natural turned into a frightful revolution that was an immense crime and a tremendous justice at the same time.  

With its lack of distinction between political and socioeconomic equalities, Bonomelli’s argument was typical of Catholic treatises on the subject. At the end, though, it showed the writer as adrift, moving away from social conservatives. After stating that the French Revolution of 1789 had done “justice,” Bonomelli turned in the direction of separating the political from the socioeconomic. At the time he wrote the pastoral letter, a clear distinction was beginning to emerge between these categories. This was due in part to the division that was developing in social science, with groups of scholars claiming and studying distinct spheres of life. But this division of scholarly labor and the subsequent distinctions between economic, political, and social areas can also be seen as a response to particular needs in society. Political egalitarianism was gaining wide acceptance all across Europe at the turn of the century, but those who were willing to concede to the masses the right to vote were not necessarily interested in economic equality. Quite the contrary, the introduction of nearly universal manhood suffrage, a major breakthrough toward democracy, represented in Italy an attempt by liberal statesmen to take the wind out of Socialist sails.  

The Catholics’ animosity toward the Italian state and the liberal statesmen who led it certainly had to do with their unwillingness to separate the issues of socioeconomic and political equality and to consider the acceptance of democracy and, with it, the political reality of contemporary Italy. Characteristically, those who drifted in the direction of considering those issues separately eventually also showed an inclination to accept the principle of political equality. This willingness to take up political and socioeconomic equality as separate topics of discussion eventually became the divide between
Catholic social and political conservatives and the Christian Democratic activists. The activists, along with their supporters in the church hierarchy, inevitably reached the conclusion that the march of political equality and the coming of democracy was inevitable. They also talked of reducing socioeconomic inequality, but usually stopped short of even considering economic equality.

As his pastoral letter showed, Bonomelli considered an attack on inequality not only a possibility but a necessity. From this position he eventually moved toward supporting the Christian Democratic activists’ aim of pressing for political equality and, simultaneously, exposed himself to the ire of Pius X by suggesting, as most of the activists were inclined to do, that the time had come for settling the Roman Question. His despair over the pope’s rejection of these suggestions is evident in a private letter he wrote in 1911 to Cardinal Capecelatro:

It is horrible! The motherland and the Church in conflict.… I go crazy (divento pazzo) if I think about it.… Eminence, where are we heading? I wrote to Agliardi and Rampolla and others, begging them to say and do something: they deplore the situation, they think as I do, they did what I asked them to do, they tried, but all in vain. Maybe, as happened in 1848, God will let the river of flames run its course in order to break up and sweep away the old structure and let the Church emerge reborn. Maybe the Vatican too will sink. I don’t know anymore what to say, what to pray for.31

This cri de coeur, with its focus on political problems, is a perfect mirror of the reality of Italian life. The obsession of the Vatican with the Roman Question and the anguish of those who wanted to settle that conflict in order to focus the attention of the faithful on the problems of contemporary society are painfully evident. The letter also echoes Bonomelli’s 1886 pastorale, which suggested that refusing to yield to mounting pressures for greater equality was to court disaster. However, this conviction, then based on evidence drawn from the past, had become by 1911 an expectation of a frightful deluge. What despair in an old man’s heart, after struggling in vain with conservatives who insisted that bowing to pressures for equality was an invitation to disaster! To social conservatives, changes in
Inequality Proceeds from God

the direction of equality were more than disastrous: they were sins, since inequality was the handiwork of God. Certain principles, the Jesuit Gaetano Zocchi declared, were “eternal, necessary, indisputable, and indestructible.” Among these “facts,” “dependent on a superior will, on Providence,” Zocchi listed the “miseries of life, the wickedness of instincts because of Original Sin,… the inequality among men and consequently the difference in intellectual, moral, and physical abilities, exingencies and needs that all require different satisfaction.”

So deeply ingrained was the objection to the doctrine of equality among Catholics that even Medolago, who was to spend his life improving the lot of the working classes, insisted that men were unequal by nature, some being physically strong and others weak; some “more inclined toward manual work” and others “toward the highest speculative endeavors.” It was the dream of “demented minds” to expect equality to materialize in the way the socialists did, said the count, who then added liberty and fraternity to those dreams of demented minds. Medolago argued that inequality was established “by God, Creator and Ruler. He so ordained that there be those who command and those who obey, masters and servants, poor and rich: one like the other, the work of the Lord: utriusque operator est Dominus.”

