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From Catholic Hegemony to Pluralism

The Transformation of Religion and Public Life in Italy since 1945

As recently as twenty or thirty years ago, many observers believed that in advanced industrial societies the fate of religions in general – and of Christianity in particular – could be interpreted through the paradigm of secularisation. According to this view, modernity asserts itself at the expense of religion, and, in so doing, it increasingly withdraws, even though not always clearly, important roles in society, politics, culture, and economy.

The underlying dynamics of this interpretation imply that the world has progressively exited from religion which incidentally signifies the dechristianisation of Europe. This process can be measured in various ways: the difficulties religions encounter in asserting their world vision when they face competition from the many other agencies of meaning which have a greater hold over the public awareness; the diminishing authority and authoritativeness of religious figures ever less listened to; the quantitative decline of religious practices, ranging from religious marriages to Sunday church attendance or similar rites; the crisis in sacerdotal and religious vocations and so on.

I. SECULARISATION AND RELIGIOUS VITALITY

However, scholarly reflection regarding these issues has been increasingly modified over time, as it is confronted with phenomena and empirical evidence that are difficult to explain away through the paradigm of secularisation. On the one hand, not all western societies appear to be characterised by the descending curve of religion, an image that rather reflects what is happening in Europe than in the dynamic reality of the United States. In this regard, there is an on-going heated debate on the question of whether the still deeply religious modern American society or Europe, characterised by an increasing decline of religious affiliations, is the exception.¹ In other words, which is to be considered anomalous, the secularism in Europe or the religious vitality of the still most productive country in the world?

On the other hand, however, even in dechristianised Europe new cults and religious movements which offer alternative spirituality flourish and seem to compensate for the current crisis in the more consolidated traditional religions. In addition, the continuous flow of foreign immigrants into European countries – carriers of cultures and religious faiths which are quite different from the traditional ones – has deeply changed the way of acknowledging and facing religious questions. At the centre of the present public debate are not only issues such as how to regulate religious pluralism but also the increasingly widespread presence of other religious confessions throughout the territory (Islam in particular) which appears to have induced parts of the population to once again appreciate traditional faiths – mostly from an ethnic-cultural viewpoint. This is not only because affirmations of others' identities generally encourages one's own, but also because the excess of cultural pluralism can cause a lack of solid values and fundamental references which exposes individual and collective life to precariousness and future uncertainty.²

1 *Peter Berger/Grace Davie/Effie Fokas*, *America religiosa, Europa laica?*, Bologna 2010 (first published 2008); *Grace Davie/Danièle Hervieu-Léger* (eds.), *Identités religieuses en Europe*, Paris 1996.

2 For more details on the topic of this article see *Franco Garelli*, *Catholicism in Italy in the Age of Pluralism*, Lanham, MD 2010.

However, generally speaking, there is another phenomenon which has very clearly emerged throughout the world – and consequently in Europe – during the last decades and which is bound to contradict the idea that secularisation is an inevitable effect of advanced modernity. In many countries and on several continents, within various contexts and cultures, a renewed presence of religions in the public sphere can be witnessed. Opinions from the perspective of religions are publicly expressed on important issues of the collective life and religions take up an active role in the numerous battles on the wide range of issues fought out in various walks of life.

Religions on the Public Stage

As José Casanova has observed years ago, the truly new element in this field is that religions and diverse religious traditions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism) refuse to stay within the boundaries of the private sphere. Instead they demonstrate a new public vitality and even claim a public role.³

One reason for this is that religions tend to defend their own territories for fear of becoming socially insignificant. Yet more important is that they want to take part in the construction process of the modern world because they believe that they can contribute (or that it is their duty) to redefine the rules of social coexistence in a globalised world which is undergoing profound changes. In this way they not only support liberation and emancipation movements which involve various peoples and nations, but also intervene in the dramas and problems of collective life and the world system (justice and democracy, civil rights, social injustices, economic and environmental inequalities, relationships among cultures and at an international level); and give their opinions on ethical questions at the frontiers of life, on bioethics, on scientific and technological questions.

Faced with these new scenarios and diverse phenomena, the debate on the secularisation of societies becomes more articulated. First and foremost, secularisation is still in progress understanding this term as the differentiation process that during the course of history has led many social spheres (not least economy, politics, science) to free themselves from religious authority, to act according to autonomous rules and criteria that do not take into account religious perspectives and to find their reasons for legitimacy inside their own field. Religion today – especially in western societies – no longer carries out the all-encompassing function that it used to have in the past, in so far as the emancipation of many social sectors from religious influence is a fact of historical development. Secondly, the privatisation of religion is without doubt important in some western nations, however in many countries and areas of the world it does not seem sufficient to prevent religions from playing a very strong role in the public sphere, although often this situation gives rise to conflicting emotions and opinions. Finally, the decline of religious practices and beliefs does not appear to be a universal trait, since many so-called modern countries are characterised by strong dynamics in religious terms.

Religion, Modernity, and Secularisation

After having described the dynamics and concepts set out so far, it seems to be appropriate to briefly indicate at this point what is precisely meant in this article by the terms »religion«, »modernity«, and »secularisation«.

Well aware of the countless definitions of religion which are set forth by theologians and historians, here we shall look at religion from a sociological perspective that stems

³ José Casanova, *Oltre la secolarizzazione. Le religioni alla riconquista della sfera pubblica*, Bologna 2000; Pippa Norris/Roland Inglehart, *Sacro e secolare. Religione e politica nel mondo globalizzato*, Bologna 2007 (first published 1994).

from the following contestations that: 1. every religion is a carrier of a particular vision of life and the world, it connects human reality with a supernatural or transcendental order and is capable of giving meaning to existence and of explaining the reason, nature, and purpose of the universe; 2. these beliefs form the basis of ritual practice and ethical behaviour, they give orientation for the faithful and create the foundations of their conduct of life; 3. groups, associations, and organisations which promote particular collective behaviour and exercise their influence on various sectors of society emerge around these religious representations; 4. every great religion tends to form a unitary system fulfilling specific cultural functions and becoming deeply involved in social dynamics and, in so doing, it interacts with events and developments which take place in other social systems (e.g. economic, political, educational, reproductional).

