

## Chapter 7

### Pastoral care and Christian education in post Second World War Italy. The testimony of Don Lorenzo Milani

#### *Premises*

I must confess that I accepted with a certain trepidation the invitation to present a paper on the figure of Don Lorenzo Milani and his *Esperienze pastorali* to this congress<sup>1</sup>, well aware of the great difficulty the historian faces when approaching a personality such as that of the prior of Barbiana, who was object, during his life – as Giovanni Miccoli already reminded us in 1980 –, «of great love and hate, figure of contradiction and discussion during a large part of his ministry», and also during the decades after his death. The danger of flattening his image, simplifying its contours by «hastily assimilating one or another of the enormous contrapositions that, at that time, distinguished [...] Italian society» as a consequence of the «public role of rupture and accusation that he had consciously assumed»<sup>2</sup>, is always present, even if the half-century that separates us from the Milani affair seems to have calmed, in part, the polemics and rending of that period.

<sup>1</sup> The current article reproduces the complete text, along with integrations and changes, of the paper presented at the International convention organized by the Faculty and Department of Education Sciences at the University of Macerata on the theme *Don Lorenzo Milani e la scuola della parola. Analisi storica e prospettive pedagogiche* (Macerata, 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> November 2007).

<sup>2</sup> G. Miccoli, *Don Lorenzo Milani nella Chiesa del suo tempo*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani*, Atti del convegno di studi (Florence, 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> April 1980), Florence, Florence Council, 1981, pages 26-50 (now also in Id., *Fra mito della cristianità e secolarizzazione. Studi sul rapporto chiesa-società nell'età contemporanea*, Casale Monferrato, Marietti, 1985, pages 428-454).

It is true, however, that even today Don Milani's works, his answers to the religious and pastoral challenges of his day, provoke an immediate emotional involvement, a kind of direct call, with no middle ground, to either totally agree or disagree; and there is no doubt that all this increases the risk of forcing, «of undeserved assimilations, of unmotivated and false arrests» making it difficult to be a detached critic even though this must be the only true attitude for an authentic historical reconstruction.

As early as 1983, during an important conference at the Catholic University in Milan on *Don Lorenzo Milani tra Chiesa, cultura e scuola*, Pietro Scoppola underlined the importance of placing Don Milani and his works in the correct historical context of his times: «This may seem an obvious choice as this is implicit in any historical research – he notes –; but it acquires sense and importance in front of today's tendency to use the category of *prophecy*, and, as far as Don Milani is concerned, in front of the tendency to a non-historical reading of his experience precisely because of its prophetic character»<sup>3</sup>.

As an emblematic example of a similar line of approach, Scoppola quotes Michele Ranchetti at the 1980 Florence symposium on Don Milani, a symposium which was destined to offer an enormous contribution to the world and works of the prior of Barbiana. The hypothesis of a “prophetic”, non-historical reading of his works had been explicitly put forward by Ranchetti, who, starting from the observation of the absence of any element of mediation in Don Milani, concluded by doubting that same possibility of historically placing his experience: «We are persuaded – wrote Ranchetti – that we are dealing with an ‘individual’, an ‘*accidens*’ who placed himself before the reality of his times as a meta-historical presence who, ignoring the interpretative categories of the culture of his times, was able to recuperate [...] premises, consequences and terms

<sup>3</sup> P. Scoppola, *Vicende politiche e mutamenti economico-sociali dagli anni di De Gasperi all'esperienza del centro-sinistra*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani tra Chiesa, cultura e scuola*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 1983, pages 3-4.

of a syllogism of absolute truth, unrelated to our or any other historical time»<sup>4</sup>.

After more than a quarter of a century, we must admit that the risk, indicated by Pietro Scoppola is still present and, here and there and which seems to reemerge in some recently published and well documented works. The reference to *prophecy* is still frequent nowadays, perhaps too frequent, and seems to authorize a lot of simplifications with the excuse of saving one the task of reading reality in its true and complex dynamisms. In the Catholic circle, besides, this reference to *prophecy*, runs the risk of re-proposing, in new forms, even unknowingly, the old integralist mentality that has for so long ignored, or judged inappropriate, the necessity of the cultural mediation between faith and society.

There is also another risk to which the life and works of the Florentine priest have been and still are exposed, despite all the research and studies, some of which valuable and illuminating<sup>5</sup>, dedicated to them. I refer to the risk of ambiguous up-dating and improper manipulation of political or ecclesiastical character<sup>6</sup>. A non-critical reading of Don Milani could become, in fact, the flag for battles that were never his, making him an unknowing element of laceration among different ecclesiastical currents and feed radical as well as out of date prejudices, to the detriment of a reading that could offer critical elements of growth and maturity for all consciences and for the Church and Italian society as a whole.

In order to fully understand the meaning and importance of a work such as *Esperienze pastorali* and, more generally,

<sup>4</sup> M. Ranchetti, *Temi e problemi di una esperienza religiosa del nostro tempo*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani*, cit., page 57.

<sup>5</sup> See M. Toschi, *Don Lorenzo Milani e la sua Chiesa. Documenti e studi*, Florence, Edizioni Polistampa, 1994; G. Battelli (Ed.), *Lorenzo Milani. La parola ai poveri*, Fossano, Editrice Esperienze, 1996; D. Simeone, *Verso la scuola di Barbiana. L'esperienza pastorale e educativa di don Lorenzo Milani a S. Donato di Calenzano*, Verona, Il Segno, 1996; M. Lancisi, *Il segreto di don Milani*, Casale Monferrato, Piemonte, 2002; G. Pecorini, *Il segreto di Barbiana, ovvero l'invenzione della scuola*, Bologna, EMI, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, R. Berardi, *Lettera a una professoressa. Un mito degli anni Sessanta*, Milan, Sheakespeare & Company, 1992; A. Santoni Rugiu, *Il buio della libertà. Storia di Don Milani*, Rome, De Donato-Lerici, 2003.

to highlight the human and religious itinerary of the prior of Barbiana, we must, therefore, replace them inside that complex season for the Church and Italian society of the aftermath of the Second World War – in other words we must re-read them in the light of the particular socio-political and ecclesiastical-religious situation of the 1950's and early 1960's.

### *7.1 Don Lorenzo Milani in the post Second World War Italian Church*

It must be said from the start that finding a niche for Don Lorenzo Milani in the panorama of the Italian Church from Pious XII to Paul VI is no easy matter due to the complexity of the man himself: his strong personality, the originality of his way of thinking and acting, his distance – if not isolation – from the political and ecclesiastical currents of the time make it difficult, if not impossible, to ascribe him to any one of them<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, it is not easy to find in Don Milani any cultural or spiritual heritage other than the limited influences received during his years as a seminarist<sup>8</sup>, including some readings he effected during this period, to which I shall refer later.

A significant role in his way of being and working was undoubtedly played by his family roots and the education he received in his childhood and youth. Owing to this, Don Milani absorbed a tradition of middle class rationality – open, cultured, critical and cosmopolitan – which, as we will see later, profoundly influenced many of his choices and attitudes<sup>9</sup>.

Little or nothing can be observed under the voice of cultural influences and references to any kind of theological and spiritual

<sup>7</sup> See A. Riccardi, *La Chiesa italiana fra Pio XII e Paolo VI*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani tra Chiesa, cultura e scuola*, cit., page 21.

<sup>8</sup> See L. Martini, *Il seminario fiorentino nella formazione di don Lorenzo Milani*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani*, cit., pages 95-116.

<sup>9</sup> See Don Milani's biography by N. Fallaci, *Dalla parte dell'ultimo. Vita del prete Lorenzo Milani*, Milan, Milano Libri Edizioni, 1974 (later published as: *Vita del prete Lorenzo Milani. Dalla parte dell'ultimo*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1993). See also B. Calati, *Bibbia e spiritualità in don Milani*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani tra Chiesa, cultura e scuola*, cit., pages 110-123.

traditions. Even towards the so-called *Catholic Progressivism* after the second World War, the young priest showed a certain detachment, in the sense that he was not accepted to what he defined in some Letters as «the left-wing Christian Freemasonry» and, more generally, to the political and ecclesiastical currents that characterized the Florentine and Italian Catholic world of the period. Ideally unattached to any school of thought, Don Milani lived in a detached way the debates and the controversies of the intellectual movement and the Catholic “avant-garde” of the 1950’s; the picture that we get of him from his letters is that of a priest totally absorbed in his religious and parochial duties<sup>10</sup>.

Ordained priest by Cardinal Elia Dalla Costa, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1947, and assigned as chaplain to San Donato of Calenzano, a large village near Prato, Don Lorenzo Milani began his ministry in a Church dominated by the figure of Pious XII, who had emerged from the war with great personal prestige, into the void left by the fall of the regime, and in a social context which had been deeply modified by fascism<sup>11</sup>.

Pious XII, as Andrea Riccardi reminds us, «from the bombing of S. Lorenzo in Rome where he had participated in the population’s suffering, had acquired an important almost symbolic place in the public opinion, thus inaugurating an intense relationship between the Pope and the masses. Mass media [...] had widened and spread the words and figure of

<sup>10</sup> See as regards the Milanian papers: L. Milani, *Lettere alla mamma*, ed. by A. Milani Comparetti, Milan, 1973, pages 108-109; N. Fallaci, *Dalla parte dell'ultimo. Vita del prete Lorenzo Milani* (IV ediz.); M. Lancisi (Ed.), ... e allora don Milani fondò una scuola. *Lettere da Barbiana e San Donato*, Rome, Coines, 1977; G. Melli (Ed.), *Lettere in un'amicizia*, Florence, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1977; M. Lancisi (Ed.), *Dopo la «Lettera». Don Milani e la contestazione studentesca*, Bologna, Cappelli, 1980; L. Milani, *Alla mamma. Lettere 1943-1967*, ed. by G. Battelli, Genova, Marietti, 1990; G. Pecorini (Ed.), *I Care ancora. Lettere, progetti, appunti e carte varie inedite e/o restaurate*, Bologna, EMI, 2001; M. Gesualdi (Ed.), *Lettere di don Lorenzo Milani Priore di Barbiana. Nuova edizione con lettere inedite*, Milan, Edizioni San Paolo, 2007 (first edition 1970). As regards unedited documentation: G. Battelli, *L'epistolario di don Lorenzo Milani. Inventario e regesto*, «Cristianesimo nella storia», 1980, 2, pages 495-530.