The Permanence of Classes on the Social Landscape and the Paradoxical Objection to Conflict among Classes

Those who, like Medolago, affirmed an innate inequality in society apparently did so with the support of the highest authority of the church. In his motu proprio “Fin dalla prima,” one of the first documents he released after his assumption of the papacy, Pius X went on record to state that:

1. Society as established by God is composed of unequal elements as the members of the human body are unequal. To make them equal would be impossible and would amount to the destruction of society itself.

2. Equality among the various members of the social [body] exists only insofar as all men trace their origins to God, the Creator, they all
have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, and will be judged, rewarded or
punished according to their merits or demerits.

3. From this it follows that it is according to the order established
by God that in society there be princes and subjects, capitalists
padroni] and proletarians, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, nobles
and plebians, who, united by the tie of love, are to aid each other to
reach their final destination in Heaven and, here on earth, their mate-
rial and moral well being.34

These statements constituted the first three of nineteen proposi-
tions advanced in “Fin dalla prima,” propositions that were identified
as “norms” to be followed “religiously” on pain of interdict by church
authorities. The importance of these propositions was further empha-
sized by the fact that under each of them was a reference to a docu-
ment released by Pius’s predecessor Leo XIII. In connection with
the statements, according to which society was class-divided by
divine arrangement, a reference could also have been made to Car-
dinal Sarto, who lectured in 1896 to a gathering of social scientists
about the “inexplicable mystery of inequality among men on earth
that is as necessary as it is inevitable, and that would return the day
after a generous dreamer would think of abolishing it because it is
the law of this world destined to perish.”35 In 1903, as pope, Sarto
talked of society as “the work of God, Who Himself wanted a
diversity of conditions.” And as late as 1910 he stated that “to main-
tain the diversity of classes, which clearly is a characteristic of a
well-constituted community, means to preserve the form and char-
acter God, its Author, gave to society.” The statement again was
Leonine—in fact, a direct quote from the encyclical Graves de
communi issued in 1901.36

When he condemned class conflict, Sarto’s consistency was also
the consistency of the church’s official doctrine. Even the thought of
it was a sin: “Language which might inspire aversion for the higher
classes is, and can only be regarded as, altogether contrary to the
ture spirit of Christian charity.”37 Since an equation had been estab-
lished by the leadership of the church between class struggle and
violence, the doctrine of Christian love dictated that the church con-
demn class conflict, as indeed she does to our own days.38
Yet another equation connected strikes with class struggle and violence. Thus Pius X remained consistent throughout his life in condemning strikes. As late as 1913, he declared that strikes were “against the well-being of the workers and the quiet life of the citizen”.\textsuperscript{39} This statement repeated almost word for word what Leo XIII argued in \textit{Rerum novarum}. Utilizing the social paradigm of the body analogy, that encyclical presented harmony among classes as “natural” and conflict as “unnatural,” and stated further that the strike “not only affects the masters and their work people alike, but is extremely injurious to trade and to the general interests of the public; moreover, on such occasions, violence and disorder are generally not far distant and thus it frequently happens that the public peace is imperiled.”\textsuperscript{40}

Thus the Catholic labor movement had to carry the burden of a paradox manifest in Catholic social philosophy, which insisted upon distinct social classes but condemned conflict among them and looked upon such manifestations of class struggle as strikes as anything but desirable. When the central office sent out a questionnaire about the activities of Catholic organizations of labor, to the question “Did the members take any part in strikes?” the president of the local in Bagolino, in the Brescia province, responded: “No, they all behaved.” In maintaining \textit{buona condotta}, good behavior, by staying away from strikes (in fact, by organizing a protest against one called by another organization of labor), the Catholic unions conformed to the expectations of the leadership. This happened in 1891. But the mentality that, in the words of the historian Antonio Fappani, made a person guilty of the “worst possible conduct” even to think of a strike\textsuperscript{41} was to remain with the Catholic labor movement during the decades to come.

