

## ITALIAN CATHOLIC REVIEWS: A SURVEY

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I HAVE not visited Italy since 1956, so that these impressions of current journalism there are at a slight remove: but I have kept up with various periodicals printed in Italy through 1957 and into 1958. These are mostly Catholic—though very different in other respects—, my recent reading of non-Catholic Italian journalism being almost limited to the two chief ‘neutral’ newspapers of the North, the *Corriere della Sera* (Milan) and *La Stampa* (Turin), and to glances at the ‘highbrow’ anticlerical review *Il Ponte* (Florence) and the equally anticlerical but far more widely sold *Il Mondo* (Rome).

A word, to start with, on the post-war situation of Italian Catholicism. It seems an odd one, at first sight; powerful yet unstable. Politically, post-war Italy has been run by Catholics. The Resistance was, superficially at least, more Communist than Catholic, and until 1948 the situation seemed very dangerously fluid; but that year the Christian Democrats won their decisive victory at the polls, and they have stayed in power, though with reduced majorities, ever since; in the teeth of a fiercely sustained opposition from right, left and centre, not to speak of their own internal disagreements and such minor nuisances as the Montesi affair. Two chief factors—apart from the deep, if somewhat sluggish, attachment of most Italians to their Catholic heritage—have contributed to this real, if limited, Catholic predominance in Italian public life since the war: the high political intelligence and personal integrity of De Gasperi and the prestige of Pius XII. Add also the steady economic recovery of the nation: due as much, I suppose, to the ordinary Italian habits of thrift and hard work as to foreign aid. But the equilibrium has only just been maintained; the fight is on all the time; one has the impression of a country whose Catholic character is under a pretty hard strain. A healthy condition, no doubt—good for the spiritual muscles—but one that is apt to give rise to a certain bellicosity, a touchiness, a readiness to lose one’s temper and one’s dignity. Such a mood is apparent in much Italian Catholic journalism of the past decade; though the impression of acerbity is sharpened,

no doubt, for the English reader, by a felt contrast with our own milder intellectual climate. Far more controversy goes on in Italy than in England between Catholics and the rest; and, implicitly at least, among Catholics themselves.

What is all this argument about? It turns chiefly, I think, on three subjects or against three dangers: Communism, of course; anti-clerical Liberalism; and what may be called simply the Flesh. Communism as a power in Italy is a post-war phenomenon; Liberalism is the old nineteenth-century foe, now somewhat discomfited and consequently less aggressive and contemptuous than formerly in its bearing towards the Church, though underneath its hostility is as hard as ever in certain quarters. As for the Flesh, this ancient enemy—or rather the things reckoned to be its instruments: much of the press, the novels of Moravia and others, film stars ('those saw-dust dolls', as the Dominican *Vita Sociale* called them in a fierce editorial) and most films, radio and television programmes, bathing attire, advertisements, etc.—gets a very great deal of attention in Italian Catholic journalism. There is continual and vociferous protest against the 'dilagante immoralismo' associated with the above means of expression. There are loud demands for a severer application of laws in defence of morality, a stricter censoring of books, plays, etc. And the foreigner, I suggest, has no right to say off-hand that all this is much too fussily repressive. You have to take account of the Italian climate and character, for one thing; of the intense traditional attachment to the family; of the *visible* sharpness of the contrast—hardly imaginable in England—between Paganism and the Church in Italy. But that is a long story; let us turn to our pile of periodicals and pick out a few specimens.

Here, for example, away on the Left, is the lively little Milanese fortnightly, *Adesso*. I say 'the Left' because *Adesso*, though firmly anti-Communist, is committed to a social-revolutionary view of Christianity; is vehemently anti-bourgeois (if this vague term may pass); is freely critical of the Government (though De Gasperi was one of its heroes); is as pacifist as a Catholic organ can be; and because it has risked its reputation for orthodoxy by trying to keep up a 'dialogue' with the Socialists (though it has small use for Nenni). It began in red Modena ten years ago and was fairly soon episcopally suppressed. But it was allowed to start again; transferred itself to Milan; adopted a less provocative

motto—‘Now (*adesso*) and at the hour of our death’, instead of ‘Now (*adesso*) let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one’; but the latter motto was resumed last December—and carried on. It is run by laymen, but priests also write in it; it is deliberately troublesome, but not anticlerical. If it has printed some extremely bold criticisms of the religious Orders and has not always spared the Hierarchy, this is not because those concerned were friars or bishops, but for quite specifically—I cannot judge how correctly—stated social failings. It has a warm devotion to Pius XII and last November it particularly rejoiced over his address to the World Congress of the Apostolate of the Laity, in which the Pope explicitly approved of there being free-lance forms of lay apostolate outside the boundaries of organized Catholic Action—this term having, in Italy, a definite concrete meaning and political reference well to the Right of *Adesso*. ‘Until yesterday’, went the comment in this paper, ‘it was risky to speak of a lay apostolate outside Catholic Action as officially recognized; as we of *Adesso* know full well, having found ourselves not only pushed into a corner, but suspected of a want of orthodoxy and of too little devotion to the Pope and the bishops’ . . . *Adesso*, in short, represents an uncommonly tough and interesting combination of loyalty and independence, Christian faith and free speech. Its survival is itself remarkable; and I fancy that its influence is not decreasing. I am sure it is an influence for good.