Since the recent debate, which contrasts the concepts of modernity and post-modernity, has been profoundly detailed and complex, we define the idea of modernity here as the result of modernisation processes which were acquired by western societies after the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution and which are characterised by the following aspects: social differentiation and the consequent specialisation of social institutions (such as the free market, political institutions, cultural organisations); participation of the ›masses‹ in political and economic life; cultural pluralism determining the presence of numerous visions of the world and conceptions of truth; and last but not least the tendency of every social subsystem to rationalisation. In reference to the condition of the more developed western nations, we prefer the term ›advanced modernity‹ instead of ›post-modernity‹, as considerable discontinuities have not been verified in the process of modernisation, at least from the point of view of the relationship between religion and the contemporary world.

Modernisation processes have also produced another relevant phenomenon in western societies: secularisation, understood as a set of processes able to organise various areas of social life on a non-religious basis, that is to say, the transition from a traditional society, in which every aspect of life apparently used to be legitimised by religion, to a more rational way of organising social life, where every social subsystem finds its legitimisation within its own reason of existence. In this sense, the concept of secularisation can be connected to the Weberian term of ›disenchantment of the world‹ according to which the religious sphere gradually loses its hold over society. In such circumstances, religion acknowledges its reduced scope of intervention. Thus, it is compelled to redefine its role and to become more specialised in order to avoid to be sidelined in regard to social processes. In this paper, we will make extensive reference to the term ›secularisation‹ to illustrate the process of differentiation (or of decreasing affiliations towards the Church and religion) which has enabled various social, economic, and political institutions to free themselves from the control of religion. However – in accordance with Casanova's observations – our analysis neither confirms that the process of secularisation necessarily entails the tendency of religion to become more private, that is to say to have less influence in the public sphere, nor does it mark the decline in religious beliefs and practices.

The Italian Situation in Historical Perspective

The developments mentioned above are often intertwined. They can occur in different combinations which create the particularities of different nations. This is also true for the situation in Italy, the subject of this paper. Although here religion no longer has an all-encompassing role in society, it still holds an extremely prominent position. Despite a constant decline among the population over the years, levels of religiosity are noticeably higher than in other Catholic or Protestant European countries. Many people may keep their relationship with religion private (detached from religious institutions), yet that does

not prevent them from paying attention to the public role played by churches and religious organisations and from taking advantage of some of their functions.

These conceptual instruments for the analysis of the Italian situation illustrate the profound transformation that the country in general and Catholicism in particular has undergone since 1945. First and foremost, there is the age-old problem of whether and to what extent the concept of secularisation, understood as religious decline, can explain the developments on the field of religion in Italy over the last fifty to sixty years. In other words, how deeply has the secularisation process affected the country during this period, not only regarding the reduced influence of churches and religious institutions of the society, but also in terms of weakening religious practice and sentiment in the population. Furthermore, such instruments can establish whether there have been any counter-trends to the secularisation process and, if so, they are able to identify them at two levels: firstly in terms of the capacity of churches and religious groups to react to new scenarios and emerging cultures, and secondly in terms of the opportunities which can be offered to the religious sphere by a more secularised society according to the well-known formula that even advanced modernity has its ›religious offshoots‹. Finally, these instruments can individuate the connection between secularisation and the concept of the »cultural gap« as a key to interpret the long-term religious transformation of the Italian society. Compared to other European countries, the modernisation process appeared much later in Italy but had a deeper affect. Is it fair to say that – with reference to religious tendencies – this gap has been bridged? Or is the religious situation in Italy different from any other among the advanced countries?

The analysis of the situation in Italy from the post-war years to the present mainly refers to the developments in the Catholic field. This is not only because the Catholic Church has always played an extremely important role here – even though touching high and low points – but also because Catholicism down to the present day represents the most widespread religious reference in the population. The continuity of Catholic presence over time is a national characteristic, even in a context characterised by growing alternative beliefs and religious confessions along with an increasingly widespread and stronger culture beyond religion.

In general and in highly simplified terms, the relationship between religion and society in Italy can be categorised into the following four broad scenarios.

II. THE MYTH OF »NEW MODERN CHRISTIANITY«: THE IMMEDIATE POST-WAR YEARS

The first scenario illustrates the developments during the first two decades after the Second World War. At that time, Italy was a country on its knees with an out-dated economic system, a cultural gap regarding modernity and a political scene fraught with conflict between the pro-Western block, which was led by the Christian Democrats, and the pro-Soviet block consisting of the Communist Party.

In this context, the presence of the Church and Catholic religion was enormous. Churches were packed with worshippers and religious and sacerdotal vocations filled seminars and convents. A plethora of public religious manifestations, such as the »Madonna Pellegrina«, aroused widespread popular participation throughout the country. »Azione Cattolica«, the most important of the ecclesiastical associations, reached the peak of its popularity with four million members of predominantly young age. The faithful voted in huge numbers for the Catholic party (Democrazia Cristiana; DC), which – after the memorable victory in the 1948 elections – conducted the process of modernisation of the country, carried out reforms and promoted the industrial recovery. It was a period of large-scale investments, such as the creation of a modern infrastructure network, the development of the automobile sector and the reconstruction of other industries. The myth

of development caused an internal migration from the South to the North, that is to say people moved from the countryside to the cities. Personal income and consumption grew and new life styles emerged and spread. People were predominantly optimistic about the future. This was the famous Italian economic miracle.

All this took place in a society that seemed to pivot on Christian values and was imbued with Catholic culture. This period represents a kind of Golden Age of the twentieth century Italian Catholic world (in Italian: *il mondo cattolico*). It was characterised both by the phenomena previously described (a high level of religious practice, numerous ecclesiastical associations, important manifestations of popular religion, a broad nationwide consent within the Church and so on) and by the data relative to the structure of the Catholic Church that, precisely during these years, registered a marked increase in human and organisational resources, destined to diminish extremely over time. As table 1 shows, it was during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s that the Catholic Church reached its peak in terms of the number of priests, of new ordinations, and of members of female religious institutions. Thus it achieved a considerably high degree of density of religious personnel throughout the country.

