In a series of articles published during the 1970s, I pointed to the Neo-Thomistic intellectual current as the source of some of the most important ideas and paradigms of Italian Catholic social philosophy at the turn of the nineteenth century. In applying this thesis to the history of the Italian Catholic labor movement during its formative years, I have expanded the methodological scope of my previous works. Whereas those were essentially exercises in the history of ideas, in this study I have attempted to produce a hybrid of intellectual and social history by anchoring ideas in reality, by relating social ideas to social institutions, notably, the particular organizational forms and activities of the Catholic labor movement.

Monographic studies that have dealt, often marginally, with the early history of the Italian Catholic labor movement are now obsolete, having been published during the 1960s. Thus a book-length treatment integrating the research evidence that has emerged during the last two decades is overdue. A synthesis, which this volume represents, is also timely because it will help orient research on this subject as the relevant materials in the Vatican Archives are about to become available.

The evidence that forms the basis of this study comes mostly from those who occupied positions of leadership: the Vatican hierarchy, the episcopate, and the laymen who headed the central organizations of Italian Catholic Action. Intellectual history presenting the motivations and intentions of leaders is an indispensable part of historiography, for it is the first step toward the discovery of ever-present tensions between ideas and reality, between the custodians of ideals motivating social movements and the activists charged with
putting these ideals into practice. A study of the intentions and directives of leaders is especially relevant in connection with religious hierarchies such as the leadership of the Catholic church, for in such institutions directives from above have an unusual salience. In such cases the tensions between leaders and followers also become especially dramatic because of the particular form of legitimacy with which the leadership is endowed, an authority derived from God.

I approach history from a perspective that places social ideas and action, rather than political developments, at the center of the stage. Italian historiography, until recently, had a one-sided political orientation and tended to focus on political ideas, trends, and events as central in the historical process. Because of this political emphasis, the tools, the basic concepts found in the works that cover my historical period, were of limited use, if not misleading, for the study of social ideas—especially if one’s aim was to examine these concepts as they related to social action.

Italian historians describe Catholic political attitudes, for instance, as ranging between the extreme positions of “conservative” and “moderate.” Conservatism implies an uncompromising, rigidly intransigent adherence to the Vatican’s position in connection with the Roman Question, a confrontation between the church and the Italian state that resulted from the incorporation of the Papal States into united Italy. To put it bluntly, Italian Catholic conservatives were caught in an impasse to which there appeared to be no solution given the unwillingness of the political ruling classes to undo the Risorgimento. Moderates, on the other hand, favored an end to the deadlock through a compromise between the church and the state, and wanted to lift the Non Expedit, the ban placed by the Vatican on the participation of Italian Catholics in national elections as long as the Roman Question remained unsolved.

If Unification set the political alignment of Italian Catholics, their social attitudes developed in response to the Social Question, which centered on the living conditions of the working classes. In confronting the *questione sociale*, the church attempted to come to terms with modern industrial society. This effort brought Catholics face to face with the developing labor movement and class conflict. The activists’ inclination to accept the inevitability of class antago-
nism gave rise to a struggle within Italian Catholic Action that became especially bitter during the papacy of Pius X (1903–14). He considered class conflict and strikes contrary to the spirit of Christianity and, to prevent them from occurring, imposed on Italian Catholic Action severe organizational restrictions, which he justified by reference to Neo-Thomistic ideas.

The pope’s insistence upon the mixed organization of labor, for instance, was connected with Thomistic social philosophy. The mixed union, which was to include both capitalists and workers, was conceived by Neo-Thomistic conservatives like Pius X as indispensable for the proper practice of *caritas* (charity), the all-important theological principle aimed at uniting society by establishing a symbiotic relationship between various social strata. The Thomistic principle of charity implied a “tutelage” by the “superior classes” of the interests of the workers, the “inferior classes,” as conservatives preferred to call them. But the insistence upon the mixed union became the source of a conflict between aged conservative leaders, often high-ranking churchmen, and young activists, who, daily facing reality, knew that the Italian workers had no inclination to submit to permanent social inferiority. Thus, if only because they wanted to be successful in their organizational efforts, activists such as Giulio Rusconi and Giorgio Gusmini pressed for the acceptance of the simple union that included only the workers. The social autonomy of the simple union expressed the rising class-consciousness of the Italian workers.

Some members of the church hierarchy, like Cardinal Alfonso Capecelatro and Bishop Geremia Bonomelli, not only sympathized with the activists but shared many of their ideas. By the same token, some of the young activists were perfectly orthodox in outlook and behavior. Nevertheless, the conflict between paternalistic ideals and social reality reflected a veritable generation gap between leaders and activists in Italian Catholic Action. This generation gap was even more obvious in politics, with the activists usually taking super-moderate positions and thereby incurring the wrath of conservative church leaders. Activists such as Filippo Meda and Luigi Sturzo represented a new generation that matured after Unification. For them the loss of papal temporal power was not a personal experience
but an historical event; it was an accomplished fact. The Non Expedit, which deprived Catholic citizens of Italy of their political rights and reduced them to pawns in a chess game between the Vatican and the Italian ruling classes, appeared to the activists as a wasted sacrifice, since it had been in effect for more than thirty years without producing any apparent results. The political inaction enforced by the Non Expedit, which appeared perfectly justified to aged leaders like Pius X, came to be seen by many of the young activists as senseless and self-defeating, since it prevented Catholics from putting into practice through political action the principles their social philosophy held dear. Thus, from the very beginning of his papacy, Pius X faced intense and constant pressure from the activists for the lifting of the Non Expedit, a pressure that he resisted because he was not yet prepared to meet the activists’ demands to posit the Roman Question in radically new terms, which involved not only releasing the Catholic electorate but also allowing the organization of a Catholic political party.