The obsession with the avoidance of social conflict and strikes that colored the attitude of the church leadership led to a marked aversion toward urban society and the industrial working class, which was seen as hostile toward the “superior classes” and, because of that, as a threat to social peace. Unlike the urban industrial workers, the rural population was perceived as respectful of law and order, deeply religious, and willing to accept the guidance of the church. Giovanni Spadolini noted the preference of Catholics for
rural society “with its advantages of solidity, wholesomeness, and continuity.” This view was motivated by Thomistic theology with its emphasis upon a symbiotic relationship among various social strata, a relationship that Catholics thought was dead in the urban environment but alive and well among the peasants. This idealization of the countryside as the “height of moral life” ran uninterrupted throughout the history of Italian Catholic Action. In 1874, at the first congress of the Opera dei congressi e comitati cattolici, the umbrella organization of Catholic Action, Alfonso Rubbiani, the general secretary, set the tone by referring to the

sweet quietness of the countryside [which] turns out to be always the height of order and morality. In the genesis of the city, we find the remorse of man the sinner who trembles from the fright of rebellion, turned pale seeing Creation and thinks to be able to forget God the Vindicator Dio vindice by surrounding himself with artifacts that do not directly carry the sign of that creating hand, that [man] the sinner sees armed with lightning and scourge. Man in the state of sin necessarily had to build the city, and it is not accidental that we encounter in the Genesis Cain, the first murderer, the first among men to be cursed by God, as the first who builds a city. The innocent man, by contrast, was placed by God in a garden among flowers and plants, and here is the explanation of why the just, who have a clear conscience, prefer the silence of the countryside and the delinquents need to find cover, hide, circumscribe and limit the horizon.

Rubbiani was not alone in praising the peasant for being robustness personified. [The peasants] breathed the air of the fields and hills, pure and rich in oxygen, left adolescence vigorous, bloomed in youth, were hardy during virility and preserved their strength during old age, which mitigated decrepitude. Work increased their vigor, they converted frugal nourishment into good blood, they needed less than the industrial worker, and their need could be satisfied at little expense. They maintained an affection for their families, who in most cases shared work, and it was habitual for them to observe the sacred laws of decency and morality. Their cheerful songs, often resounding in the valleys and mountains, showed that they went through their days tranquil and satisfied.
The striking thing about this idealization of the countryside and its people as God-fearing and respectful of the priests as they were of the social order, in contrast to city-dwellers, who constituted *civitas diaboli*, a community of Satan, is that upon examination it turns out to be utterly against the spirit of Thomism. Detailing the social philosophy of Aquinas, Ernst Troeltsch makes “the remarkable discovery, that in contrast to the inclination of modern Catholicism toward the rural population and its specific Ethos, it is solely the city that St. Thomas takes into account. In his view, man is naturally a town dweller, and regards rural life as the result of misfortune or of want.”

Aquinas’s writings, like those of his mentor Aristotle, did include a rural-urban contrast. But this, very much unlike the late-nineteenth-century Catholic conservatives’ comparison, showed agriculture as “dirty and miserable” and life in the countryside, then ravaged by feudal barons, as anything but the scene of a good life. Instead, the Angelic Doctor idealized “the medieval town, with its principles of peace, with its basis of free labour, and corporate labour groups, with its stronger intellectual interests and its care and protection through its administration for everyone, which provided a fertile soil for Christian ideals.”

In their use and abuse of the ideas of Aquinas, Italian Neo-Thomists failed to notice his aversion to rural society. The idealization of the countryside and its people continued, but along with it went the idealization of life in medieval towns where there was no “antagonism between the superior and inferior classes,” but an “admirable harmony with which the world was governed by Divine Providence.” The words were Medolago’s. Together with Toniolo he will be our guide as we follow Italian Catholics in their quest for the magic formula that they hoped would allow them to make class struggle, that modern sin of sins, disappear from the face of the earth. This journey by time machine to the Middle Ages, Aquinas’s world, produced an Italian version of the corporative doctrine, whose development constituted the first chapter in the history of the Italian Catholic labor movement.