

THE FASCISTI AND THE CHURCH

Capperi! Has the ugly war hatched an uglier brood of cut-throats and demagogues? Must Italy be baptized anew with blood, shed in fratricidal strife?

So sighed Italian bishops and priests in the spring of 1919, for all around them, discord and carnage grimly reigned. Clerics regarded Fascism with suspicion and dread. They were actually frightened by the brutal tactics of the infant organization. Strange, in the very beginning of Fascism, the Church had looked benignly upon it by reason of its avowed intention of opposing Bolshevism, but as days went by, outrage after outrage against the most sacred laws of God and man forced it to conclude that Fascism's purpose was a fresh and devastating persecution of the Catholic religion. This opinion seemed to be confirmed by the opposition of Fascism to the Popular Party, a Catholic organization, headed by a remarkable priest, Don Luigi Sturzo. Also, they seemed to be woefully contradicting themselves. Boasting that they were preservers of the sovereign authority of the state, as their name, Fascisti, from the Latin word "Fasces" (symbol of authority), signifies, at the same time they were acting outside the jurisdiction of the State in taking the law into their own hands.

In August, 1922, however, after a cruel, relentless campaign, fought eye for eye and tooth for tooth, Fascism triumphed over Communism in Italy. Thereupon individual, local acts of violence against the Church gave way officially to widespread unmolested. Priests breathed more freely. They reasoned that since Fascism had accomplished its avowed work, it would dissolve. But Italy still needed its freshness and vigor, and Mussolini, to the surprise of all, instead of disbanding the party, began to remobilize it in huge proportions. The Church received another jolt when he announced his attention of seizing the government.

In two short months this stupendous thing was accomplished. Mussolini, the son of a blacksmith, was called upon by the King to form a cabinet. Parliament, though hostile, as a matter of prudence, jointly clothed the King, the Premier and his cabinet, with limited dictatorial power; that is, only in matters of immediate necessity and in issues arising from the late

disturbances. Mussolini thus found himself in a position to do either great harm or great good to the Church. The Vatican, the Italian Church and the whole Catholic world then anxiously waited for a sign. That sign was not long coming, and though only a sign, it calms the fears of Catholic Italy, for the sign is friendly.

Consolidated in office, the Fascisti promise to be very warm friends of the Church. The indications are ample.

First of all, Fascism admits religion to be the only foundation of morality, and better still, openly preaches this—a rare thing for modern European political parties.

It is not Freemasonic; in fact, it is explicitly decreed that a man cannot be a Mason and a Fascist at the same time. The party is not oathbound; its policies are candidly aired, and in secret they speak nothing—another rare thing; a very good sign.

The leader is a Catholic; perhaps not so practical as could be wished, but he has the faith, upon which it is easy to build virtue. The officers of the party are largely Catholic; the rank and file overwhelmingly so.

Its previous acts of violence can be somewhat forgiven. The situation demanded drastic measures, and in moments of passion, individuals performed acts contrary to party spirit. Bloodshed was deeply regretted. When more peaceful moments came, gentler means were employed. For instance, a Fascisti committee of four or five would call on a rabid Socialist and solemnly and silently present him with a bottle of castor oil. This suggestive ceremony accomplished more good than a bullet or a stiletto.

They were not acting entirely outside the State; they supplied the deficiency of the State. Socialists had given birth to sickening chaos in the labor and financial worlds; life and property were not safe; but the government dared not lift a finger, for if it did so, the worldwide blast of Socialistic power would be turned against it and Italy would very soon have been revolutionized into a Soviet State resembling the Bolshevism of Lenine. So the royal house of Savoy gritted its teeth and bore it patiently. The Fascisti, with the interest of Italy at heart, organized to do what the State could not do, and the government, at least to some extent, winked at them and secretly acquiesced in their interference.