<sup>11</sup> See A. Riccardi (Ed.), *Pio XII*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1984; and Id. (Ed.), *Le Chiese di Pio XII*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1986.

the papacy that became a world *leader* after the confusion of the war». The pope was more present than his predecessors in Catholic public opinion and, with his teachings, took on the difficult task «of launching the Church's proposal with his words rather than with choices of government where he is, instead, dominated by prudence and continuity». His teaching was rich, almost an attempt to find a Christian solution to every problem that presented itself in social and civil life: «Around the words of the pope, the papal 'prophecy', the Church is called on to mobilize itself»<sup>12</sup>.

For the Italian bishops, the reference to the pope and to his initiative is innate to the spirituality and style of government. Under the papacy of pope Pious XII the deferment to the Holy See became more frequent<sup>13</sup>. The same *Azione Cattolica* (association of Italian Catholic laics), reformed in its statute by pope Pacelli, became more centralized and subordinate to the Holy See<sup>14</sup>.

The Jesuit, father Riccardo Lombardi, contributor of «La Civiltà Cattolica» and close collaborator of the pope in the post-war years, was one of the main interpreters of this appeal, on the part of Pious XII, for the centralization and mobilization of Catholic forces<sup>15</sup>. In a letter from 1950, Don Milani showed how he greatly esteemed father Lombardi, whom he welcomed, together with his confessor Don Raffaele Bensi and his seminar teacher Don Enrico Bartoletti, among those worthy

<sup>12</sup> Riccardi, *La Chiesa italiana fra Pio XII e Paolo VI*, cit., pages 23-24.

<sup>13</sup> See R. Sani, *Vescovi e mobilitazione cattolica nell'età del centrismo*, in G. Rossini (Ed.), *De Gasperi e l'età del centrismo (1947-1953)*, Rome, Edizioni Cinque Lune, 1984, pages 517-531.

<sup>14</sup> See *Statuto dell'Azione Cattolica Italiana 1946*, Rome, Studium, 1962. On this centralization see: L. Ferrari, *Gli Statuti dell'Azione Cattolica del 1946*, «Italia Contemporanea», 1978, 1, pages 52-74; A. Giovagnoli, *Le organizzazioni di massa d'Azione Cattolica*, in R. Ruffilli (Ed.), *Cultura politica e partiti nell'età della Costituente. I. L'area liberal-democratica. Il mondo cattolico e la Democrazia Cristiana*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1979, pages 316-362.

<sup>15</sup> See R. Sani, *Mobilitazione e rinnovamento: la proposta religiosa di padre Lombardi*, in Id., «La Civiltà Cattolica» e il mondo cattolico italiano nel secondo dopoguerra (1945-1962), Brescia, Morcelliana, 1986, pages 163-196; and G. Zizola, *Il microfono di Dio. Pio XII, padre Lombardi e i cattolici italiani*, Milan, Mondadori, 1990.

of being listened to<sup>16</sup>. The Jesuit was, in fact, very present and appreciated among the Italian clerics; many letters from priests and bishops bear witness to the interest that surrounded the work of recognition, on a unitary and centralized base, of the Catholic forces which he had undertaken<sup>17</sup>.

The mobilization of the Catholic world in these years are continuous: after the massive involvement in the political elections of 18<sup>th</sup> April 1948, Pious XII inaugurated, in 1950, the Holy Jubilee Year and, in 1954, the Marian Year, while father Lombardi in 1949 organized «the Goodness Crusade» and in 1952, in tune with the pope's appeal, created a Christian revival movement that, from Rome, was to spread throughout the world<sup>18</sup>.

This kind of Christian mobilization illustrates the Pacelli papacy's trend that favoured a Church that was strongly centralized and charismatic, that felt that it had new proposals for the new democratic society<sup>19</sup>; in particular, the style of the mobilization seems better suited to a society characterized by a conflict between two great movements, one Catholic and the other Communist, that developed in the climate of the cold war with the tones of a political struggle that merged into in a religious one<sup>20</sup>.

Pietro Scoppola notes that «in Pious XII there are new intuitions and affirmations: the strong accent on the value of the individual lays the basis to overcome the purely instrumental

<sup>16</sup> Fallaci, *Dalla parte dell'ultimo. Vita del prete Lorenzo Milani*, cit., pages 86-87. As regards don Enrico Bartoletti, later bishop of Lucca and from 1972, general secretary of the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, see *Un vescovo italiano del Concilio, Enrico Bartoletti 1916-1976*, Genova, Marietti, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> See Sani, *Vescovi e mobilitazione cattolica nell'età del centrismo*, cit., pages 517-531.

<sup>18</sup> See R. Sani, *Roma cattolica: un'idea per un rinnovamento su scala mondiale. La mobilitazione di Padre Lombardi*, «Humanitas», 1985, 1, pages 59-87.

<sup>19</sup> See A. Riccardi, *La Chiesa di Pio XII, educatrice di uomini e di popoli, tra certezze e crisi*, in *Chiesa e progetto educativo nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra (1945-1958)*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1988, pages 9-36.

<sup>20</sup> See A. Riccardi, *Il potere del papa da Pio XII a Paolo VI*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1988, pages 80-110; and Id., *Il Vaticano e Mosca. 1940-1990*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1992, in particular the part dedicated to the Pacelli papacy.

vision of democracy [...]; but there is also continuity in the fundamental design of a reconstruction of Christianity, design that implied the idea of a self-sufficient Catholic culture, able to define valid criteria for behavior in every branch of learning and in every operative field»<sup>21</sup>.

The so-called “second generation” of Christian Democrats – that is, those men who had supported, after the fall of Fascism, the newly born party of De Gasperi, becoming a significant part of the leading group, but who had not lived the political experience of the pre-fascist period – was near enough to this vision<sup>22</sup>.

Without doubt, the project that Scoppola has defined as Maritainian-Montinian was born from a careful study of the crisis of the 1930's and therefore it presented itself with distinctly new aspects; but «the *historical ideal of a new type of Christianity* – the formula with which Maritain expressed his idea of the project – always remained one of the foundations of that vision, a new Christianity seen as a feasible model, more or less perfect, and therefore a different historical reality from communism or capitalism – a third of the way between the two [...]. Overcoming the traditional indifference of Catholic thought towards political democracy and making of it the necessary and essential premises of every conquest of justice, De Gasperi surmounted the narrowness of early twentieth century social Catholicism. There was [...] a substantial complementariness of roles among the mobilization of the masses, led by the pope himself, the cultural contribution of the second generation, particularly evident in the compilation of the Constitution, and the political actions of the statesman from the Trento region»<sup>23</sup>.

But what were the results of this Catholic mobilization? And, how aware of the evolution in the religious life of the country

<sup>21</sup> Scoppola, *Vicende politiche e mutamenti economico-sociali dagli anni di De Gasperi all'esperienza del centro-sinistra*, cit., page 9.

<sup>22</sup> See P. Scoppola, *Il progetto degli anni '30 fra realizzazioni e contraddizioni nel secondo dopoguerra*, in *L'idea di un progetto storico dagli anni '30 agli anni '80*, Rome, Studium, 1982, pages 73-109. See also Id., *La proposta politica di De Gasperi*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1988; Id., *Gli anni della Costituente fra politica e storia*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1980.

<sup>23</sup> Scoppola, *Vicende politiche e mutamenti economico-sociali dagli anni di De Gasperi all'esperienza del centro-sinistra*, cit., pages 8-9.



was the ecclesiastic hierarchy in the last years of the 1940's and the first years of the 1950's?

7.2 *The decline of the ideal of the "new Christianity": the Pacelli papacy, the secularization processes and the advent of the consumer society*

The need to create a «new Christian order» – expressed by Pious XII as early as his Christmas radio message in 1942<sup>24</sup> – was taken up again by the bishops in the postwar years and proposed as a real solution for the achievement of peace and justice in Italy. «We really believe in a Christian and moral restoration», wrote Mons. Nogara, Archbishop of Udine<sup>25</sup>. And the bishop of Faenza, Mons. Battaglia, summed up the principles on which the reconstruction of the country should be based: «These are the three roads to reconstruction: religion as the basis of private and public life; morality in our way of life, according to the Christian conception; justice and compassion, especially in social relations»<sup>26</sup>.

In this ideal Christian restoration, we have, on the one hand, the necessity of a religious rebirth, and, on the other, the need of a direct participation of Catholics in politics, for the defense of the Church and religion. Some drastic comments on the state of religion in the various dioceses come from numerous bishops: «Religion is partly ignored by the masses, duties perfunctorily performed or practiced only formally by the masses with no spirituality», wrote Mons. Nogara<sup>27</sup>. The Calabrian bishops complained about the religiousness of the people of the South which is only «external», and often mingled with «superstition»<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> See F. Malgeri, *La Chiesa italiana e la guerra (1940-1945)*, Rome, Studium, 1980, pages 119-124.

<sup>25</sup> Mons. G. Nogara, *Le basi della restaurazione cristiana. Lettera pastorale*, Udine, 1945.

<sup>26</sup> Mons. G. Battaglia, *Le vie della ricostruzione. Lettera pastorale*, Faenza, 1946.

<sup>27</sup> Mons. Nogara, *Le basi della restaurazione cristiana. Lettera pastorale*, cit.

<sup>28</sup> *Lettera collettiva dell'episcopato calabrese*, Cosenza, 1945.

These complaints are fairly generalized and shared by the entire Italian clergy and a series of proposals were made to help in a renewal of religious life<sup>29</sup>. The need for a re-intensification of Parish life to educate the population through «frequent well-prepared sermons on the word of God», and the choice of new forms of presence and testimony on the part of the clergy among the population, is expressed by the bishops of Abruzzo who reminded the clergy of their daily duty «to spiritually nourish their congregations»<sup>30</sup>. In the same way, Mons. Colli, Archbishop of Parma, at that time at the head of the Azione Cattolica, sustains that it is ignorance «of doctrine» on the part of those «who proffer themselves Christians» that is the real obstacle against the building of a «Christian society», and invited the clergy to mobilize in that direction<sup>31</sup>.