Table 1: Data Relative to the Structure and Organisation of the Catholic Church in Italy over the Last Decades⁴

Year	Number of dioceses	Baptisms	Parishes	Diocesan priests	New ordination of diocesan priests	Religious priests	New ordination of religious priests	Deacons	Philosophy and theology seminarians	Members of male religious institutes	Members of female religious institutes	Charitable institutes	Educational institutes
1951	303	*	25,578	47,232	*	18,217	1,154	*	8,650	25,214	145,747	3,681	339
1961	294	*	26,368	44,588	*	21,855	891	*	9,312	28,426	160,114	4,685	4,327
1971	290	898,274	28,058	42,829	640	22,509	478	14	4,990	32,997	157,626	4,833	4,418
1981	291	639,198	29,022	38,897	352	20,936	202	246	2,914	28,592	135,472	4,471	11,867
1991	222	512,751	25,800	35,519	507	19,060	117	1,121	3,196	26,530	123,457	4,798	11,262
2001	221	458,549	25,729	33,377	453	17,536	93	2,588	3,044	22,972	106,008	3,670	9,064
2006	221	439,661	25,567	31,897	428	17,098	167	3,359	2,726	22,806	98,672	3,776	8,432

* Data not available

All these favourable conditions together have nurtured the hope of some ecclesiastical circles of creating a »new Christianity«. This was in fact not a genuine Italian idea, in so far as the term was used in France by Jacques Maritain to indicate a social project inspired by Christian faith. It was supposed to surpass capitalism and communism and to affirm not only social and economic relationships but also political and institutional parameters centred and based on the »person«.⁵

In post Second World War Europe this concept of an ideal society spread out from intellectual circles to the civil and the political society where social conditions appeared to be favourable to its fulfilment. For many, the rebirth of Christianity in a modern key – capable to understand the innovations of the time, ranging from the system of democratic

4 Source: Data taken from the *Annuario Pontificio*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome 2008 (and previous years).

5 Cf. *Jacques Maritain*, *Umanesimo integrale*, Rome 1946, pp. 106–109.

government to market economy, from the division of social labour to individual rights – seemed to be close at hand. This applies to those nations where Christian Democratic parties glamorously won elections and where large parts of the population identified themselves with such religious values. This development generally took the liberal political elites by surprise, after they had governed these national states for decades.

Particularly in Italy, defined by the historian Pietro Scoppola as a »Catholic hegemony« which was already implicit in the society, »a self-sufficient fulfilled Catholic culture«, »a state that tends to conform to the reality of a Catholic country« was consolidated.⁶ Reflecting on this scenario, another Catholic historian, Arturo Carlo Jemolo, refers to an »unexpected realisation of a Guelph state one hundred years after the decline of neo-Guelph aspirations«.⁷

Apart from the profound Catholic roots of the Italian population, there is another condition which favoured the accomplishment of a project or Christian pathway towards modernity: the fact that Italy had the strongest Communist Party in Western Europe, the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), which in those years indirectly guaranteed that the Democrazia Cristiana was supported by NATO-countries and the United States in particular. Consequently, for more than four decades the political system in Italy remained blocked at its centre where Christian Democrats dominated. There were no realistic and feasible alternatives, neither on the right (because of the tragic memory of Fascism) nor on the left (because of the presence of the Communist Party). In this context, the 1948 election, fought against the left alliance consisting of the PCI and won by the DC, was not only a political conflict between two political positions but rather between two models of cultural conditions. At that time, Italian communism represented the radical subculture alternative in contrast to the Catholic one, the »red religion« in opposition to the »white religion« represented by Catholicism. Communism was not only a party but an actual social and cultural world, a cooperative system of economic relations and almost a secular religion. This was not necessarily a relation of conflict, especially in the 1970s. This decade was characterised by an extreme fragility of the institutions. In the so-called »years of lead«, which refer to the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, turmoil and conflict caused by terrorism and the sensitivity of some sectors of the Catholic world towards the most marginalised social groups reigned in Italy. All this favoured several forms of collaboration between the Catholic and the Communist parties.

Political Catholicism during the 1970s and 1980s

The political power of the Democrazia Cristiana in the post Second World War years did not only depend on the international scenario and the threat of communism, but also on its capacity to encompass the different currents of the Catholic world in Italy. According to a definition by the then leader Alcide De Gasperi, the DC was »a centrist party looking to the left«; that on the one hand supported the experience of Social Catholicism which had developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and on the other proposed a social model that was supposed to be an alternative not only to Anglo-Saxon capitalism but also to communism. In other words, the DC aimed at holding together the companies and the workers, the individual and the community, wealth and its redistribution and so on. In this way it presented itself as a reference point for very different social groups, ranging from self-employed workers to small land-owners, from high ranking civil servants to small-scale entrepreneurs, from cooperatives to rural banks, not to mention the category of manual labourers and white-collar employees whose political views

6 *Pietro Scoppola*, *La nuova cristianità perduta*, Rome 1985, p. 15 (all cited translations by Franco Garelli).

7 *Arturo Carlo Jemolo*, *Chiesa e Stato in Italia negli ultimi cento anni*, Turin 1963.

were the closest to the one which was held by the Church. Thus, the DC presented itself as the obvious choice for Catholic voters who in the immediate post-war period dominated not only the parishes and the oratories but also the countryside, the artisan workshops, and the numerous associations and professions of the civil society.

Political Catholicism shaped by these experiences immediately split up and consolidated into three broad sectors which – reflecting different social interests and demands – were responsible for the Christian Democratic success over many years. The first current was progressive and expressed strong aspirations of Social Catholicism. In addition, it showed more interest in solidarity and in the poorest of the society. As a consequence, it was rather inclined to dialogue with left-wing parties. The second one, the centrist group, sought a balance between economic development and social solidarity and thus had a greater tendency to govern autonomously or to make pacts with other secularised or liberal parties. The third one, the right-wing spectrum, rather in favour of defending Catholic values against communism, was consequently more easily inclined to accept conservative political positions.

The post-war reconstruction of Italy took place in a climate of social and political stability, not least because the main subcultures of the country (Catholic, Communist, liberal movements) nurtured shared values and civil harmony despite of their ideological differences. It is no surprise that during a period characterised by rapid and deep change social and economic conflicts occurred. However, they did not have disruptive effects, possibly due to the normative framework of the new Republican Constitution of 1946, which was a compromise between liberal and capitalist needs and safeguarded the least advantaged classes in society.