Down in Rome it is the Jesuit *Civiltà Cattolica*, the doyen of Italian Catholic reviews, that naturally claims first attention. Well produced and printed, the *C.C.* marches out every fortnight, a hundred pages strong and entirely written by Fathers of the Society: ably edited and full of sinewy, well-informed, often learned and sometimes really distinguished articles. As the great Society’s best-known periodical—and one so close to the Church’s centre—the *C.C.* is obviously important; that is the first thing to say about it. Hence a special interest attaches to its choice of themes and topics for attention. And here is a striking fact: during the past year Communism has *not* appeared as a major issue in the pages of the *C.C.* In January 1957 Fr Perego made a close analysis of current philosophical trends among Italian Communists; but the main current of Italian Jesuit criticism has since run in a different direction or at least has other groupings, other dangers in view. These may be summarized under two heads: the existen-

tialist threat to the notion of an objective moral law; and the 'liberal' attack on the temporal and institutional involvement of Christianity in history, as a social factor side by side with the State. The stress, then, is on morals, individual and social. The two threats mentioned above may combine in the form of a purist, 'mystical' misinterpretation of Christianity—as in G. Fassò's book *Cristianesimo e società* (1956), which is critically examined by Fr Lener in the number for March 2; or they can be considered quite separately. Thus existentialist 'situation ethics', in its religious form as the ethic of 'encounter with God', is the target of three articles by Fr Perego (August, September and October), while a preoccupation with the same general theme is elsewhere apparent in the recurrence of articles on 'conscience', 'free choice', 'the interiority of Catholic morality', as well as in no less than three on Unamuno (two of whose books were recently put on the Index; another straw in the wind).

Distinct from this concern is the simultaneous debate with Liberalism. This has been going on in the *C.C.* for a hundred years, but Fr Lener's recent and repeated contributions to it, though couched in a ponderous prose, are up to date as well as highly intelligent. He is perhaps the chief Italian Catholic jurist writing now. He was given his pretext by the Liberal, but non-Communist, *Il Mondo* which in April 1957 organized a congress in Rome to discuss how best to uphold 'laicism' and defeat 'the real danger that threatens Italy and civil liberties', namely clericalism. Consequently Fr Lener was concerned (a) to refute the old claim of anticlerical Liberalism (but now being restated with considerable heat) to be the only authentic heir of the Risorgimento; and (b) to justify the notion of a Catholic 'laicism'. Modern 'laicism' was also the theme of Fr Brucculeri in September, though he restricted the term to its anticlerical meaning.

Though principally concerned in 1957 with morals and politics, the *C.C.* has not of course ignored biblical criticism, metaphysics or art. Articles on the Dead Sea scrolls, an admirably objective analysis of 'Bultmann and the crisis in Protestant theology', a superb study of Heidegger's metaphysics by Fr Fagone—these items, especially the last two, would do credit to any review. Art and literature are less attended to, as one would expect. Notable however is a hesitant, uneasy consideration of Graham Greene by Fr Mondrone, and a perhaps slightly un-

generous refusal by the same critic to see in Moravia's last novel, *La Ciociara*, that 'gleam of light' which some Catholics have been hailing therein as a sign that Moravia is at last breaking out of his 'opaque' materialism. One of these perhaps more discerning, perhaps only more gullible Catholic readers of Moravia is E. N. Girardi who writes on contemporary literature in the Milanese review *Vita e Pensiero*. This monthly, edited from the Catholic University and mixing contributions from clergy and layfolk, is a bit lighter and slighter than the *Civiltà Cattolica*, but maintains a good standard as a modern review of wide cultural interest. Last year's numbers show the expected concern with politics and public morality. There was an outstanding article (September) by L. Burzio on 'Church and State in Italy Today: the Obedience of Catholics'; an extremely honest, clear and helpful statement on this ever-topical issue. Elsewhere in *Vita e Pensiero*, when politics are concerned the polemical note is inclined to rise sharply; and the current worry about public morals, in respect of plays, films and radio, though understandable enough, can issue into rather hard and fast moral judgments on particular works. Yet on the whole this review is singularly alive, versatile and civilized. My own interest was caught particularly by an article in the April number on the poetry and prose of a new Catholic writer, Elena Bono. Of this young woman's work I cannot judge except from quotations, but these are enough to suggest that she may be a writer of genius. If so, the fact is profoundly important. Creative writing—poetry and the novel—in post-war Italy has been dishearteningly non-Christian. There are Catholic scholars, critics, publicists a-plenty; but hitherto no new Christian poet, no novelist of any distinction. Yet the moralist's voice, sounding so loud from the Catholic camp, is no substitute for the artist's when art is in question. Only the poet or novelist can show concretely what can and should be said in words. The critic who denounces Moravia for describing 'cose oscene' may be right about Moravia, but he cannot be right about those 'cose' as such, for no reality as such is obscene. But how can this truth be displayed except by a religious poet? Let us then watch Elena Bono!