Along the same lines is the appeal to the clergy by Mons. Confalonieri, Archbishop of L'Aquila. He had been Pious XI's personal secretary, and represented, in the post-war years, a type of energetic and active bishop along the lines of pope Ratti. Confalonieri insists on «the compulsory teaching and study of the Christian Doctrine – in other words, the Catechism – for all, children and adults»<sup>32</sup>. Overcoming this ignorance in matters of basic faith, it was also very much wanted by the bishop of Vittorio Veneto, who saw it as a remedy against «that materialistic sense of life propagated by the new ideologies», against which often there was only «a wavering faith, as easy to put out as a candle,

<sup>29</sup> See for example Card. C. Salotti, *L'ora della tribolazione e l'ora della speranza. Lettera pastorale*, Palestrina, 1944; Mons. G. Battaglia, *Il Signore non è contento di noi. Lettera pastorale*, Faenza, 1944; *Doveri cattolici di fronte ai pericoli odierni. Lettera pastorale collettiva dell'episcopato della regione triiveneta*, Venice, 1945; Mons. G. Cazzani, *Veritatem facientes in charitate. Lettera pastorale*, Cremona, 1945; Card. C. Salotti, *Per la ricostruzione morale della Patria. Lettera pastorale*, Palestrina, 1945; Mons. C. Confalonieri, *Spirito di fede. Lettera pastorale*, L'Aquila, 1946; *I doveri dei cattolici nell'ora presente. Lettera collettiva dell'episcopato marchigiano*, Ancona, 1946; Mons. G. Nogara, *In vista della Costituzione. Lettera pastorale*, Udine, 1947; Mons. E. Colli, *La guerra è la grande nemica (Pio XII). Lettera pastorale*, Parma, 1949.

<sup>30</sup> *Lettera collettiva dell'episcopato abruzzese al clero e al popolo delle rispettive diocesi*, L'Aquila, 1945.

<sup>31</sup> Mons. E. Colli, *Dove si va a finire? Lettera pastorale*, Parma, 1947.

<sup>32</sup> Mons. C. Confalonieri, *Rinnovamento spirituale. Lettera pastorale*, L'Aquila, 1947.

a faith that is so sleepy that even a thunderbolt could not wake up»<sup>33</sup>.

The need, denounced by the bishops, of a mobilization of the clergy and the people for a rebirth of the faith and religious life, is always closely linked – in the sense of a «Christian restoration» – to the mobilization of Catholics in the political and social life of the country. The 1946 elections for the Constituent Assembly, saw the Italian bishops involved in ensuring a constitution that was founded on Christian values and that defended the role of the Church in the country<sup>34</sup>. The importance of a massive Catholic participation in the elections was stressed by the archbishop of Florence, the Card. Dalla Costa who wrote: «There is no doubt about the Christian duty to block the destruction of family, civil and religious society which can only come about through the elections»<sup>35</sup>. The bishop of Cremona, Mons. Cazzani, after having underlined the importance of the decisions of the Constituent Assembly that was about to be elected, warned that «not only the economic interests of a class or a party are involved, but the supreme interests of the nation itself»<sup>36</sup>.

Already in the pastorals of 1947 we can sense a certain disappointment towards the results of the mobilization supported by the Church and a Christian rebirth. Mons. Gilla Gremigni, archbishop of Teramo wrote: «We waited for the fall of Fascism and Nazism... with such anxiety and now, today, in practice, if not in theory, we find insult added to injury»<sup>37</sup>. For the bishop of Padua, in spite of the efforts of the Church, «many people still live in indifference and apathy as if the

<sup>33</sup> Mons. G. Zaffonato, *State in fide et viriliter agite. Lettera pastorale*, Vittorio Veneto, 1947.

<sup>34</sup> See R. Sani, «*La Civiltà Cattolica*» e la politica italiana nel secondo dopoguerra (1945-1958), Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 2004, pages 45-67.

<sup>35</sup> See Card. E. Dalla Costa, *Il voto: obbligo di coscienza per i cristiani*, «Bollettino Diocesano», Jan.-Feb. 1945.

<sup>36</sup> Mons. G. Cazzani, *Supremo interesse e supremo diritto. Lettera pastorale*, Cremona, 1946. But see also: Mons. E. Colli, *Il dovere dell'ora presente*, Parma, 1946; Mons. Nogara, *In vista della Costituzione. Lettera pastorale*, cit.; Mons. G. Battaglia, *I diritti di Dio. Lettera pastorale*, Faenza, 1947.

<sup>37</sup> Mons. V. Gilla Gremigni, *Esame cristiano di parole abusate. Lettera pastorale*, Teramo, 1947.

Church were something that doesn't concern them»<sup>38</sup>. These positions were symptoms of an awareness that was beginning to emerge among the bishops concerning the effective difficulty of finding an answer to the new problems and behavior that afflicted the masses in the post-war period<sup>39</sup>. These feelings and preoccupations which were, at the time, barely perceptible, were to become much stronger in the 1950's.

The mobilization for the 1948 elections pushed these problems into the background at the time. The need for a great electoral performance was foremost in the mind of the Church and the bishops. «Faced with present conditions – wrote Mons. Mazzocco – no Christian may remain inert, passive, with folded arms, complain or even only pray to God to save us»<sup>40</sup>.

Many bishops were drastic and saw the elections as a clash between two civilizations life: the Christian and the Communist one<sup>41</sup>. In other hierarchic spheres, the invitation to electoral mobilization was based in less radical tones and more space was given over to a reflection on the country's problems. «Without judging our Constitution – wrote Mons. D'Avack, archbishop of Camerino – it is certainly true that in many cases it may be equally applied with excellent or disastrous results: it follows therefore that it should be applied by men who recognize themselves in the Church and Christian principles»<sup>42</sup>.

We find many different tones and attitudes in the documents of the Italian bishops: it is not always possible to offer a substantially

<sup>38</sup> Mons. C. Agostini, *Sentire con la Chiesa. Lettera pastorale*, Padua, 1947.

<sup>39</sup> See Sani, *Vescovi e mobilitazione cattolica nell'età del centrismo*, cit., pages 517-531.

<sup>40</sup> Mons. G. Mazzocco, *Nell'ora torbida che volge solo Dio può salvarci. Lettera pastorale*, Adria, 1948. But see also: Mons. C. Confalonieri, *Militi di Gesù Cristo. Lettera pastorale*, L'Aquila, 1948; Mons. G. Nogara, *Il lavoro. Lettera pastorale*, Udine, 1948.

<sup>41</sup> See S. Magister, *La politica vaticana e l'Italia 1943-1948*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1979, pages 61-64; and above all G. Miccoli, *Chiesa, partito cattolico e società civile (1945-1975)*, in V. Castronovo (Ed.), *L'Italia contemporanea 1945-1975*, Turin, Einaudi, 1976, pages 191-252 (now also in Miccoli, *Fra mito della cristianità e secolarizzazione. Studi sul rapporto chiesa-società nell'età contemporanea*, cit., pages 371-426).

<sup>42</sup> Mons. G. D'Avack, *Lettera pastorale*, Camerino, 1948. See also Mons. G. Angelucci, *Due parole al mio popolo. Lettera pastorale*, Città della Pieve, 1948.

united image of the Italian bishops, in close collaboration with the papacy and various Catholic organizations. It was certainly not a diversity of position towards pope Pacelli's policies but rather a kind of sensitivity which was not felt by all, due to a substantial lack of collective consultation as to the problems connected to it. The Italian bishops, numerous and often living in small, provincial dioceses, had not yet acquired any form of common policy, if we exclude a regional one (not always present) and contacts with the Roman Curia. The national episcopacy, without effective internal links, was sometimes even unaware of decisions made by the Roman Congregations. In answer to these differences (rather than divergences) the invitation «never to lose sight of the Papacy and the Pope»<sup>43</sup> made by Card. Dalla Costa, an influential cleric full of sense of autonomous responsibility on the part of the bishops, became very important.

Once again, in the 1948 pastoral documents, there is new vigor in the demand for more social justice, something which all Catholics were called upon to sustain. Mons. Nogara wrote «Peace that is not based on justice but on egoisms and antagonisms will never last long»<sup>44</sup>. Mons. Battaglia draws the attention of Faenza diocese to the «hosts of disinherited and poor» urging action to achieve «social justice»<sup>45</sup>. Along with these calls for a concrete form of social justice after 18<sup>th</sup> April there are also indications for a growth of religious life, which is expressed in Mons. Perini's (archbishop of Fermo) pastoral: «We must go back to the rites with an active participation of the faithful... catechism for adults that is not a sermon but a lesson, clear, alive, close to their needs»<sup>46</sup>.

The victory of the Christian Democrats in the 1948 elections, if on the one hand averted the specter of communism, on the other, for the Italian bishops, left many problems unsolved which the Church and Catholics were called to face. The arrival, via the press and cinema, of new models of behavior totally different from those of our country (American, for example)

<sup>43</sup> Card. E. Dalla Costa, *State in fide. Lettera pastorale*, Florence, 1948.

<sup>44</sup> Mons. Nogara, *Il lavoro. Lettera pastorale*, cit.

<sup>45</sup> Mons. G. Battaglia, *L'ora dell'azione. Lettera pastorale*, Faenza, 1948.

<sup>46</sup> Mons. N. Perini, *Religione del lunedì. Lettera pastorale*, Fermo, 1948.

made the bishops very worried. Mons. Allorio, bishop of Pavia, warned that, despite the Communist defeat «in religious, moral and social fields there is still danger: the alarm continues»<sup>47</sup>. Mons. Fares, bishop of Squillace and coadjutor bishop of Catanzaro, had the same preoccupations. For him we were facing «a real sense of bewilderment of conscience» produced by «the obscurity of religion» among people, and in the society<sup>48</sup>.