The fact that the managerial class of the time proved to be capable of dealing with such a complex and dangerous situation and showed some sense of responsibility, allowed the economy to grow within a climate of political stability.

The First Symptoms of Secularisation

However, as Scoppola states, »the very days of omnipotence« of the Christian Democrats were »those in which the process of secularization« began.⁸ In their governing role, Catholics have made substantial contributions to enable the Italian economy to grow and to make much improved life styles possible in the Italian society. In doing so, they induced profound changes in the geography of the nation. Millions of people moved from the countryside to the cities, an increasing number of workers were employed in the heavy industries and the suburbs grew and expanded. All this created new forms of living together. Whereas affluence spread and enabled new life styles, models of the past had difficulties to expand in this new situation.

Thus, modernisation itself and not communism was the most dreaded adversary of Catholicism, as it contributed to the social and cultural changes of the nation which had just started to free itself from religious control. Modernisation was a more lethal opponent precisely because it was subtle and hidden among the positive tendencies of the economic recovery and because it induced the population to seek immanent reasons of fulfilment and lessened the importance of religious values. Undoubtedly the vast majority of Italians maintained their typical Catholic attitudes and forms of behaviour but they were already attracted to conditions that modified their consolidated orientations.

The ecclesiastical hierarchy immediately sensed this new danger, bishops spoke out against wide-spread consumerism and referred to the underlying process of secularisation, but they were well aware that they had to deal with new developments which were

8 Scoppola, *La nuova cristianità*, p. 19.

difficult to understand and to control. The hope of establishing a new modern Christianity was already beginning to wane.

However, compared to other European countries, the situation in Catholic Italy looked much brighter during those years. The levels of religiosity were still consistently and notably high and churches were filled for ordinary rites as well as celebrations of popular festivities. In addition, the Catholic movement was particularly dynamic with religious and independent figures (such as Don Primo Mazzolari, Don Lorenzo Milani, Carlo Carretto) endowed with unquestionable authoritative and charisma. Political Catholicism witnessed an important period of time with outstanding personalities such as Giuseppe Dossetti, Alcide De Gasperi, Giorgio La Pira, Amintore Fanfani, Aldo Moro whose ideas and actions represented the three basic currents of the Democrazia Cristiana in different forms. Moreover, Catholic associations were extremely healthy under the leadership of »Azione Cattolica« that had more than 3.3 million members in 1959 (with an increase of more than one million members in the previous ten years), and that grew continuously during the first half of the 1960s. Numerous specialised movements were connected with »Azione Cattolica«. Their members were devout laypeople who proved their faith in different social sectors and groups such as the Catholic Scouts, the Italian Sport Centre, the Italian Female Centre, the Acli (Association of Italian Christian workers) and also within the vast field of professional Catholic associations such as in the union of middle-school teachers, judges, doctors, pharmacists, technicians, artists as well as in the Catholic university lecturer committee and in the Catholic union of the »Cisl«, which had one million members at the end of the 1950s, and the »Catholic Association Defending the Interests of Farmers« or »Coldiretti«. This proliferation of movements and associations illustrates not only the enormous vitality of the Catholic world during that period, but also that Catholicism in Italy was beginning to fragment, a process of distinction typical for all societies in the process of modernisation.

Therefore, even though Catholic subculture was active and could rely on a managerial class of high quality which was leading the country, the Church perceived that the social fabric was changing and the influence of religious faith on the conduct of life was weakening. From a present day perspective those worries might appear premature or exaggerated given that Italy was certainly not comparable with France or Belgium which were at that time already classified as »mission lands« by the respective Episcopal Conferences. However, the ecclesiastical concerns demonstrate the capability and willingness of the Church to comprehend a set of social developments which were able to profoundly influence the country in the following 15 years.

III. VATICAN COUNCIL, CRISIS AND SECULARISATION: 1960S AND 1970S

The Second Vatican Council can be seen as a hinge between Christian Democratic and Catholic hegemony on the one side and the beginning of the nationwide secularisation process on the other; and this applies until today. The Council started out by launching a new openness of the Church towards the modern world with numerous contributions from German and French theologians – countries already influenced by the process of secularisation – yet it ended with divisions and restraints in contrast to the seemingly courageous initial approach. The Italian Church was marginalised, not only because it was engaged in managing its own situation but also because it was culturally less prepared to acknowledge the profound changes.

The Second Vatican Council: Contestation and Assimilation

The Council started when the economic miracle was in full progress and it concluded in the years of the first student uprisings in various western countries. The French revolt in

May 1968, preceded by protests in American universities a few years before, marked the beginning of an extremely turbulent phase in Europe in which organisations and institutions of western societies were severely challenged. The concept of authority was questioned by the young generation.

Without doubt the new openness of the Church towards modernity is one of the crucial keys to interpret the Second Vatican Council, through which the Church acknowledged this momentous change and adapted itself to align the announcement of the Gospel with the world which had evolved from Enlightenment, from scientific progress and from the end of the Ancien Régime.

The outcome of the Council was the result of an enormous and complex mediation between the necessity to adapt to the contemporary world on the one hand and the respect for the thousand-year old Catholic tradition on the other.⁹ Local as well as national church representatives from different backgrounds in terms of the levels of religiosity and secularisation expressed highly different views in the discussions of the Council's assemblies which made its task even more difficult. These meetings were characterised by clashes and disagreements, above all between the progressive wing whose representatives were less affiliated to the past, and the traditional wing still tied to church doctrine and approach which originated from the Council of Trent and the Counter-Reformation.

Precisely for these reasons, the assimilation of the Council into the Italian Church brings to light the latent tensions of a Catholic world which already was divided due to the different views on the ongoing change of the country, which was exposed to the authoritarian and institutional crisis in a period of student uprisings and worker protests. The Liturgical Reform can be considered an emblematic case, because celebrations previously in Latin were then held in various national languages. The faithful who had to understand in order to properly take part in the rites were no longer spectators of a ritual performance but played an active and conscious role. This very reform became one of the most evident fields of disagreement in the Italian Church. It was above all the bishops and the traditional faithful who blocked the way to liturgical renewal because they were anxious to safeguard the sense of the sacred and the mystery of the rites. However, despite varied opposition, the reform was rapidly enacted and contributed in giving greater importance and dignity to the role of the lay believer in church.