Their opposition to local chapters of the Popular Party can be explained. In some few places, as in Cremona, the Popularists had given the Fascisti the impression of being Socialistically inclined, and Fascism hating and abhorring anything Socialistic, warred against the radical element of the Catholic party, not the party itself. The responsible portions of the Popular party are in sympathy with Fascism, as is evident from the following statements contained in their official organ, the "Corriere D'Italia," Rome, December 14th.

"The Premier proves to possess a political intuition of the very first order, boldly seeking to alter the rules of Parliamentary succession in the presence of a crisis which has no precedent in Italy. His first attack has overthrown the stupid tradition of Liberalism in the very face of anti-clerical opposition . . . He has addressed the Church in language respectful and candid, which Italy has for long been unaccustomed to hear from his predecessors. . . . No Catholic can remain insensible in seeing the public efforts finally bent on no further denial or snubbing of the ideal rights of the Christian conscience and the authority which it generates . . . We are sincerely pleased to see the iron chain of Agnosticism and strife, the brood of prejudices and sectarian opposition, broken."

Thus suspicions of the past, based on local squabbles, have yielded place to benign expectancy. This friendly feeling is reciprocated. Mussolini showed his broadness when he invited six of the Popularists to sit in his cabinet; and by no means were they the lowliest seats. Two very important portfolios, that of Minister of Treasury and Minister of Public Works and Social Welfare, were given to the colleagues of Don Sturzo. Besides, many a point on the economical program of Mussolini coincides with the Popularists'.

Understood now in a better light and having a little more leisure to voice apologies for its actions, Fascism is receiving the support of many of Italy's bishops and priests. They readily bless Fascisti flags and offer prayers.

A very connotative incident is the Solemn Mass at the Church Santa Maria Degli Angeli that ushered in the new regime on Italy's Armistice Day, November 4th. The King and ministers attended and were very devout. This was a radical departure from the usual icy snubbing religion had received for fifty years by former premiers. The Mass was in black and offered for the repose of Italy's soldier dead. After the Mass the whole assembly, with the exception of the King, marched to the grave of Italy's Unknown Soldier. There, Mussolini with a thundering voice, asked all to kneel down for one minute and

lisp a prayer. They did so—and during this, the full choir of Roman chimes voiced a melody from their bronze throats, making the scene very impressive, very grand and very Catholic.

Mussolini's sentiments on education are very gratifying. Immediately upon being vested with authority, he instructed Prof. Gentile, the Minister of Education, to restore crucifixes to the classrooms, countermanding the obnoxious ruling of Socialists, years back. At present, no religion is officially taught in the schools. However, if a parent wishes his child to be educated in the Catholic faith, he makes application to the director and the child is so educated apart from regular class work. Mussolini argues this way: Italy is ninety-five per cent Catholic; therefore the Catholic religion should be taught officially in the public schools. If a parent does not wish his child to be thus educated, let him apply for a dispensation. Why please so insignificant a minority and disregard the wish of practically all Italy in such a vital point?

In this matter, and in other points of importance, Mussolini has promised special consideration to Catholicism. He is dead set against Socialism and he is cold to Protestantism and proselytizers.

A meaty indication is had also from the fact that he has suggested prominent Cardinals and Bishops for seats in the Senate. (Senators in Italy are appointed by the King at the suggestion of the cabinet, not elected). Thus far, the King has not formally appointed any, but this is because he knows that though it is not a novel thing, it is a serious step, and Churchmen, he feels, like to put heads together before they commit themselves. When an intimation is made to him that they will accept, then we may look for appointments. It is not at all rash to advance the belief that the placet of Pope Pius will not be hard to obtain. Clearly, their presence in the Senate will do much good. For instance, very often in past years, a senator, for want of something better to do, kept his name on the house journal by heaping abuse upon the Catholic Church. But the presence of one Cardinal or Bishop would stop this invective.

One important thing remains to be asked, and on the answer will pivot our judgment as to whether the Fascisti are friends or enemies of the Church. Has Fascism as yet passed any positive law helpful to the Church?