Mons. Confalonieri declared that new forms of apostolate and mobilization, with the coming Jubilee Holy Year, were needed to make Catholics «enter the fight, under the banner of Christ». For him the mere «cult is not enough» and «the error of many is to think that religion is only a series of prayers, rites and ceremonies»<sup>49</sup>. The existence of «serious social injustices» and «persistent economic disequilibrium» – already denounced by the bishops in their 1948 pastorals – was the central theme of Mons. Colli's letter for Lent 1949. According to the archbishop of Parma, «too many misunderstandings and egoisms dominate the relations between the different classes»<sup>50</sup>; the Abruzzo episcopacy maintained that there was an urgent need for a «Christian press, good, former of consciences» to contrast the spread of «propaganda from the enemies of Christendom»<sup>51</sup>.

The mobilization for the «Great Return», launched in 1950, in occasion of the Holy Year, which in Pious XII's project should have marked the return of the faithful to the Church (we are in the period of the decree of excommunication for communists, promulgated by the Holy Office in 1949)<sup>52</sup>, was enthusiastically received by the bishops, but did not achieve the expected results<sup>53</sup>. The initiatives remained within the traditional areas

<sup>47</sup> Mons. C. Allorio, *L'allarme continua. Lettera pastorale*, Pavia, 1949.

<sup>48</sup> Mons. A. Fares, *Messaggio pastorale*, Squillace, 1950.

<sup>49</sup> Mons. C. Confalonieri, *Apostolato cristiano. Lettera pastorale*, L'Aquila, 1949.

<sup>50</sup> Mons. Colli, *La guerra è la grande nemica (Pio XII). Lettera pastorale*, cit. But see also: Mons. G. Angrisani, *I fiori della Madonna. Lettera pastorale*, Casale, 1949.

<sup>51</sup> *Lettera collettiva dell'episcopato abruzzese sulla buona stampa*, L'Aquila, 1949.

<sup>52</sup> See G. Alberigo, *La condanna della collaborazione dei cattolici con i partiti comunisti (1949)*, «Concilium», 1975, 8, pages 15-40.

<sup>53</sup> See R. Sani, *Un laboratorio politico e culturale: «La Civiltà Cattolica»*, in

of religious manifestations, not reaching those circles that move far from the Church<sup>54</sup>.

The administrative elections of 1951-'52 became, for the bishops, a real test, not only for the success of the mobilization for the «Great Return» of 1950 but for the entire post-war pastoral efforts. «Nearly all of us – wrote Mons. Battaglia (bishop of Faenza, in the Romagna region), after the results of the administrative elections – who more, who less, thought that the situation in our rural areas had improved; instead social-communism is still strong. The surprise increases when you think that, in the past few years, great religious events have shaken all the classes of our society»<sup>55</sup>. Of the same opinion is the bishop of Reggio Emilia, for whom the masses, in spite of having shown a certain religious fervor «during the year of the diocesan Eucharistic Congress, in three years of pastoral visits, in two years of *peregrinatio Mariae*», are the same that today listen to Satan's emissaries, orators of hate, activists of Godless people»<sup>56</sup>.

The strength of the left-wing parties – because of the close link between faith and politics present in the Christian Restoration project and supported by the same Pious XII – assumed the form of a failure on the pastoral level<sup>57</sup>. In this context, we must also consider the intensification of the polemics towards communism and, above all, the new relationship between the bishops and the Christian Democratic Party.

This same Catholic party was not immune to criticism in the way that it governed and handled dealings with the social-communist opposition. Perhaps the strongest accusation, coming

Riccardi (Ed.), *Pio XII*, cit., pages 409-436; Id., *Roma cattolica: un'idea per un rinnovamento su scala mondiale. La mobilitazione di Padre Lombardi*, cit., pages 59-87. But see also: G. Martina, *La Chiesa in Italia negli ultimi trent'anni*, Rome, Studium, 1977, pages 51-54; A. Riccardi, *Roma «città sacra»? Dalla Conciliazione all'operazione Sturzo*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 1979, pages 351-357.

<sup>54</sup> See *Lettera pastorale collettiva dell'episcopato della regione triveneta*, Venice, 1949; and Mons. P. Botto, *Prima lettera pastorale*, Chiavari, 1949.

<sup>55</sup> Mons. G. Battaglia, *Dopo le elezioni*, «Bollettino Diocesano», June 1951.

<sup>56</sup> Mons. B. Socche, *L'ora dell'unione e dell'impegno per tutti i cattolici. Lettera pastorale*, Reggio Emilia, 1952.

<sup>57</sup> See Riccardi, *Roma «città sacra»? Dalla Conciliazione all'operazione Sturzo*, cit., page 381.

as it did from Card. Schuster, was the most condemning: «When you allow communists to distribute to the masses about a million copies of the daily paper, when, with a false idea of democracy you allow the party to plot and organize against religion... it is hardly surprising that the government's social reforms and the Church's preaching pass almost unseen and unheard»<sup>58</sup>.

The archbishop of Milan's violent attack on the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and on the governing coalition was not an isolated one: «This reflection must make us realize – writes the archbishop of Parma, mons. Colli – that hoping to stop communism without reforming the liberal mentality... would be utopia»<sup>59</sup>. Along the same lines, but in less aggressive tones, was Mons. Nogara, archbishop of Udine, who took up again the polemics towards secularization, which, according to him wanted «to exclude religion from public life»<sup>60</sup>.

The lack of any common reflection, on behalf of the bishops, did not permit, in the post-war years, the realization of a unitary pastoral project. It almost seemed as if, among the bishops, there was a minimum common opinion, imposed by the papacy, not without disagreements and contradictions, lost in the phrasing of the pastoral letters<sup>61</sup>. On this basis, it is impossible to launch a real analysis of the relations between the Church and the mass society, while with the awareness of this religious crisis, the suggestions for a simplification of the problems and contradictions of social reality become stronger<sup>62</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> Card. I. Schuster, *Discorso della I domenica di Avvento*, «Rivista Diocesana Milanese», 1953, 42, pages 318-322.

<sup>59</sup> Mons. E. Colli, *Le dottrine alterate. Lettera pastorale*, Parma, 1952.

<sup>60</sup> Mons. G. Nogara, *Riforma dei costumi. Lettera pastorale*, Udine, 1951. But see also: Mons. N. Perini, *Collaborazione. Lettera pastorale*, Fermo 1951; Mons. B. Mangino, *Siate cristiani forti. Lettera pastorale*, Caserta, 1953; Mons. P. Capizzi, *Il Sacerdote. Lettera pastorale*, Caltagirone, 1953; Mons. G. Battaglia, *Le vie della pace. Lettera pastorale*, Faenza, 1953.

<sup>61</sup> See A. Riccardi, *Ambienti ecclesiastici romani e politica italiana negli anni del dopoguerra*, in G. Rossini (Ed.), *Democrazia Cristiana e Costituente nella società italiana del dopoguerra. Bilancio storiografico e prospettiva di ricerca*, Rome, Edizioni Cinque Lune, 1980, 3 vols., I, pages 263-320. But now see also Id., *Il «partito romano». Politica italiana, Chiesa cattolica e curia romana da Pio XII a Paolo VI*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2007, in particular the *Postfazione* in the second edition, pages 247-306.

<sup>62</sup> See P. Scoppola, *Le trasformazioni culturali e l'irrompere dell'«American*



In this way, the communist threat became identified as the real obstacle for the Christian restoration: a great deal of the balance of the pastoral activity in the country seems to depend on the electoral success or failure of the Catholic party<sup>63</sup>.

In the wake of a general sense of delusion, the Italian bishops noted how the DC of De Gasperi had «lost in part its credibility with the electors»: this party, we read in the minutes of the reunion of the presidents of the Conciliar Conferences of Italy, held in Florence in January 1952, «gives the impression of wanting to remain a closed circle of élite»<sup>64</sup>. The responsibilities of the Christian Democrats, for the transformation of social and religious customs, seem to be many, even if felt in a generally confused way.

The bishops became aware of the profound changes in the same way of feeling and in the practical attitudes of the faithful, especially the younger ones. It was not only the changed relationship between the people and the clergy that worried the Church hierarchy. Even public opinion seemed to be animated by a different spirit: the press was more lay and anticlerical and seemed to be pervaded by an increasing immorality; more generally it would seem that the traditional respect for the Church and her principles had disappeared. Society appeared deeply changed and the paradox was that all this was happening in a historical moment, when for the first time since National unification, the Catholics were firmly in power in Italy.

But could we still call this a Catholic country? Enormous catholic energies were consumed in the great political battle for the 18<sup>th</sup> April 1948 (Don Milani was an eye-witness as can be seen in his letter to Pipetta)<sup>65</sup>; a battle, the outcome of which was to do so much religious good for the country. The mobilization

*way of life», in Chiesa e progetto educativo nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra (1945-1958), cit., pages 476-494.*

<sup>63</sup> See Sani, *Vescovi e mobilitazione cattolica nell'età del centrismo*, cit., pages 517-531.

<sup>64</sup> The minutes of the reunion of the presidents of the Conferenze Conciliari d'Italia (Florence, 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> January 1952) can be found in Riccardi, *La Chiesa italiana da Pio XII a Paolo VI*, cit., page 30.

<sup>65</sup> See Gesualdi (Ed.), *Lettere di don Lorenzo Milani Priore di Barbiana. Nuova edizione con lettere inedite*, cit., pages 21-23.

of the Catholic masses ended with the political delegation to the leaders of the Christian Democrats and the mediation of De Gasperi. But had there been a Christian policy? This is the question, that at the beginning of the 1950's, was on everyone's lips.

### *7.3 Don Milani in the face of failure of the political mobilization of the Church of Pope Pious XII*

How did Don Lorenzo Milani live this complex situation? Well, he was not only uncritical towards this mobilization of Catholic forces, but he participated actively as can be seen from the well-known letter sent to his friend Gian Paolo Meucci, dated 21<sup>st</sup> June 1952, where he took up once again the themes of a conversation between himself and Meucci from the previous day.