Organisation was another area of the Italian Church that was influenced by the Council. Priests no longer had to point out their »separateness« from the world, but could emphasise their being a part of the modern world while still being men of the Church. The change was symbolic as well as structural. The change in dress code from the cassock to the clerical collar portrays the symbolic level which was approved by the majority of the faithful but looked on with suspicion by parts of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The reorganisation of the seminaries due to a decline in vocations illustrates, on the other hand, structural change. In 1968, the number of seminarians dropped to 25,500 after a peak in 1962 of over 30,000. This downward trend continued until 1978, when the numbers fell to 9,850. Following the same pattern, only 384 priests were ordained in 1978 compared to 918 in 1966.¹⁰ These figures led to the closure or merger of many seminaries, especially of the minor ones, and to a more rigorous selection of those wanting to follow their »vocation« as well as to impromptu solutions when young candidates for priesthood decided to live together in private homes.

The conflict within the Church reflected the developments in the broader society. The demands of liberty and participation did not spare the Catholic world and weakened and delegitimised the ecclesiastical institutions. The more engaged faithful were driven to wonder whether it was advisable to remain within the Church or rather become part of a

⁹ Cf. *Giuseppe Alberigo*, *Breve storia del concilio Vaticano II*, Bologna 2005.

¹⁰ Cf. *Marcello Offi*, *I preti*, Bologna 1998, pp. 23–35.

process which would write history. A number of them left the Church to embrace political engagement. These were the years of Catholic diaspora and dissent, of growing grass-root communities, ecclesiastical association-building, of splitting up and losing members, of priests and nuns undergoing identity crises and of the decline in the number of vocations. This ecclesiastical contestation tended to interpret the Council as a democratic revolution within the Church influenced by the Marxian-Christian dialogue and the attraction of Liberation Theology. »Azione Cattolica« was going through a period of religious choices, it attempted to be faithful to its original identity without following the call of explicit political engagement and thereby paying a high price in terms of a fall in the number of its members. In addition, the »worker priests«, who shared a working class life in the factories where they took their Christian testimony and tried to convince and missionise the Communist electorate, spread in Italy. This development is emblematic of the climate of the period and the tensions experienced by many grass-root Catholic communities which on the one hand felt the effects of the crisis of authority that had beset the ecclesiastical institutions and religious roles, and on the other hand felt the need to find new forms of engagement to realise their ideals.¹¹

The ecclesiastical world appeared to be in a state of disarray. Through its encouragement for a new era based on Catholic activities ›from below‹ the Council had risen the hopes of many grass-root groups and Christians. This same need also developed during the time of protest and political uprising, a period that witnessed the resurgence of grass-root demands for participation expressed in particular by individuals who were socially advantaged and engaged.

11 Despite the opposition to the Vatican hierarchy, the experience of worker priests rapidly spread from France to Italy due to some charismatic figures and some local bishops who were open enough towards social questions. The first Italian worker priest was Sirio Politi, a worker in the port of Viareggio in the 1950s and 1960s, who recorded his factory experience in a diary (published under the title »One of them«, Turin 1967) and who became a reference point for this kind of engagement. Other worker priests whose experiences have left their mark in history can be found in Lombardy and in the Turin diocese. In this latter area there was a substantial G.I.O.C. movement (young Christian workers of French derivation) and several seminarians were attracted to this new way of interpreting the sacerdotal role. Between the 1960s and 1970s there were about 300 worker priests in all. A progressive decline in the numbers then began, falling to the present situation with less than 10 priests in factories today. The end of this experience is due to various factors, and is only in part a result of the barriers raised over time by the ecclesiastical hierarchy: the reduction in the number of large factories and the increase in work in the third sector; the generational change among the clergy with new recruits being trained and living in a social-political context which was very different from that of the worker priests; a gradually more acceptable attitude by Catholic hierarchy towards this kind of choice makes it not only more viable within the Church but also helps to release the tensions that had surrounded it. With regard to the ecclesiastical setting, it is without doubt worth remembering the many obstacles imposed by the Vatican and by some parts of the ecclesiastical hierarchy towards this kind of experience (they blamed it as »communism« and as dangerous for the integrity of Christian faith and testimony). Confronted with this some priests abandoned the ministry; although after the Second Vatican Council the worker priests were re-installed due to the consensus given to this type of choice by Pope Paul VI. However, this experience was of great importance regarding both the Catholic world and various forms of social and political participation. The worker priests served as a symbol, because they showed that some men of the Church were willing to share the working conditions of the common people, to choose the part of the proletariat, to express tacit and everyday-life solidarity towards the lives of those who worked on the assembly line. See also the article by Christian Bauer and Veit Straßner in this volume.

The Catholic World during the Profound Crisis in the 1970s

The 1960s were characterised by alternating hope and disappointment due to the Second Vatican Council on the one hand and tensions from the student and worker protests on the other. Subsequently, the society and the Church in Italy were gripped in a crisis with obviously numerous implications during the 1970s.

The economic miracle ended in a deep recession triggered by the petrol crisis in 1973. The resulting austerity measures and reduced consumption figures made the public well aware that the constant growth of wealth had been nothing more than an unrealistic dream. At the root of the crisis there were factors which were predominantly inherent in the system, such as profound contradictions caused by the far too rapid modernisation process, the personal and social costs of large-scale migration from the South to the industrialised North, and the up-rooting of large swathes of people from their traditional origins and habits. The rural culture, which had been the basis of the system of traditional values for centuries, vanished rapidly.

Moreover, the process of social change initiated by the student protests in 1968 turned out to be a nightmare rather than the hoped-for dream. What had started as a peaceful attempt to put an end to a traditional system which was considered too authoritarian and limited, degenerated into armed conflicts and into terrorism caused by groups from the right and the left. The brutal outcome of the crisis was the formation of the »Red Brigade«, who in 1978 subsequently kidnapped and murdered Aldo Moro, one of the most intellectually coherent and authoritative politicians in the country and member of the Democrazia Cristiana.