Owing to the fact that in Italy there are five or six major political parties, it is hardly ever possible for any one of them to obtain more than half the seats. The power may shift, but the balance prevails. The party securing half the seats, is incapable of pursuing a vigorous policy in view of the certain fusion of the minorities, whose united strength equals and counteracts the leading party. At present the Fascisti are a minority in Parliament, even considering that in measures helpful to the Church, they are certain of the support of the Catholic party. Mussolini therefore can do nothing. His hands are tied as completely as any American President with a hostile Congress. It was for this very reason that the lawmakers gave him quasi-dictatorial power; otherwise he would be a joke as a Prime Minister.

At present, it often happens that many of the Socialists are elected by slight pluralities in many provinces. If all the Fascisti votes of the nation were considered, they would be entitled to more seats. Mussolini would change the present Constitution. He would appeal directly to the people in a general election and give to the party obtaining a nation-wide relative majority the right to two-thirds of the seats in the Chamber. When he feels that his party is strong enough to obtain that majority, he will most probably induce the King to decree such a special election. This is what the "*Corriere D'Italia*" meant when speaking of altering the rules of Parliamentary succession. In order to strengthen his party for such an ordeal, he must now give his attention to things that will appeal to Italian stomachs and purses. Hence no positive law helpful to the Church has as yet appeared. Still Mussolini has done something. For the first time in half a century, the name of Almighty God has been pronounced in Parliament. Truly, the iron chain of Agnosticism is broken.

As regards the Vatican, nothing official has as yet crystallized. The case stands thus: having committed the wrong in 1870, the Italian Government must take the first step. The question will never be solved, unless a Premier sits down and resolves to devote himself to an intelligent study of all the intricacies of the problem, free from anti-Clerical and nationalistic bias. Up to now, no one who has studied the problem has gone into it unprejudiced and unbogoted, and consequently, the effort

never bore fruit. Mussolini has promised a fair and thorough study. He is desirous of solving the riddle, amicably and soon. Italy's welfare is paramount to Mussolini; but he knows full well that Italy, his beloved country, will never obtain that high station due her among the nations and that solidity and firmness necessary to withstand future eruptions, unless the position of the Catholic Church is brought to normal, safeguarded and protected in all her rights. He is logical. The Catholic Church, he reasons, notwithstanding the persecution of fifty years, has done much to keep the bulk of the people loyal to constitutional government; she has been the best bulwark of patriotism; she has applied the antidote of Christian principles to Italy, sick with the poison of ultra-red Communism. If then she has done all this to her persecutor, what will she not do to her friend? Her powerful influence will be greatly intensified if the Italian Government joins hands with her and ceases its unholy, unnatural coldness and neglect.

Mussolini intends to ask the Pope for an official declaration of terms, and it would not surprise Italy in the least to discover that the conditions for peace coming from the Holy Father, are practically what Mussolini at this very moment conceives as the final terms.

Further, the Premier would take away from the King any power in the naming of bishops, notwithstanding any traditional right or privilege. It is not the King's business.

The Pope has confidence in Mussolini. The friendly tone of his Christmas Encyclical Letter more or less justifies this conclusion. Mussolini himself appears devoted and candid. With him, the temporal question stands a very good chance of being solved; the best chance it has had thus far.

All in all then, as things stand now, Fascism does promise wonderful things for the Church in Italy. This is the message of March, 1923. April, May, June, July may either confirm or demolish this fervent opinion. Mussolini may prove a renegade to his promises; Fascism may collapse tomorrow. Who knows! But we all hope and pray that he will be true and faithful and loyal to his vows; that he will stir the grace that is in him; that he will use the tremendous power now in his hands, indirectly if he must, for the honor, welfare, glory and prosperity of his good sweet mother, the Roman Catholic Church.

—Bro. Christopher Perrotta, O. P.