Giovanni Miccoli has already analyzed well this letter, on which it is worthwhile, however, to pause to formulate some further and rapid observations. A certain disaffection towards the DC had already set in after the delusion of the 1948 elections, so it is interesting to note what importance Don Milani, in his letter to Meucci, still attributed to what he ironically called «God's Firm». As Miccoli comments, with this expression he did not mean only the Church as a theological and institutional entity, but the whole Catholic world, which in that moment meant «the Holy See, the hierarchy, the clergy, lay organizations, 'Christian party'; a well-articulated and distinct whole, and together solidly organized, firmly united by a superior unit of command and discipline»<sup>66</sup>.

Don Milani thus wrote to Gian Paolo Meucci in June 1952:

Dear Gianni, yesterday you caused me a little sufferance because we poor country people take all the news that comes from the city as true. Nobody can dupe me about the things concerning my people, but when

<sup>66</sup> Miccoli, *Don Lorenzo Milani nella Chiesa del suo tempo*, cit., pages 430-434. But see also Id., *Chiesa, partito cattolico e società civile (1945-1975)*, in Id. (Ed.), *Fra mito della cristianità e secolarizzazione. Studi sul rapporto chiesa-società nell'età contemporanea*, cit., pages 371-427.

it comes to city dwellers I depend on the informer who inspires me with the most trust. Yesterday I listened to you with complete trust, which lasted until about three minutes after your departure. Three minutes after you left I carefully examined the pile of idols that you had broken. You know that unfortunately I had broken idols, too. But yesterday was really too much. Until yesterday, for example, I had consoled my boys with the promise that the best part of the DC could be redeemed. I used to tell them that, with our votes, we could build a Christian party formed by trade-unionists and housewives. You insinuated, instead, that the CISL might have been penetrated by the USA. The ACLI, maneuvered by the clergy. Fanfani, conformism. La Pira, paternalism. ACI, shit. Pious XII, shit. De Gasperi, shit. «Now», shit. Dossetti, despair – no, perhaps something worse: Dossetti, unlimited esteem. But in this esteem for the man who found himself alone in the desert, almost an invitation for me to say *we are alone*. To feel that there are two or three of us on God's side, and all the rest in dirty betrayal. In this conclusion there is certainly the hand of Satan because he reserved 7,000 that did not bow to Baal [...]. That's why I say that yesterday you deceived me. But not deliberately, because you deceived yourself as well. I ask you now to come back as soon as you can, or else to write to me in order to make up for the harm you did: that is, to make a more precise examination of the value of men and things, from which results that, if “not” the Catholic optimism (equally satanic) of the young ACs, at least a little bit of hope is the sure, certain and statistically founded sign that we do not work alone in the desert but in God's Great Firm. Not contemplating our belly-buttons, but a sky full of promises, hopes, reality, certainties. I do not ask for your compassion [...]. I only ask you to seriously re-examine them (these judgments) because, if as I hope, not everything was thought over, you can re-build for me something good to tell my young people [...]. If Dossetti comes to Florence, please let me know. I don't take *a lot of* notice of these things because I am now withdrawn in my shell at S. Donato. I don't ask you for important friendships, plots, political sets, movements, profound discussions with people who think like me, left-wing Christian masons, mutual admiration societies. I only ask you, if you have no firm evidence, not to destroy that link of hope I had with the Firm, that with which I had hoped to be no longer “an isolated and superior genius” but an intelligent little cog in God's great machinery<sup>67</sup>.

The conversation and the friend's opinions, to which the letter refers, already reflect the apprehension and feeling of crisis felt in many Catholic circles at the beginning of the 1950's, in the

<sup>67</sup> The letter is reproduced in Lancisi (Ed.), ... *e allora don Milani fondò una scuola. Lettere da Barbiana e San Donato*, cit., pages 124-126.

face of the increasing failure of those hopes of social renewal and an adequate and coherent political struggle, that had been important elements in the mobilization of the 18<sup>th</sup> April 1948 and of the subsequent proposals. More directly, they were linked to the crisis and disbanding of the Dossetti group, after the entry of Amintore Fanfani in the VII De Gasperi government (July 1951) and to the resulting withdrawal of Giuseppe Dossetti from political life<sup>68</sup>, «a historical moment seemed irreparably lost, the denunciation of the weaknesses and inabilities of men seemed to absorb all other considerations»<sup>69</sup>.

The letter to Meucci does not underline only the essential agreement, on the part of Don Milani, with the articulations and prospective of Catholic intervention in those years; the term in which he expresses this necessity offer a precise clue to his own need «of a link, some way in which to solder his own daily work to a more ample, articulated and historically solid reality». In other words, it is the refusal, on the part of Don Milani, to feel that they are few and alone: «The pessimism of he who isolates himself appears just as satanic as the programmatically happy-go-lucky optimism of the young of GIAC»<sup>70</sup>.

The basic impression, however, is that the letter to Gian Paolo Meucci reflects the determination of a caesura in Don Lorenzo Milani's life, both as man and priest, that connected to the dramatic failure of the hopes of a season which, at the beginning of the 1950's, seems to have exhausted itself. From this moment on, in fact, his reaction becomes exclusively moral and can be summarized in the denouncement of what he considers the betrayal of a government that has, in his opinion,

<sup>68</sup> See G. Baget Bozzo, *Il partito cristiano al potere. La DC di De Gasperi e di Dossetti 1945/1954*, Florence, Vallecchi, 1974, pages 349-382; G. Campanini, *Fede e politica 1943-1951. La vicenda ideologica della sinistra DC*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 1976; P. Pombeni, *Il gruppo dossettiano e la fondazione della Democrazia cristiana italiana (1938-1948)*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1979; Id., *Le «Cronache sociali» di Dossetti. Geografia di un movimento di opinione 1947-1951*, Florence, Vallecchi, 1976; G. Tassani, *La terza generazione. Da Dossetti a De Gasperi, tra Stato e rivoluzione*, Rome, Edizioni Lavoro, 1988; G. Trotta, *Giuseppe Dossetti. La rivoluzione nello Stato*, Florence, Camunia, 1996.

<sup>69</sup> Miccoli, *Don Lorenzo Milani nella Chiesa del suo tempo*, cit., page 432.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, page 433.

let itself be «bound hand and foot» by the oppressors of the poor.

His moral travail derives from the fact that he had «actively supported» such a government: «Don't tell me that the government is doing what it can, that it is better than nothing, that without it who knows where we might be» – he writes in his *Lettera a don Piero*, written between 1953 and 1954 and then published in *Esperienze Pastorali* –; talk like this is good for people «who live on this earth, for this earth». But «what greater tragedy for a priest could ever happen? To be free, to have the Sacraments, Parliament, the press, radio, churches, pulpits, schools and with all this abundance of divine and human resources, reap the fruit of being derided by the poor, hated by the weakest and loved by the strongest. To have the Church empty. To know that soon the faith of the poor will be done for»<sup>71</sup>.

In *Lettera a don Piero* we are struck by the re-emergence of the hypothesis – even if only to note the failure – of a wide mobilization of all the Catholic, religious and civil energies, for the construction of a new society. What was maturing in Don Milani, however, is a purely moral opinion, that never succeeded in crossing the threshold of a real, true political analysis, which was always an evaluation of the possible, connected therefore to the critical comprehension of reality. The lack of an authentically historical reading, that is of perspective, did not permit the Florentine clerk to see the signals of the labored advance of the Italian Catholicism in the democratic mass society. The need of a radical coherence seemed to push him, on the other hand, more and more towards a refusal of the political dimension rather than towards the direction of a search for alternate hypotheses of presence and more adequate interventions in the new situation<sup>72</sup>.

<sup>71</sup> L. Milani, *Esperienze pastorali*, Florence, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1958, pages 464-465.

<sup>72</sup> See also the careful reflections formulated by Scoppola, *Vicende politiche e mutamenti economico-sociali dagli anni di De Gasperi all'esperienza del centro-sinistra*, cit., page 15.

#### 7.4 *At the origin of the Esperienze Pastorali of don Lorenzo Milani*

Don Milani became prior of S. Andrea in Barbiana, an isolated village in the Mugello area with fewer than 100 faithful, at the end of 1954, while part of the population of the Apennines was preparing to move in the opposite direction and the mountain parishes had begun to be short of priests<sup>73</sup>.

The socio-economic transformations and the first vigorous signals of the industrial and productive growth destined to characterize our country in the course of the decade, were beginning to be felt even in Barbiana: many families had the opportunity to leave the mountains, to move to the plains and find better paid jobs, and sometimes they were replaced by even poorer immigrants from the South. Thus, while Italy was developing and moving towards a more and more widespread prosperity, “the last ones” of Don Milani were destined to be eternal losers and the prior of Barbiana was determined to stay with them.

Don Milani did not compound into a unitarian, cultural design the values of justice and the rights of the conscience that are the foundations of democracy, he lived in conflict with them through the participation of the condition of his poor, his “last ones”: his experience «cannot be unified in an organic, cultural vision, but only in the continuous effort of participating in the life of these poor people», those whose condition of outcasts derived from material poverty and lack of education. This experience, as Pietro Scoppola has so rightly underlined, did not follow the development of the events that transform Italian society but broke away from it: «The movement of his reasoning is in some way the opposite of the reality of his times; in a society that is changing into an industrial one he makes his ascetical choice in favor of ‘the lowest’; the exile in Barbiana marks in this sense a fracture [...]. Don Milani does not pass from the idea of the new Christianity to the reforming culture that is rife among

<sup>73</sup> See Riccardi (Ed.), *Le Chiese di Pio XII*, cit., pages 3-117 and *passim*; G. Verucci, *La Chiesa nella società contemporanea. Dal primo dopoguerra al Concilio Vaticano II*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1988, pages 204-323.

Catholics at the end of the 50's and the next decade; but, under the spur of his ascetical tension, he abandons every historical project and remains, as to say, on what is the foundation of any civil or social renewal, on the value of man and supremacy of conscience»<sup>74</sup>.

