

## THE COMMUNIST'S CONFESSION

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THE little story that follows has something in common with Guareschi's *Don Camillo* tales, but it has the advantage of being true; and truth is more interesting than fiction even when the latter is written by a humorist of genius. My true story is not funny, but most Italian priests who know communism at close quarters do not—sometimes for different reasons—find the situation at all funny, and are even inclined to blame Guareschi for having, as one of them said to me, 'joked about things that are tragic'. That may not be quite fair to Guareschi, but it is a point of view which his non-Italian admirers should not overlook.

As for my story, its setting is the Tuscan countryside today, where three-quarters of the population are communist and therefore officially excommunicated by the Church. That is the first point to grasp. Try to imagine the more obvious difficulties confronting a priest in this situation. Is he to refuse the Sacraments to everyone who has the party membership card and will not throw it away? If so, he knows that he is shutting the church door in the face of most of the men in his parish and more than half the women. Over large zones of central Italy the peasants just assume, as a thing too obvious to need discussion, that the communist party is *their* party. *E il nostro partito*: the phrase comes out pat as a matter of course. Moreover it is widely assumed in Italy (at least verbally) that communism is simply Christianity in practice, and that the priests at the bottom of their hearts know this. In other words it is assumed that the barrier between Church and communism is no more than a legal device erected by the priests because their self-interest ties them to the *other* political faction. And that is an assumption which (it may well seem) a rigorous application of the decree of the Holy Office will, humanly speaking, only confirm and harden. On the other hand, the Church certainly means her decrees to be carried out. So between his superiors and his people it is the humble parish priest who has to suffer.

Now suppose that a young priest in a 'red' village gradually wins the respect and affection of many of the boys and young men of the district. Never mind how he does this; the document I shall quote will indicate, authentically, the method used; but to describe this and justify it to English readers would require another article. We start at the point where the situation has reached, apparently suddenly (but not really so) a moment of crisis. One of those communist youths suddenly sees the priest as a priest; no longer as a friend only but as a father confessor; and is down on his knees before him under the stars, in a lane between the olives. What is he confessing? Well, what do boys confess? The answer is obvious, and it does not include membership of the communist party. *This* is simply not seen as a sin; indeed its sinfulness is, if anything, the more hidden from that conscience just because that other sin is now seen so clearly, is filling the boy's mind. And what can the priest's immediate reaction be but a huge gratitude for this pathetic gesture of humility, this shame, this stupendous leap towards a purity that only Christ requires from human beings? So the boy (naturally, one might say) gets his absolution there and then. And he gets it again and again, at other times, for the same thing—with never a word on either side about the party ticket. Yet that ticket, the priest knows well enough, is now, so to say, losing the game, is being supplanted subconsciously. But subconsciously only; for the boy's conscious mind has ever so many motives for sticking to his party, motives inseparable, still, from all that his conscience tells him is good. The confusion is so human. The priest, no fool, watches and waits.

The equilibrium reached, temporarily, at this stage is certainly not a compromise, in the boy's eyes at least. From his point of view, here and now, there is nothing left in *principle* to be surrendered. The priest, who sees further, knows that this, alas, is not so. He has taken what was offered; half a loaf, he has argued, is better than no bread; but what if the other half is suddenly, imperiously demanded by a voice which the boy has not learned to trust and obey? And just this is what happens in the course of time when a Dominican comes to the village to preach and hear con-

fessions. The sermon is a furious anti-communist harangue. In the confessional penitents are asked whether they belong to 'the party', and if they say 'yes' are told to leave it on pain of not receiving absolution. Our youth is one of those thus summarily turned away unpardoned. Dismay of the local priest who sees his delicate, years-long, patient labour of love brutally interrupted and all but devastated, it seems, by the clumsy hand of a stranger. 'How I suffered that evening!', he wrote later. 'It may sometimes be necessary to accelerate a childbirth; but let the doctor who *knows* the case decide.'

That phrase comes in a letter written by the priest to the Dominican after the latter's departure. With this letter the priest enclosed another written by the youth in the case and containing certain details which the priest, as bound by the seal of confessional, could not himself divulge. Both letters came to be printed in the Florentine Dominican review *Vita Cristiana*, together with a reply by a theologian of the Order treating, first, the general question of 'laxism' in the administration of the Sacrament of Penance, and secondly the particular problem set by penitents of the type of the young communist. It is the latter question only to which I draw attention here, and this, moreover, only as an interested observer noting a practical difficulty felt acutely by some of our brother priests in Italy, not as presuming to solve the problem theoretically. In point of fact the Dominican's reply, while not discussing the matter in detail, seemed on the whole to approve the line taken by the parish priest.

Here then is a rendering of the boy's letter (enclosed with the priest's) to the Dominican who had refused to absolve him. I translate fairly literally, preserving, as far as I can, the homely rough simplicity of the original.

Dear Father,

Don Lorenzo tells me that you and he have had words about me. He tells me to forgive you as you are always in your priory, or hearing the confessions of people you don't know, and so you haven't got experience. I do forgive you because I am now close to the Church and I have come to understand that when you priests make mistakes it is often

not just because it suits you to make them but because you don't understand the way we have to live.

Besides, as Don Lorenzo says, it is often our fault too. It was up to us to stay around with you and talk to you all day about our lives. If we'd done that we'd have brought your hearts round to our side, because you haven't got hearts of stone, far from it, and it wasn't just to suit yourselves that you sided with the rich against us. 'Out of sight, out of mind', my grandmother used to say; and in fact you are always reading the *Mattino*, which belongs to the capitalists, and in church you only meet shopkeepers and employers who tell you that we all go about on motor-bikes.<sup>1</sup>

Well, now, I'm going to tell you about my life because Don Lorenzo has asked me to.