The 1970s in Italy also marked a profound change in life styles and customs, which came into being under the influence of a new social climate during a period of political participation. The student and worker protests certainly threw the system off balance, although the long-term resistance of the institutions along with the subversive deviation of some members of the »movement« weakened their effects over time. However, many elements of counterculture had already been seeded within the social environment and consequently new values and references were established in what was becoming an increasingly plural society. Examples of such values included the will to be one's own master, the desire to experiment, the search for immediate satisfaction, the self-determination of one's own choice and conditions of life. All these new values were – in terms of thought and practice – in diametrical opposition to traditional culture and outlined a generational divide. As it has been observed, »alternative life styles« affected the Italian society far more than »political alternatives« in that period.

The most evident symbol of this cultural and political change was the battle which was fought throughout the country after the approval of the bill on divorce (1970) by some parts of Parliament. This law caused profound perplexity and disconcertment in the Church and the Catholic world.¹² The Catholic field, which was largely bound to tradition and rather reserved towards modernity, was alarmed by the approval of the law, because it indicated the high level of secularisation in the country and therefore gave reason for an incisive reaction. Supported by the Vatican but not under the direction of the DC, a group of Catholic militants and intellectuals promoted an abrogative referendum against the law. In contrast, other Catholic groups were rather sceptical towards the referendum and willing to acknowledge a pluralistic society where people could make their own choices. The laity took action, while the DC felt obliged to a political compromise with the referendum promoters who were far more right-wing than the party. The activism of the laity world and the political left was able to create a majority – a rare event in Italy – in favour

12 Cf. *Franco Garelli, La chiesa in Italia. Struttura ecclesiale e mondi cattolici*, Bologna 2007, pp. 37f.

of the law. Subsequently the referendum was defeated in 1974. The DC had lost. Deep divisions of the Catholic world, which once used to be a solid social block always capable to find a compromise between different views, were laid bare in public.

Catholics as a Minority?

Confronted with the events of terrorist deviation and profound changes of habits, the Church and political Catholicism chose an approach of reflection and made an attempt to redefine their position. Although it was weakened by the election results of the mid-1970s, the DC reacted to the threat of terrorism and defended the institutions, even at the cost of human lives and internal divisions. These years were also characterised by the policy of »historic compromise« with the Partito Comunista Italiano. Despite being tied to the Soviet block, the Italian Communist Party clamped down on left-wing terrorism which it regarded as an intrinsic destructive force and as an unrealistic means for establishing an alternative society. The policy of »national solidarity« served, first and foremost, as an emergency measure, even though at that historical moment it was based on some kind of affiliation between the two principal national »churches«, the Catholic Church and the Communist Party. Both were severely put to the test in view of the emerging new culture which favoured rather individual than collective needs.

The most telling expressions of the agony of the moment with regard to the Church and to Catholic associations were those of »disorientation«, »fragmentation«, and the need for »reconciliation«.¹³ The notion of disorientation referred first and foremost to the referendum on divorce. This episode illustrated the blatant reality of a Catholic country whose society was no longer following Church indications, and, to some extent, reflected a political current that tried to turn Italy into a secular country by using the new trends of liberated lifestyles. The term of fragmentation was a reference to the fact that organised Catholicism not only experienced a drop in numbers but also lost its unity, when it was faced with the profound change of these years. It reacted in different ways towards the emerging cultural demands and made contrasting decisions in social and political terms. Finally, reconciliation or re-composition referred to the necessity – expressed both by Church hierarchy and at grass-root levels – to launch an open discussion among the engaged Catholic world which on the one hand acknowledged the legitimacy of different ways and views and, on the other hand, prevented Catholics from losing their historical and spiritual heritage.

Thus various attempts were made to conduct a dialogue and to reunify ecclesiastical groups and movements. Yet this did not prevent that two different ways of interpreting the relationship between the Church and the world and between faith and historical engagement dominated the discussion. One referred to »religious choice« (expressed generally by »Azione Cattolica«, Acli, the Scouts), typical for the faithful who were in dialogue with the world, who wanted to live faith in a society without any particular distinctions and who strove to testify the Christian message in a society no longer Christian. The other one referred to »religious presence« (at the base of »Comunione e Liberazione«). This direction intended to prevent religious faith from being diluted in advanced modernity, to reaffirm Catholic identity and to transfer it into culture and social work.

This period, however, witnessed a growing spread of secularisation in society and in the Church. Nationwide changes in mentality and habits, which had already been seen in more advanced countries, became even more obvious when another referendum was carried out in 1981 which was supposed to repeal the abortion law introduced in 1978. Similar to the referendum on divorce, the one on abortion was defeated by two thirds of the Italian population, although the vast majority of Italians still declared its affiliation to

13 *Bartolomeo Sorge*, *La »ricomposizione« dell'area cattolica in Italia*, Rome 1979; *Gualberto Gualerni*, *I cattolici degli anni '70*, Milan 1977.

the Catholic religion. In short, in the span of a few years two laws (on divorce and on abortion) had been confirmed that were in contradiction to the Catholic doctrine and that were approved by a government still led by Christian Democrats. Following these events, the authoritarian Jesuit review »Civiltà Cattolica« in an editorial in 1983 declared that »Italy today can no longer define itself as a Catholic nation«, due to its widespread religious indifference and the sharp decline in the number of practising Catholics. For the first time, the idea that Catholics had become a minority group in Italian society reverberates throughout ecclesiastical circles.

IV. THE SOUNDNESS OF THE INSTITUTION AND THE CHARISMA OF POPE JOHN PAUL II: THE CHURCH OPENS UP TO PLURALISM

Right in the middle of the crisis, the Church acknowledged the extent and intensity of the change and again took the initiative by trying to combine the remaining parts of the committed Catholic world and by accepting the diffuse pluralism of political choices and religious sensibilities. The Church had some advantages in this process as it was an institution whose strength had not only developed over a long period of time but which usually had regained consent after situations of considerable socio-cultural upheaval.

