

PERSONAE

I. Padre Rossi

IN the past few decades the Church in Italy has produced a number of remarkable priests, widely known and venerated as initiators of organized works of charity. A Don Orione, a Don Gnocchi, a Don Calabria—such men are the flower of the Italian clergy and in their presence anticlericalism is simply disarmed. The ex-priest Carlo Falconi, in a bitterly critical survey of post-war Italian Catholicism,¹ interrupted his polemic to salute the ‘courageous initiative’ of these ‘darlings of the Italian public’.

The case of Don Giovanni Rossi, our present subject, is very different. It is different, first of all, because the founder of the ‘Pro Civitate Christiana’ association at Assisi is primarily concerned not with works of charity, in the usual sense of this term, but with the propagation of the faith. The expressed aim of Don Rossi’s association of lay ‘volunteers’ (men and women, who must all be university graduates and who all make a promise of celibacy) is to bring the knowledge of Christ to those sections of society that are most estranged from the Catholic faith. This description covers workers and peasants as well as the more educated classes, though in its actual working the P.C.C. seems to be more concerned with the latter category. From its ‘Citadella’ at Assisi issues fortnightly the brilliantly edited and illustrated magazine *La Rocca*; here also take place the annual ‘Courses of Christian Studies’ and the frequent gatherings of artists and intellectuals, of workers and employers. The nearest English parallel is perhaps Spode House, but the Citadella is a larger affair and far more *chic*. Indeed, it is clear that Don Rossi has abundant means at his disposal—derived, it is commonly said, from Milanese industrialists. A Milanese himself, he has all the go-ahead optimism and business ability that are characteristic of the Lombard capital; and Milanese too, perhaps, is the slightly ostentatious ‘modernity’ of his enterprise.

To tell the truth, this tall grey-haired priest, with his suavity and his smile, does not appeal to everybody. He has encountered a good deal of not altogether spiteful or misinformed criticism. But one must understand the situation that Don Rossi is attempt-

¹ *La Chiesa e le organizzazioni cattoliche in Italia, 1945-1955*. Turin 1956, pp. 91-2.

ing to cope with. The fact is that approximately only a third of the Italian population goes regularly to Mass, and that of this third the majority are women. Perhaps one in ten of Italian adult males are regular church-goers. There is a vast amount of at least apparent religious indifference; and an appreciable minority of the population, perhaps a twentieth, may be reckoned as decidedly hostile to the Church. Of this hostile minority, again, a part, but only a part, is made up of active Communists. But Communism is not as important a factor in contemporary Italian irreligion as foreigners often suppose. It is much more a symptom than a cause of irreligion. It is of course politically fairly powerful; but of the seven or eight millions who vote Communist at the elections only a small fraction are convinced and active Marxists. Similarly, on the other side, many vote Christian Democrat who are not practising Catholics. The political factor, in short, must not be exaggerated. The spiritual conflict that divides contemporary Italy between a minority of fervent Catholics on the one side and the mass of the indifferent and the hostile on the other lies at a much deeper level than the political divisions.

Of this fact most Italian Catholics who have the interests of Christianity at heart are well aware: they know that politics, even in Italy, is only peripheral to religion. But it is terribly difficult in Italy to bring apostolic activity to bear on the essential religious issues without being distracted into politics. Every priest in this country provides an occasion for more or less irrelevant antagonisms; it is a price the Church has to pay for her political successes since the war, to say nothing of the Lateran Treaty of 1929. And behind these current quarrels stands the old enduring division, traditional in the Latin countries, between Catholicism and 'laicism'. And certainly this division has always had its political aspect—but only as the expression of a deeper spiritual conflict. Hence to get back to the religious issues it is necessary, especially in certain milieux, to outflank the political issues; which, paradoxically, is in Italy often far more easily done by layfolk than by the priest. That is a main reason for the lay apostolate of the Citadella, especially as regards its more 'popular' activities such as the missions to the larger cities. But such activities, though always very carefully prepared and carried out, and enthusiastically reported in *La Rocca*, seem to take second place, in Don Rossi's mind, to the intellectual apostolate, to the aim of influencing the leaders and exponents of Italian culture, the writers, artists and thinkers. The visitor to the Citadella is made immediately conscious of this intention of impressing the cultured; if

only by the studied accumulation of 'modern' (sacred) art-objects and the general air of sweetness and light. The spirituality of the Citadella is centred emphatically on the Incarnation and the Eucharist: in this sense it may be called Christian humanism.

A nagging doubt recurs, however; the question whether, after all, the Citadella represents a sufficient concentration of *intellectual* strength to cut much ice with contemporary non-Catholic culture in Italy.² One gives one's impression for what it is worth, but a reading, for example, of the volumes that reproduce the annual 'Courses of Christian Studies' is not wholly reassuring. The *mise en scène* of these Courses is journalistically and, so to say, theatrically brilliant; but the published results contain, frankly, a great deal of hot air. 'Laicist' culture in Italy is not an easy thing to take by storm; in some respects its intellectual standard is pretty high; and it has a certain inherited contempt for its adversary, which humanly speaking is not easily going to be broken down. After twenty years Don Rossi's team is still not more than seventy strong, with a large majority of women; and with an intellectual equipment that has not failed to excite a certain *derisio infidelium*. It needs to grow in numbers and put on weight intellectually. Its future is still uncertain. Meanwhile one must admire the courage of these lay apostles, and the Christ-centred vision of their leader.

² An example from the editor of *Belfagor*, Luigi Russo: 'We would welcome Catholic culture, if there were such a thing'. Note that the Italian word *cultura* has a more narrowly intellectual reference than our word 'culture'.