Yet behind the pope’s apparent intransigence and his rigid insistence upon the primary and decisive importance of the Roman Question, dramatic changes were developing. One of the most significant of these was the increasing appearance of Catholic voters at the polls in national elections. This began in 1904, when for the first time the ban on the electoral participation of Italian Catholics was lifted in districts where their votes helped defeat anticlerical and socialist candidates. His anxiety about socialism, which he considered a mortal threat, was leading Pius X into the gradual relaxation of the Non Expedit.

Not having a party of their own through which to channel their political efforts, by an ironic twist of fate Italian Catholics became spear-bearers for their traditional opponents, the liberals. The socialist menace drove the liberal bourgeoisie and the Catholics into an alliance between wealth and the altar that came to a denouement during the 1913 elections with the Gentiloni Pact.

Despite the fact that he allowed Catholic voters across the country to go to the polls in 1913, Pius X refused to yield to the activists’ demand for autonomous political action, a Catholic party. The pope fought this demand with every weapon he could muster, including
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excommunication. The one-sided political orientation of the historiography of Italian Catholic Action probably originates in this conflict, which shows the Pope hurling anathema in connection with political matters. This tendency was further reinforced by the formidable success at the polls of the Partito Popolare a few years after Pius X beat down activists such as Sturzo, who, with the permission of Pius’s successor, became the leaders of the Catholic political party. The appearance and importance of the Christian Democratic Party still later, after the collapse of the Fascist regime, accelerated the drift toward a political focus in the historiography of Italian Catholic Action.

Even those historians who represent this approach often admit that it was more than just political ideas and aims that set the activists on a collision course with the Vatican. There were social ideas as well as practices—such as their insistence upon the simple union—involved in the conflict between the pope and the activists. In fact, their inability to give a new political direction to Italian Catholic Action by organizing a Catholic party should direct the attention of historical research toward Catholic social theory and social action, for many activists turned toward social problems. The old leaders of Catholic Action were relieved to see Catholic youth turning away from politics, yet the flow of young enthusiasm and talent into social activities heightened the tension in Italian Catholic social action. The conflict between aged leaders and young followers, between custodians of ideals and activists—suppressed in the realm of politics—came to the surface with amazing verbal violence in debates about the social policies and aims of Catholic Action.

Quite early in my search for an understanding of this conflict, I discovered information printed in 1896 that pointed to what was to become the central theme of my work: the conflict over the mixed and the simple unions. In a short essay entitled *The Social Question and the Catholics*, Salvatore Talamo, a leading Neo-Thomistic Catholic sociologist and social theorist, identified the organizational forms of labor, the *misto* and the * semplice*, as the key issues in the conflict between “conservatives” and “Christian Democrats.” For the latter Talamo also used the words “Christian Socialists.” In my work I avoided this term because clearly it did not catch on. Virtually all Christian Democrats refrained from using the word So-
cialist to describe their program. Only conservatives seem to have employed it on occasion and usually in underhanded attempts to discredit their activistic opponents by using a word with Marxist connotations. Talamo’s perceptive essay also warned me of the problems that grew out of an overlap between social and political activisms. The term *Christian Democrat*, referring to both political and social programs, he cautioned, was rather vague. Indeed it was, as I discovered when I proceeded with my study. I attempted to clarify it by detailing its meaning insofar as social ideas and social action were concerned, in part because I hoped my work would become a modest corrective to previous studies, which, overly concerned with the political, failed to clear up the confusion Talamo noticed.

My personal experience as an intellectual of peasant background may account for my inclination toward social history involving the lives of working people. After finishing my studies at Hungarian and Italian universities, and before receiving my doctorate at the University of Rochester, I worked for several years in American factories. This experience also tended to place me on the side of the workers and not that of the *padroni*, the bosses.

The standards of my profession require that I point to my life experiences which, depending on one’s point of view, may be seen as a source of an advantage or of a burden, or both, as I am inclined to perceive them. Hopefully, my awareness of these influences that affected the direction of my research and my *forma mentis*, which tended toward an empathy with those low in the social pyramid and scant sympathy toward figures of authority, whoever they may be, prevented me from abandoning the principle of scientific objectivity. Furthermore, I do not believe that this principle precludes negative judgments, although I anticipate some of my Catholic readers will be disturbed by my critical attitude toward one Giuseppe Sarto, whose earthly remains rest in Rome under one of the altars of Saint Peter’s Basilica. He earned the highest honor that the church can bestow upon men, and is today venerated as a saint. In elevating him to the altar, the church proclaimed the judgment of God.

However, the acts of Saint Giuseppe Sarto were not played for the judgment of God alone. During the last years of his life, he was one of the most powerful of men. His influence ranged to the corners
of the earth. The mighty and the poor alike bowed to him. Heads of state followed the humble peasants of his birthplace as they knelt before him. Hundreds of millions of people listened to his voice and pondered his judgments that came from the awesome height of the throne of Peter the Apostle. As God’s deputy on earth and as a ruler of men, Pope Saint Pius X became a subject of history, and because he made history, the judgment of men, including mine, may also touch him.