However, it was Pope John Paul II's charisma bursting onto the public scene which proved to have the most significant and stimulating influence on the Church in Italy. He was able to communicate with the people, led religion back into the public sphere and suggested a new interpretation of the church-world relationship. Although John Paul's pontificate had an international air by proposing Catholicism as a third way between capitalism and communism worldwide, his actions had profound and long-lasting effects on the Italian Church.¹⁴ In his vision, the evangelisation of the world had to start in those places where Catholicism had a distinct national character, such as in Poland and Italy. Thus, he renewed appeals to the Church and to Italian Catholics in order to intensify their presence and their roles in society.

The New Concordat and the Weight of the Catholic World

Consequently, the Church's initiative gained strength and consent in the long run. Its role in society was reinforced despite the increasingly pluralistic environment. In 1984, the New Concordat was signed, which on the one hand established one of the Italian peculiarities within a European context and on the other brought the revision of the Lateran Pacts of 1929 to a close. These treaties had allowed the Fascist regime to resolve the dispute between the Italian State and the Church, and, among other things, had declared Catholicism a state religion. In the new Concordat Catholicism was no longer in this privileged position. Instead it became a religion recognised by the state that officially granted religious pluralism, inasmuch as specific agreements could also be signed with other religions. In those years the prevailing idea was that of a laity open to religious contributions in the process of social integration. The state acknowledged the social and public value of religion, but did not intend to privilege any particular confession and accepted religious pluralism. The New Concordat also set out changes in the funding system of churches which from then on could benefit from the »8 per 1000« system (according to this scheme 0.8 % of personal income tax could be transferred to any religious body). Furthermore, it requested the introduction of religious education as a subject in state schools.

14 Cf. *Andrea Riccardi*, *Governo carismatico: 25 anni di pontificato*, Milan 2003. For more see *Alberto Melloni*, *Chiesa madre, chiesa matrigna*, Turin 2004; *Giovanni Miccoli*, *In difesa della fede*, Milan 2007.

Due to its voluntary and non-profit activities, it benefited from reduced taxes and carried out various forms of activities in hospitals, prisons, re-education institutes and so on.

All these factors favoured Catholicism, as it was the most widespread religious confession among the population. There was still a high number of Catholics constituting the Italian Catholic world. The vast majority of Italian students (even though these figures were decreasing in high schools) attended religious education, most tax-payers paid their »8 per 1000« to the Catholic Church, and a large proportion of the population was in favour of Christian religious symbols (for example the crucifix) being displayed in public places, for instance in schools and hospitals.

The organisational structure of the Church was still on a considerably high level, thanks to which an active and capillary presence was maintained throughout the country. The Church could rely on a dense network of structures and human resources that seemed unequalled in Europe, despite the vocation crisis and an ageing clergy – as already mentioned – which occurred in Italy, too. During the years of crisis, the number of religious personnel in every respect (such as diocesan clergy, members of male and female religious institutes) fell by one third and the lack of new admissions led to a considerable increase of the average age of priests and religious figures working in the ecclesiastical system.

However, in the 1980s the Italian Church still had a large quantity of staff (almost 35,000 diocesan priests, about 19,000 priests from religious orders and congregations, more than 110,000 nuns) who worked in the numerous fields of Catholic activities. The extensive provision of pastoral services was certainly one of the privileged sectors of the Italian Church. It was offered by a network of dioceses and parishes (and other pastoral centres) which aligned themselves to the specific Italian particularity of the »thousand municipalities«. Their diversity illustrates furthermore the fragmentation of the religious field.

Religiosity of the faithful is another characteristic example for the situation in Italy which contrasted strongly with any other Catholic country in Europe. Although secularisation was an irrefutable fact, the majority of the population continued to adhere to Catholicism and took part in religious rites which marked important occasions in life. In fact, regular practice was notably higher than in other European countries (about 30% of adults) and more than 10% of Italians belonged to an ecclesiastical movement or association. Catholic groups offering social assistance services on a voluntary basis increased in number. They partly made up for the deficiencies of a welfare state on the verge of a crisis. The bishops supported and promoted this type of Catholic activity in society which represented the new face of a Social Catholicism that had had a long tradition in the country.

In conclusion, both the Church and the Catholic world in Italy in the 1980s mirrored a society strongly marked by pluralism which was shown by the demand for localism, the increased value of territorial culture and the economy of small enterprises. The solidity of the nation was based much more on the vitality of the civil society and the »thousand Italian bell towers« (where the presence of the Church was the result of its strong territorial roots) than on a political class which underwent a crisis of representation due to scandals and bribes. All these factors ultimately led to the end of the »First Republic« (the period from the foundation of the Italian Republic up to the early 1990s).

The End of Democrazia Cristiana and Catholic Political Unity

At the beginning of the 1990s, Democrazia Cristiana came to an end. This was caused by a series of concurrent events both within and outside the party. Firstly, the party of Catholic political unity was worn down by many years in government, by the lack of turnover of its organisers and managers, by the incapacity to free itself from the hazards of pragmatism and to reinterpret its founding principles in the present day. Numerous cases of illegal financing, bribery, corruption and other political incidents, which were dramati-

cally revealed during the so-called »mani pulite« (clean hands) period, had tarnished the party. Yet they represented only the tail end or the climax of a long-standing degenerative process. The consolidation of the two-party system in the country was another reason for the end of this political experience. A party representing the centre of the political spectrum became obsolete. The DC, therefore, dissolved not only because it had lost its impetus of ideals along the way, nor because it was, in the end, overcome by legal problems or public indignation, but also because by then it had become an »umbrella party« which was all-encompassing to such an extent that it disintegrated in an advanced modernity where specific and differentiated affiliations were required. Furthermore, the end of the DC can also be traced back to an international cause, as after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the crises of the great ideologies it had lost its right of existence in Italy, since it was no longer necessary to defend the country against the danger of communism.

The disappearance of the DC created a sense of disconcertment in many ecclesiastical and Catholic circles, even among those who had not voted for the DC. They not only felt that a political tradition had come to an end, but rather feared the loss of traditional values and good practices accumulated by political Catholicism during its better years. The feeling of disorientation, however, quickly faded and was replaced by a significant expansion of voluntary social assistance work by Catholic associations. The very crisis in Catholic politics itself seemed to have left more space for the culture of solidarity which was an integral part of the Catholic experience. Over the years, therefore, the image of the Church and the Catholic world became more and more dominated by charity and solidarity commitment, and in so doing it attracted a broad consent throughout the country.