It is in this context, through a long and complex elaboration, starting in S. Donato in 1953-'54 and ending in 1958, the year of its publication, that we can place the work *Esperienze pastorali* in which the Florentine priest described his experience as chaplain of S. Donato, and the impact with a world characterized, in the human and religious sphere, by great miseries and difficulties<sup>75</sup>.

The diminishing practice of religion and the inclination to reduce it to often only purely formal rituals, were the first things noted by Don Milani, who, while observing the local reality, often availed himself of unorthodox methods obtained from the sociological research.

From his observations of religious practice, his reflections lead him to a merciless investigation on the contents of the faith of his people in S. Donato, where the survival of habits and religious customs represented only the feeble trace of a historic faith, devoid of vitality; the remains of a Christianity reduced to a mere series of gestures and formulas.

Don Milani observed that, in the life of his practicing parishioners, religion was no longer a determining force and was deeply struck by this incoherence. He replied that many of the faithful's acts were guided by the iron law of conformism. He is also struck by the low level of education among his people, more among the agricultural workers than among the other workers; and this ignorance was all the more serious, when living in a society where, without a minimum level of

<sup>74</sup> Scoppola, *Vicende politiche e mutamenti economico-sociali dagli anni di De Gasperi all'esperienza del centro-sinistra*, cit., pages 16-17.

<sup>75</sup> On the genesis and the vicissitudes encountered by *Esperienze pastorali* see, in particular, M. Sorice (Ed.), *A trent'anni da «Esperienze pastorali» di don Lorenzo Milani*, Atti del Convegno di Calenzano (16-17 Dicembre 1988), Milan, Franco Angeli, 1990; and Toschi, *Don Lorenzo Milani e la sua Chiesa. Documenti e studi*, cit.

education, you could not exercise your rights as a citizen, nor have a professional activity. He also noted that many families lived in totally inadequate houses, devoid of the essential services (water, electricity, bathrooms, etc.). Lastly, social injustices – in particular unemployment and juvenile exploitation – were manifested through the faces, the stories and the individual dramas of his young parishes.

With the realization of this state of affairs, Don Milani reached some conclusions that would find ample space in *Esperienze pastorali*. Facing the social injustices and the primary needs of his people, the priest could not just be a bystander, he had to act on behalf of the poor and to serve them not only out of Christian duty but also as a pastoral necessity, because the work of evangelization was seriously compromised by the existence of such conditions of injustice and marginality.

From a purely religious and pastoral point of view, the traditional methods, learnt in the seminary, seemed totally inadequate to him and sometimes even counter-productive. In the traditional catechism class with children gave scarce results and many abandoned the class just at the age when they could be taught the fundamentals of the faith. Even recreational activities with the young, in the hope of keeping them close to the Church, did not have significant pastoral results; on the contrary, they provoked misunderstanding and ambiguity about the sense of faith and religious experience, both in who proposed, and in who was involved in them.

Lastly – and this is the real nucleus, the real basis of the reconstruction offered by Don Milani in *Esperienze pastorali* – were the people who had been un-Christianized for so long, even if this lack of a vivid faith was hidden under the form of a traditional religiousness and the rituality of religious duties. It was therefore necessary that the priest no longer had to consider himself the pastor of a Christian flock but as a missionary in *partibus infidelium*, and act as such.

Even from a strictly sacramental point of view in fact, Don Milani noted, the faithful were no longer faithful. The *Lettera dall'oltretomba riservata e segretissima ai missionari cinesi* from «a poor white priest at the end of the II millennium»,



placed in the appendix of the volume, expressed, in an almost apocalyptic way, the sensation of the end of a Christian society, of the Catholic world, even of the presence itself of the Church: Tuscany had become a land of mission for Chinese priests<sup>76</sup>.

Several scholars have remarked on the profound influence a work such as the Abbot Godin's *France, pays de mission*<sup>77</sup>, had on the young seminarist Lorenzo Milani. The work appeared in 1943, at the origin of the so-called *Missione di Parigi*<sup>78</sup> and was also about the experience in France of the worker priests, narrated in a famous book – *Les saints vont en enfer* by Gilbert Cesbron<sup>79</sup> – of which Don Milani was an attentive and penetrating reader as is revealed in a letter to his mother dated 19<sup>th</sup> May 1952<sup>80</sup>.

Without doubt the theme of the “un-Christianization” of contemporary society and of the urgency of the problem of evangelization in the working-class world, as emerged from the debate in France, is the starting point for Don Milani's reflections<sup>81</sup>, which, because they stemmed from the authentic pastoral experience experienced in S. Donato, could not be generalized or labelled with abstract terms of sociology.

<sup>76</sup> See Milani, *Esperienze pastorali*, cit., page 437.

<sup>77</sup> See in particular É. Poulat, *Problemi e orientamenti della pastorale in Francia negli anni 1940-50*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani*, cit., pages 162-167; Miccoli, *Don Lorenzo Milani nella Chiesa del suo tempo*, cit., pages 441-443; B. Bocchini Camaiani, *Chiesa e ambienti religiosi fiorentini negli anni '50*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani tra Chiesa, cultura e scuola*, cit., page 63.

<sup>78</sup> See G. Siefert, *La mission des prêtres-ouvriers. Les faits et les conséquences*, Paris, Éditions de l'Épi, 1963; É. Poulat, *Naissance des prêtres ouvriers*, Tournai-Paris, Casterman, 1965; J.-F. Six, *Cheminements de la mission de France 1941-1966*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1966; É. Poulat, *Une Église ébranlée. Changement, conflit et continuité de Pie XII à Jean-Paul II*, Tournai-Paris, Casterman, 1980; L. Augros, *De l'Église d'hier à l'Église de demain. L'aventure de la Mission de France*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1980; J. Vinatier, *Le Cardinal Liénart et la Mission de France*, Paris, Éditions du Centurion, 1978; Id., *Le Cardinal Suhard (1874-1949)*, Paris, Éditions du Centurion, 1983; É. Poulat, *Chiesa e mondo operaio. Il caso dei preti operai*, in Riccardi (Ed.), *Pio XII*, cit., pages 295-306.

<sup>79</sup> G. Cesbron, *Les saints vont en enfer*, Paris, Laffont, 1952 (It. trans. *I santi vanno all'inferno*, Milan, Longanesi, 1952).

<sup>80</sup> Milani, *Lettere alla mamma*, cit., pages 108-109.

<sup>81</sup> See Poulat, *Problemi e orientamenti della pastorale in Francia negli anni 1940-50*, cit., pages 162-167.

There is also, in *Esperienze Pastorali* an anti-middle-class vein that is not political but moral and, as has been underlined, «approaches the polemics of a Bloy or a Péguy, perhaps filtered through certain Florentine circles in the period between the wars, or even of a Mounier to whose magazine ‘Esprit’ don Milani was a subscriber during his years at S. Donato».

Milani’s proposal was to re-unite culture and faith through the individual’s conscience thus stimulating personal judgments that were the fruit of a maturing ‘I’. «With this appeal to culture, as the capacity of having a personal position towards the religious problem, Milani appears as a not last heir to religious humanism, and his proposal, situated as it is in a context of the agony of the rural civilization, finds space in that secular movement, which, according to Delumeau, in modern times, is directed towards the diffusion of a convinced Christianity»<sup>82</sup>; a faith that had as a presupposition its adherence in an awareness of conscience.

The school for the people was the principal instrument of the *ex novo* work of reconstruction of the religious dimension of consciences; a school, let it be clear, that freed the poor from their subjection to the middle-class culture, allowing them to aspire to the highest expressions of the human spirit and living them a sense of personal dignity. The concentration on civil as well as religious education practiced in Don Milani’s «people school» in S. Donato and proposed in *Esperienze pastorali* as an alternative to a pastoral of «works» and «re-creators», can be placed, therefore, at the junction of the three great tensions in which can be summarized, according to Antonio Acerbi, the spiritual universe of the Florentine priest: «Bring justice to the poor, the far away near, the faithful to a personal religious experience». This is «the right instrument to obtain, once and for all, that there are ‘coherent’ Christians, that to the ‘far away’ the true face of the Church is revealed and that ‘the most profound gifts of the workers’ soul emerge’»<sup>83</sup>.

<sup>82</sup> A. Acerbi, *Cultura popolare e Parola in don Lorenzo Milani*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani tra Chiesa, cultura e scuola*, cit., page 129.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, page 130.

### 7.5 *Genesis of a polemic and a condemnation: the publishing of Esperienze Pastoralì*

The publication of *Esperienze pastorali* had a complicated *iter*. Important in this occasion was the work of Don Raffaele Bensi and Giorgio La Pira<sup>84</sup>. The latter, after the refusal of Mons. Giovanni Battista Montini (archbishop of Milan) to father David Maria Turoldo<sup>85</sup>, presented Don Milani's work to the archbishop of Camerino, Mons. Giuseppe D'Avack, who even wrote the preface<sup>86</sup>. Just as important appears to be the role of Don Bensi who, in August 1957, bypassing the normal procedures of the curia, acquired the *imprimatur* from Card. Elia Dalla Costa and the following *nihil obstat* from father Reginaldo Santilli<sup>87</sup>.

<sup>84</sup> Don Lorenzo Milani to Giampaolo Meucci, December 1956: «Dear Gianni, for practical necessity I am obliged once again to refer to yours of 30<sup>th</sup> August. Necessary because yesterday I gave the book to Don Bensi, to give to La Pira so that he could add an accompanying letter and send it to the bishop of Camerino to ask him to write two lines of a preface or at least ecclesiastical permission to print it in Camerino (Editrice Fiorentina Tipografica Camerino). This complicated maneuver is what you and father David advised me and which I have only modified by involving don Bensi whom I hold in high regard because of his judgment, experience and knowledge of my personal problems with the Florentine curia. I'm sure that he will always be able to save me from unpleasant and unnecessary troubles» (*A Giampaolo Meucci, Barbiana*, 12. 12. 1956, in Gesualdi (Ed.), *Lettere di don Lorenzo Milani Priore di Barbiana. Nuova edizione con lettere inedite*, cit., page 88).