Literary matters call to mind a small independent review of a more literary character down at Naples: *Delta*; edited by two University professors, it consists mostly of literary criticism, with

dashes of philosophy and political commentary. It started a decade ago as one expression of that reaction against the influence of Croce which has affected all the younger Italian intellectuals since the war; and this, in the case of the *Delta* group, has gone hand in hand with an alert interest in the Christian intellectual tradition. But perhaps this group remains intellectually too independent for our present survey. The same could not be said of the Florentine *L'Ultima*, another 'small-group' lay review, intensely theological in aim and interest, though quite independent of official schools. But as I have not read it since 1956 it must not detain me now.

To return to the heap before me, here is the Florentine Dominican bi-monthly *Vita Sociale*, edited from S. Maria Novella by a brilliant and tireless friar, Reginaldo Santilli, and sharply stamped with his personality. Independent in political judgment, leaning if anything towards the Left, critical of the wealthy, very free in the discussion of social topics—pacifism, the morality of strikes, automation, etc.—*Vita Sociale* is yet centrally (so to say) strictly Thomist. It aims to be read by the young, but it demands hard thinking; within, of course, its self-limited field. Of all these reviews it is the one most like BLACKFRIARS (as one would expect); but its tone is generally more vehement; and, being Italian, it leaps more readily towards abstract ideas. Also from Florence—but from the Fiesole side—comes the *Rivista di Ascetica e Mistica*, with its handsome red cover. This is the old *Vita Cristiana* of the S. Marco Dominican Province, now renamed (as I cannot help regretting) and enlarged. Its new title shows its ambitious aim and scope. About half its usual content is written by Dominicans. Though so far rather uneven in quality, this review is a promising venture, if only because it has an able and daring editor and because it is *sui generis* in Italy.

Two more names and I have done. From Assisi Don Giovanni Rossi circulates his *La Rocca* all over the peninsula. Subtitled, characteristically, a 'christological fortnightly', *La Rocca* is probably the most successful Catholic periodical in Italy. Don Rossi is a big-hearted, cordial Milanese—and an astute organizer and brilliant journalist. There is nothing like his paper, in Italy at least, for combining instruction and entertainment, pictures and preaching, readability and religion. Utterly Italian as it is, it yet takes the whole Catholic world for its field of interest, impelled by its founder's central devotion to the mystical body of Christ.

Its keynote is Optimism—some would say, to a fault. But if its stress is on joy and love, its message is penitential; only how attractively baited! And finally, *Il Focolare*: a tiny paper from a Florentine suburb; something like a good, but very good, parish magazine. Its priest-editor, Don Facibene, is an old man with a lifetime of work for street urchins behind him; and in Florence they call him a saint. Next time you are in Florence take a bus to Rifredi, visit the Facibene Boys' Institute and workshops, and then buy a *Focolare*. It has Tuscan wit and will refresh the spirit.

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## REVIEWS

**SAINT DOMINIC.** *Pilgrim of Light.* By Gerard Brady. (Burns and Oates; 18s.)

There are gratifying signs of a growing interest in the life and work of St Dominic and the early Dominicans. Since the bibliography of this book was compiled there have appeared the two-volume *Histoire de S. Dominique* by Père M-H. Vicaire, O.P., of Fribourg (1957), and the sumptuous album of photographs by Leonard von Matt, with text by Père Vicaire, published in most European languages. Mr Brady's book comes between the two, for it lacks the scholarly documentation of the one and, though adorned with many of his own excellent photographs, does not attempt to vie with *Dominikus* in artistic appeal. Its aim is more modest. It sets out to interpret St Dominic and his mission for the modern reader who has no special knowledge of the period. The author is at pains to explain the problems that then faced the Church, the nature of the heresy of the Albigenses and the political framework of southern France that was so different from the huge, impersonal bureaucracies of today. He has visited all the places associated with the saint, and if his enthusiasm occasionally leads him into the language of a guide-book it is only a momentary lapse from a high standard of clear and attractive prose. St Dominic emerges from these pages as a credible figure, indeed as a burning and a shining light, clear about his mission and sure about the means; a saint who instantly won the hearts of popes and bishops, and so effectively communicated his zeal to his disciples.