First you ought to know that I was born a communist. In my village in 1946 the communists got seventy per cent of the votes. Where I work, out of forty of us there is only one who isn't in the C.G.I.L. My mother goes to Mass, but even she won't give her vote to the priests. As for dad, he won't even discuss it because he too was born a communist—*his* dad wouldn't even have a priest when he was dying. My dad said: 'If my children want to go to church, they can; but once they are eighteen and think as I do, they will stop going'.

Well, after my first Communion I went on for a while going to church; but once I was fifteen I never went again. I spent Sunday mornings out with dad, and the evenings at the People's Club<sup>2</sup> with my friends.

Now one evening I met Don Lorenzo and he said to me: 'The workers need education in order to defend themselves: they ought to get it wherever they can, even from priests'. I replied that that suited me, because where I work there was one lad who had been to school who always made the rest of us shut up when we argued. So we arranged that I should go to school at Don Lorenzo's after supper. Others came too, and then without wasting time Don Lorenzo said

<sup>1</sup> i.e. are not really poor after all. The *Mattino* is the Catholic daily paper of Florence.

<sup>2</sup> *Casa del Popolo*: village hall with cinema, bar, etc.; usually, in Tuscany, the local centre of the communist party.

straight out: 'I swear to you boys before God that I am doing this only in order to educate you and that I will always tell you the truth about every subject that comes up, whether it suits my own firm or doesn't suit it'. I said to myself: 'That remains to be seen. But if politics come into it, I'm off.' Several months passed by and politics never came into it.

One day a demochristian boy came in; we got arguing and a row started. Don Lorenzo jumped on the table and shouted: 'Talk one at a time and I'll help you to say what you want to say'. And we agreed. And then we were astonished because he began to go for the government and for the demochristians and for us all at once. So we asked him: 'Well, then, who is right?' He answered: 'You chumps, the truth doesn't take sides! No one's got a monopoly of it, like cigarettes!'<sup>3</sup> And the demochristian boy was more put out than we were.

The long and the short of it is that we made friends: because he was honest, and was against both sides, and despised the priests' newspapers and *l'Unità*<sup>4</sup> in exactly the same way, and he taught us to think for ourselves. They were not like him in my party—nor in the other parties for that matter.

I stayed a communist and at the works it was my job to collect the party subscriptions. For it seemed to me the poor man's party—besides, my dad had always been for it and it seemed to me wrong for a son to contradict his dad. Don Lorenzo says you must always do what your dad tells you, even when he blasphemes. So it seemed to me all right about the party and I honestly didn't see what religion had to do with it.

But there was something else that I knew was wrong, the dirty things<sup>5</sup> I did with myself. So one evening after school when I was the last to leave and Don Lorenzo was walking back with me part of the way home, I made up my mind and said to him, 'Will you hear my confession?' And he said, 'Get down on your knees'. So I confessed there in the lane at night, and I couldn't help crying because I had never liked

<sup>3</sup> Cigarettes are a State monopoly in Italy.

<sup>4</sup> The chief Italian communist paper.

<sup>5</sup> *Porcherie*: literally 'piggishness'; the popular term for impure actions.

doing those things because as a boy the Stations of the Cross had impressed upon me so much that he was scourged for the things that we do. After that I went for several months without doing those things, and then I fell again and for nearly a year I couldn't overcome it, but I confessed every time. And about that time I started to go to Mass again, and I went to Communion each time, and sometimes I confessed twice in the same day—but Don Lorenzo has never asked me about the party.

Well, Father, the rest you will hear from Don Lorenzo because the seal of confession is not my business and I've given him permission to tell you what he likes. My business is only to help you Preachers to understand things, so that when you go among people you may hear confessions with love as our priests do.

Yours with affectionate greetings,

GIORDANO.

To the above letter Don Lorenzo added a few very moving comments of his own, most of which I do not transcribe since their tenor has already, I hope, been sufficiently indicated. A few lines, however, should perhaps be recorded, both for their own sake and because they hint at a happy ending. On that first confession and those that followed: 'I took what was offered—a great and spontaneous sorrow, but sorrow for one thing only, that one thing. . . . That evening I *couldn't* demand more of him. And the other times? Father, he never let the sun go down on a sin. He was athirst for grace, had a horror of sin. You find few penitents like that in the country. What could I do? I absolved him of what he asked, with tears, absolution for. Was I wrong? . . . Father, I was watching a slow but profound change in him, waiting with joy for the fruit to ripen and fall of itself.' And later, speaking of Giordano after the refusal of absolution: 'He survived the blow; though he bears the scar of it still. . . . Two years have passed since then. He has not torn up his party ticket. Does that matter so much? It means nothing to him now. They distrust him now in the party—say he is the priest's spy. And it's not true. I've never asked him a thing, never a name, never a word. And he's never

told me anything. For him it is still sacred, sacred with the faith of his father whom he loves. Sacred with the faith of his past.' Of his *past*: Don Lorenzo, and he alone, has the right to draw the conclusion.

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### NOTICE

The recent publication, under official Anglican auspices, of a libellous attack on the Catholic Church is a matter for special regret to this journal which has consistently sought to foster truth and charity in religious controversy. Fr Henry St John, o.p., whose writings on ecumenical questions are well known to the readers of **BLACKFRIARS**, will discuss the issues raised by this publication in the December issue.

The same number of **BLACKFRIARS** will include 'Moral Dilemmas. IV: On Being Forty-five' by Yves Congar, o.p., an article on the Royal Commission's Report on Capital Punishment by Dr Letitia Fairfield, and the first of three articles on Latin America by Illtud Evans, o.p.