<sup>85</sup> «At first – wrote Neera Fallaci on father David M. Turoldo's testimony –, [don Milani] hoped for a few introductory words by the archbishop of Milan: Giovanni Battista Montini [...]. It was Raffaele Bensi's idea because he had met Montini in his youth and (at the time) still considered him an intimate friend. But it was impossible». And: «Father Turoldo had asked the archbishop of Milan not only for the *imprimatur* for *Esperienze pastorali* but also for a book by Maritain. At first, in fact, they thought of publishing don Milani's book at la Corsia dei Servi, at that time in collaboration with a small, independent publishing house» (Fallaci, *Vita del prete Lorenzo Milani. Dalla parte dell'ultimo*, cit., pages 246-247).

<sup>86</sup> «Then Bensi thought of the archbishop of Camerino, Mons. Giuseppe D'Avack: who, although not a progressist, certainly lived his sacerdotal experience according to the Gospel in the same way as Don Milani. Before giving his consent, D'Avack wanted to meet the author. And don Milani left for Camerino, accompanied by his spiritual director. The conversation was positive, because the archbishop agreed to write in *Esperienze pastorali*» (*ibid.*, page 247).

<sup>87</sup> See the documented testimony offered by R. Santilli, *Memoria. La vicenda di «Esperienze pastorali» di don Lorenzo Milani*, «Vita sociale», 172, 1976, pages 245-264.

The book came out a few months later and immediately caused a lot of fuss, not only in the diocese of Florence but also all over the country, leading to ample discussion in the Catholic press and also in the national papers<sup>88</sup>.

With the help of a large archive of mostly inedited documents, a few years ago Massimo Toschi reconstructed in *Don Lorenzo Milani e la sua Chiesa*, the lengthy debate and the vicissitudes met by *Esperienze pastorali*<sup>89</sup>, closely examining the role played by Mons. Ermenegildo Florit, coadjutor of Card. Elia Dalla Costa, head of the archdiocese of Florence<sup>90</sup>, the conduct of the Vatican Secretariat of State, *in primis* of the then vice Mons. Angelo Dell'Acqua<sup>91</sup>, the origin of the harsh criticism formulated on the pages of famous clerical magazines such as «La Settimana del Clero», «Orientamenti Pastoralisti», and, above all «La Civiltà Cattolica»<sup>92</sup>, up to the decision taken on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1958 by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office to withdraw *Esperienze pastorali*<sup>93</sup>.

On 20<sup>th</sup> December «L'Osservatore Romano» published on its front page an article entitled *Esperienze pastorali*. It contained a severe criticism of Don Milani's work, accusing it of laxism and ideological compromise with communist doctrine.

<sup>88</sup> See G. Riccioni, *La stampa e don Milani*, Florence, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1974.

<sup>89</sup> Toschi, *Don Lorenzo Milani e la sua Chiesa. Documenti e studi*, cit., pages 41-64.

<sup>90</sup> On the pastoral government of card. Elia Dalla Costa in Florence and on the figure of mons. Ermenegildo Florit see: Mons. Ermenegildo Florit, *arcivescovo di Firenze*, in *La Pontificia Università Lateranense*, Rome, Libreria editrice PUL, 1963, pages 150-151; B. Bocchini Camaiani, *Ricostruzione concordataria e processi di secolarizzazione*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1983; Id., *Chiesa e ambienti religiosi fiorentini negli anni '50*, in *Don Lorenzo Milani tra Chiesa, cultura e scuola*, cit., pages 61-91.

<sup>91</sup> On mons. Angelo Dell'Acqua see A. Melloni (Ed.), *Angelo Dell'Acqua. Prete, diplomatico e cardinale al cuore della politica vaticana (1903-1972)*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2004.

<sup>92</sup> See T. Centi, *Le «Esperienze Pastorali» di un cappellano*, «La Settimana del Clero», 14 settembre 1958; F. Vallainc, *Lettera a padre Centi*, *ibid.*, 14 settembre 1958; A. Perego, *Le «Esperienze Pastorali» di don Lorenzo Milani*, «La Civiltà Cattolica», 20 settembre 1958, pages 627-640; G. Ceriani, *Esperienze Pastorali*, «Orientamenti Pastoralisti», 1958, 4, pages 70-79.

<sup>93</sup> See Fallaci, *Vita del prete Lorenzo Milani. Dalla parte dell'ultimo*, cit., page 268.

As regards the question of the imprimatur, it added: «We must realize that in granting ecclesiastical approval for the book, there had been a series of misunderstandings that had made an attentive examination of the book impossible».

The article concluded stressing: «We are informed that the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office has ordered that Don Milani's book *Esperienze pastorali* be withdrawn from sale and that there be no second edition or translation. This decision is intended as a serious reminder to the sons of the Church, and in particular to priests, not to let themselves be seduced by daring and dangerous novelties, that can insinuate their way into the souls of those least prepared to affront the difficult task of the apostolate in the social field»<sup>94</sup>.

As a matter of fact, *Esperienze pastorali* was a much more profound and incisive watershed than any of its detractors in Florence and Rome, who had worked for the withdrawal of the book, could have imagined.

From 22<sup>nd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> September the VIII Week of pastoral updating on the theme of *La comunità cristiana e i lontani*<sup>95</sup>, was held in Milan. There were many speakers of great standing including the archbishop of Milan Mons. Giovanni Battista Montini, the Card. of Bologna Giovanni Lercaro, the Oratorian Father Giulio Bevilacqua. Eighteen bishops were also present. *Esperienze pastorali* was not spoken about directly, even if Florit himself had thought that the congress would have been a good occasion to discuss it<sup>96</sup>. In his opening address, however, entitled *La carità della Chiesa verso i lontani*, Mons. Montini mentioned several of the themes present in the prior of Barbiana's book.

Although rather skeptical of those who, animated by «reverence towards 'the distant ones' [...], discover and denounce critically and often ironically all the possible faults of

<sup>94</sup> *Esperienze Pastorali*, «L'Osservatore Romano», 20 dicembre 1958, page 1.

<sup>95</sup> *La comunità cristiana e i lontani. Atti della VIII Settimana nazionale di aggiornamento pastorale (Milano, 22-26 settembre 1958)*, Milan, Centro di Orientamento Pastorale, 1959.

<sup>96</sup> See Toschi, *Don Lorenzo Milani e la sua Chiesa. Documenti e studi*, cit., page 95.

‘the near ones’, the brothers of the faith» and although doubting the «goodness of heart of their method», which seems more destined to «spread a troubling and unedifying spirit» than to provoke a new pastoral sensitivity, the archbishop of Milan underlined how «the moral austerity of these critics is worth noticing», because it is a way of feeling and living the pastoral task that seemed best suited to the challenge of the new times.

After having underlined the urgency, for the Church, to get used to «the particular languages of the men of our time», regarding «the distant ones» Montini stated: «Orthodoxy creates ‘the distant ones’ and seems to exclude them from Christ’s fold. But, except for the fact that around Christ’s fold we find the paths and itineraries of the pastoral art, the good shepherd just does not stop in the fold because, when he sees that one of his flock is missing, he goes out to look for it. Orthodoxy does not calm his spirit if it is not accepted by everyone. Orthodoxy, which is, inevitably, separation and criticism for those who do not accept it, does not permit us to abandon those who have abandoned us: it does not justify inertia, does not create sufficiency and pride, does not remove pain of separation, the anxiety of waiting and searching. The boundaries of orthodoxy are not those of pastoral charity and love».

And, detaching himself from a still largely held conviction in Vatican and Episcopal circles, Montini added: «We must admit the fact that a large number of the faithful are unfaithful; that there are more ‘distant ones’ than ‘near ones’, and that pastoral influence is gradually shrinking»<sup>97</sup>.

This analysis, so far from the prevailing perception of most of the Italian clergy who still refer to «our good people»<sup>98</sup>, is extremely important. But it is also far from the convictions of Card. Giuseppe Pizzardo, secretary to the Holy Office, who,

<sup>97</sup> Montini, *La carità della Chiesa verso i lontani*, in *La comunità cristiana e i lontani. Atti della VIII Settimana nazionale di aggiornamento pastorale (Milano, 22-26 settembre 1958)*, cit., pages 27-39 (published again in Id., *Discorsi sulla Chiesa*, Milan, Arcivescovado, 1962, pages 45-61).

<sup>98</sup> See Sani, *Vescovi e mobilitazione cattolica nell’età del centrismo*, cit., pages 517-531.

replying in 1959 to Card. Feltrin who had asked for second thoughts on the experiences of the worker priests so bluntly interrupted in 1954, wrote: «It is difficult to consider totally un-Christianized masses of men, many of whom have received the sacred and indelible mark of baptism. It is not possible to sacrifice the traditional concept of the priesthood to the evangelization of the working classes»<sup>99</sup>.

Don Lorenzo Milani's anxieties and worries were not expressions of an isolated personality, eccentric and too original. Different was his way of looking at things and at the chance of changing their course; different were his evaluations of how to work and about the implicit risk in making too strong or clamorous stands: «These are difficult times. Times in which not even prudence is enough – it must become astuteness», Montini had said to father David Maria Turoldo when the latter asked him to write a preface for – a request which was refused<sup>100</sup>.

As a matter of fact, times were changing more rapidly and more incisively than the prior of Barbiana had even imagined. In a conversation of December 1965, documented by Neera Fallaci in her rich and passionate biography of Don Milani, he affirms: «In the meantime, there has been the papacy of John XXIII, the Council and a development in our way of thinking, that today is galloping ahead much more quickly than in the past, not only inside the Church but also outside»; he then adds jokingly: «Well, today they even read my book in very backward convents, and the nuns consider it a spiritual reading»<sup>101</sup>. This point of view can also be found in a letter written the same year: «My book made a lot of clamor when it came out in 1958. Then, it was overtaken on the left by a Pope! What humiliation for a 'prophet'!»<sup>102</sup>.

<sup>99</sup> The letter is quoted from Poulat, *Une Église ébranlée. Changement, conflit et continuité de Pie XII à Jean-Paul II*, cit., page 143.

<sup>100</sup> Fallaci, *Vita del prete Lorenzo Milani. Dalla parte dell'ultimo*, cit., page 247.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, page 268.

<sup>102</sup> See letter dated Barbiana 10<sup>th</sup> March 1965, in Gesualdi (Ed.), *Lettere di don Lorenzo Milani Priore di Barbiana. Nuova edizione con lettere inedite*, cit., pages 247-248.

### 7.6 *Concerns and aspirations of a “pastor of souls”*

But what is the authentic sum of *Esperienze pastorali*? What is the human and priestly profile that this work gives us of Don Lorenzo Milani? Its reflections on religious life and his pastoral mission at S. Donato come not only from the critical sense of his middle-class rationalism but also from the profound awareness he had as a priest and pastor of souls.

At this point, it seems possible to affirm that, in Don Milani, there was a deeply rooted image of the traditional priesthood as the Council of Trent had defined it. If, indeed, there was an influencing line of spiritual tradition to identify in the prior of Barbiana, apart from the familiar one, the only thing that stands out is the great and complex tradition of the priesthood of Tridentine matrix, received in its development and later in re-elaborations and meditations through the teaching of the seminary<sup>103</sup>.

Literature on the priesthood of the Council of Trent and the confessional age, as Gilles-Gérard Meersseman has stressed referring to the reform of the clergy and the «new ideal of the curate» elaborated by the Council, had insisted on condemning the «functionalist spirit of catholic priests that had caused its decadence even before the Lutheran revolt»: «It is only by bestowing a higher ideal of the priesthood that the moral level of parish priests can be raised. And it is through a re-evaluation of the traditional doctrine of the sacrament of Holy Orders that the functions of the parish priest would have become more sacred than administrative. The curate-clerk, with his already scarce sense of responsibility towards ecclesiastical law, had to be replaced by a pastor who strongly felt his responsibility, in front of God, towards the souls and sacred things that had been entrusted to him [...]. Dogma, generator of compassion, had to inspire in the parish priests the respect for priestly dignity and re-animate their pastoral zeal»<sup>104</sup>.

<sup>103</sup> See also Riccardi, *La Chiesa italiana da Pio XII a Paolo VI*, cit., pages 46-48.

<sup>104</sup> G.-G. Meersseman, *Il tipo ideale di parroco secondo le riforma tridentina nelle sue fonti letterarie*, in *Il Concilio di trento e la riforma tridentina. Atti*



Don Milani absorbed the image of the good pastor and good parish priest, as it is defined in this tradition. Mons. D'Avack, although not totally aware of the meaning and importance of the prior's work, is on the same wavelength when he writes, in the preface to *Esperienze pastorali*, that «the priest is a mediator, an intermediator between God and men, representing men to God»<sup>105</sup>. There is a continuity in the idea of the good pastor in the concept of priesthood. But, in addition to this universe of signs and representations, Don Lorenzo Milani intensely lived the reality of the people who the parish priest must serve as a pastor. And further: the parish priest, to whom the Council of Trent had given the suggestive name of «father of the poor», must know his people in order to be a father<sup>106</sup>.

But how is it possible, Don Milani asked himself, to talk to people about salvation when they do not even speak the same language? «The classic language of the answers of the faithful – notes Andrea Riccardi – was not enough for this traditional priest; fervor, processions, first Holy Communion, partaking of the sacraments...». At the same time, «the renewed language of the replies of the faithful, that of electoral consent or the participation in recreational activities organized by the parish, did not convince Don Milani. The electoral victories of the DC did not change the reality of a religious crisis and an unjust society that were such as to make him predict the end of Christianity in countries that had once been Christian. What was truly important for Don Milani, the sacramental reality of the Church necessary for salvation, did not find adequate answers from the faithful, indeed it seemed to have been stroked by a general process of disaffection [...]. Don Lorenzo began to feel dissatisfied with the classic language of the faithful's replies, with that universal language of questions and answers that

*del Convegno storico internazionale (Trento, 2-6 settembre 1963), Rome-Freiburg-Basel-Barcelona-Wien, Herder, 1965, 2 vols., I, pages 27-44 (quotation at pages 28-29).*

<sup>105</sup> A. D'Avack, *Prefazione*, in Milani, *Esperienze pastorali*, cit., page 25.

<sup>106</sup> See R. Sani, *Per una storia dell'educazione familiare nell'età moderna e contemporanea. Itinerari e prospettive di ricerca*, in L. Pati (Ed.), *Ricerca pedagogica ed educazione familiare*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 2003, pages 13-14.

for such a long time had distinguished the Christian identity of the mountain and country people. But he did not believe in this Christian identity, whose contradictions are emerging more and more with the new industrial society and with the exodus to the city»<sup>107</sup>.

It is necessary, in this sense, to lay the foundations for the maturing of a new human and pastoral language, of new forms of communication and dialogue with the people: «The foundation of liturgical prayer – affirmed Don Milani in *Esperienze pastorali* – is the possession of Doctrine. The Foundation of Doctrine is (in my opinion) that minimum mastery of the language that should distinguish a man from a beast, but which a large part of these people does not have. Give me time to do things right, going back to Italian grammar and, in the space of twenty years, I'll fill the Church for you again. But this time with fervent men, prepared and coherent»<sup>108</sup>.

In front of the crisis in the classic and universal pastoral language you need to start from scratch with your own people to reconstruct a language for dialogue; and Don Lorenzo Milani's people were made up of those “poor”, those “last ones” who had no words, the ability to speak and, for this were «cut off»<sup>109</sup>.

When his bishop sent him to Calenzano and Barbiana, Don Milani took «his role of pastor very seriously; he starts from the condition of these people to conceive his task. His choice of the poor does not have ideological roots, but rather evangelical and pastoral ones»<sup>110</sup>. From this point of view, there is nothing ideological or political in Don Milani's actions and choices.

In 1952 he wrote to the editor of «Adesso», the magazine founded by Don Primo Mazzolari at that time under the editorship of Giulio Vaggi: «I am not interested if the poor gain advantages (this is of no importance for the advent of the Kingdom), it is important that men stop sinning and social injustice is not evil (for me as a priest) because it harms

<sup>107</sup> Riccardi, *La Chiesa italiana da Pio XII a Paolo VI*, cit., pages 48-49.

<sup>108</sup> Milani, *Esperienze pastorali*, cit., page 88.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, page 197.

<sup>110</sup> Riccardi, *La Chiesa italiana da Pio XII a Paolo VI*, cit., page 48.

the poor but because it is a sin, offends God and delays the coming of His Kingdom»<sup>111</sup>. And in *Esperienze pastorali*, he noted that the rights of the poor were a problem that «in itself (however sacrosanct) is beyond my interests, which are only in the supernatural, but *per accidens* instead and because of a complex contingent of historical facts that has embedded itself in my normal sacramental and catechistical apostolate, and is an obstacle»<sup>112</sup>. In his *Lettera a Don Piero*, he finally completely clarified his approach: «I want to lead my sons to heaven. I started out for this and even now only think of this. I don't want to make them lords. I don't want them to have more money. I'm not interested in trade union problems [...]. They can all die of hunger for what I care! They will all go to heaven. I have not forgotten the first Beatitude. It's always in front of my eyes. Yes, *Blessèd*, I believe it [...]. What have I, man of the Sacraments, intermediary between earth and heaven, got to do with the misdeeds of the powerful of the earth? Think of your soul, think of your salvation. Ask me for God's book, the Body of Christ, His Pardon»<sup>113</sup>.

In Don Milani «there is no camouflage among the poor, no theorizing about the superiority of the mountain or rural culture». The prior of Barbiana was aware of «his middle-class responsibility, to give words and certain instruments to those who are devoid of them». He did «not indulge in systematic analysis of the economic situation in Italy nor of the capitalistic development; his observations are always personal and fragmentary, suitable for those situations when he is at the side of his poor»<sup>114</sup>. Don Milani chose to be the shepherd of his poor flock, without desiring anything else.

An exception in the Italian Church of the 1950's and 1960's, Don Milani did not share in the search for global and conclusive syntheses, whether they be ecclesiastical or social and political:

<sup>111</sup> Letter to the editor of «Adesso», San Donato a Calenzano 25 luglio 1952, in Gesualdi (Ed.), *Lettere di don Lorenzo Milani Priore di Barbiana. Nuova edizione con lettere inedite*, cit., page 34.

<sup>112</sup> Milani, *Esperienze pastorali*, cit., pages 443-444.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pages 457-458.

<sup>114</sup> Riccardi, *La Chiesa italiana da Pio XII a Paolo VI*, cit., pages 51-52.

«His cultural production and his type of biography – as has been rightly underlined – are those of a pastor, albeit a singular one in his Church, for the scarcity of congregation and intensity of experience». It is, in fact, extremely difficult «to speak of a pastoral proposal of Don Milani, even the most a-systematic and dramatic, similar to that proposed by *abbé* Godin. In fact, any proposal dies with him, in the same way that Barbiana ends with him and seems to be well aware of this»<sup>115</sup>.

In this light, the singular figure of Don Lorenzo Milani does not lend itself to a systematic reading but rather to a necessary remediation on the singular existence of a believer, priest and pastor. The questions he put to the Church of his time was to recuperate the essence of religious and pastoral action in order to work in a country that was no longer Christian. He had a simple, precise, almost catechistic sense of the Church: «I will never rebel against the Church – he wrote in a letter dated October 1958, right in the middle of the polemics surrounding *Esperienze pastorali* – because several times a week I need to be pardoned for my sins and I would not know who to turn to if I were to leave the Church»<sup>116</sup>.

In Don Milani, the real and lacerating conflict in the name of the rights of that tiny portion of God's people, of whom he was father and pastor and in his own priestly ministry, was never second to his faith in the unity of the Church – a Church that was, in this way, better (and more authentically) served than by conformism.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, pages 52-53.

<sup>116</sup> Letter to father Reginaldo Santilli, Barbiana, 10<sup>th</sup> October 1958, in Gesualdi (Ed.), *Lettere di don Lorenzo Milani Priore di Barbiana. Nuova edizione con lettere inedite*, cit., page 112.