This development was partly consequence and partly cause of the end of the Catholic party. It was a consequence insofar as the most active forces of the Catholic world had gradually turned away from the political experience precisely because they no longer identified themselves with a party which had become increasingly self-referential and opposed to change. Yet, it was also a cause, since a considerable amount of people left the party and turned to social and humanitarian groups and contributed to the implosion of the party.

The fact that parts of the Catholic base turned away from the political party sphere did not only cause a growing voluntary activity but gave also rise to various forms of engagement in civil society, such as the tendency of many young Catholics to choose civil rather than military service, the interest in pacifism, environmentalism and the »Third World«, anti-consumerism and the engagement in legal issues. Parts of the grass-root Catholic world took on these commitments during this period of time because their aim was to renew local politics. They joined groups which opposed the system of political parties and took part in attempts to mobilise the society in this direction.

Towards a Cultural Diaspora?

Another sign of change can be seen in the internal dynamics of Catholic associations where different religious sensibilities and diverse concepts of the church-world relationship implying plural political options clashed. Whereas some ecclesiastical groups and movements did not show any interest in political issues, because they were rather motivated by spiritual and religious interests and tended to ignore the importance of historical engagement, there were others that combined their religious identity with a particularly public role, even though they were based on different political orientations; which has already been seen in the case of religious mediation (interpreted by »Azione Cattolica«) and religious presence (proposed by »Comunione e Liberazione«). Traditional currents merged with progressive political orientations in the vast field of Catholic voluntary activity, even if the emerging groups, especially those which were engaged in peace, justice, international cooperation, or against addictions, rather identified themselves with left-wing parties than with other political formations. In conclusion, even though during the rele-

vant period of time a considerable number of members of the Catholic archipelago continued to vote for the Catholic party, it is very clear that different motivations led to this choice, whilst other committed believers now felt relieved from the old bonds.

All these factors confirm that the Catholic vote was free from old political ties, that Catholics no longer claimed a »political home« (even though partly disowned and contested), and that the Church had lost its political referent par excellence, the party that for decades had defended Catholic interests and values. Consequently, the Catholic hierarchy acknowledged the new state of affairs and publicly recognised the end of the era of the Catholic political party in the mid-1990s. The new position was outlined at the Palermo Convention in 1995 when Pope John Paul II – in front of the bishops and representatives of all Italian dioceses, religious orders and organised associations – declared that »the church must not and will not be involved in any choice of political or party position, as in the same way it does not express preference for one or another institutional or constitutional solution, as long as authentic democracy is respected«. This principle was followed by a warning to Catholics to avoid »a cultural diaspora corresponding to the political diaspora, as if all reference points had been lost«. ¹⁵ The Church accepted pluralism of political choice, but at the same time reminded Catholics that »they cannot consider every idea or world vision compatible with faith, or with their easy adherence to political or social groups that oppose, or do not pay enough attention to the principles of the Church's social doctrine, regarding the respect for the human person, the family, the freedom of scholastic choice, solidarity and the promotion of justice and peace«. ¹⁶

V. CHANGE IN CULTURE AND IDENTITY: THE CHURCH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The most interesting aspects of the transformation process of religion, however, can be observed in the very recent history of changes in culture and identity within the Church and Italian Catholicism. Obviously the Church has kept its typical historical roles such as religious services and training, social assistance and education, but it is now flanked by a new tendency to intensify its presence on the public stage. ¹⁷

Public Presence: The New Strategy

Since the 1990, the Catholic Church has been facing several essential questions: What have the nation and the Catholic world been experiencing during a period which has been profoundly characterised by a continuous questioning of the Italian Church? What steps should be taken to avoid a cultural diaspora of the Catholic world? How can Italian Catholicism, so strongly divided over political choices and religious sensibilities, be kept united? And above all: What can be done to save the cognitive resources and good practices of Italian Catholicism? How to ensure that Catholic sentiment, still widespread in Italy (even if characterised by numerous ambivalences and contradictions) is respected and acknowledged as a resource and value for the whole nation? Why does the national image in terms of the family, conduct of life and other values mirror the prevalent orientations and opinion leaders in public communications, which are far more secular and libertarian than the opinions and sentiments of the population? Why do Catholics have to

¹⁵ *Alceste Santini*, Dalla crisi del cattolicesimo politico del XX secolo alla ricerca di nuove vie, in: *P. F. Casavola* (ed.), *Quale futuro politico per i cattolici*, Turin 1997, pp. 117–153, here: p. 125.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁷ *Franco Garelli*, Religion und Gesellschaft, in: *Karoline Rörig/Ulrich Glassmann/Stefan Köppl* (eds.), *Länderbericht Italien*, Bonn 2011 (forthcoming).

be the »nurses of history«, the »good Samaritans«, and why are they not supposed to be entitled to have a voice and rights?

The changes within the Church since the mid-1990s were supposed to answer precisely these questions in order to prevent that the role of the Catholic Church become more and more irrelevant in an increasingly plural society. The wounds from the defeat of the referendums on divorce and on abortion are still open among the Catholic hierarchy and some Catholic organisations. According to them, there are far more Catholics in Italy than just the one third of the population that voted to abrogate those laws. Those who did not follow the indications of the Church did so not because they were secularised, but out of respect for other's convictions. But even if Italian Catholicism was indeed to be a minority, what would the country gain from the on-going process of secularisation? Why not oppose the decline in traditional habits, the ethical crisis, the spread of a radical-libertarian culture and the rise of moral disorientation in a society that risks losing its fundamental foundation?¹⁸

These questions and reflections are based on a number of assumptions developed during the years since the mid-1990s by a group of Italian Church leaders and shared by its entourage. The first one is the assumption that despite greater cultural and religious pluralism Catholic affiliation is still widespread in the population and therefore has to be well represented in society. Secondly, organised Catholicism plays an important role by offering the country the service of religious institutions and charities. In contrast to this, its influence on the public opinion and the public sphere is marginal. Thus it is necessary to make great efforts so that Catholic cognitive resources and good practices can contribute to the common culture. Thirdly, a principle of unity has to be found in order to avoid disorientation and fragmentation in the Catholic world, which becomes even more evident at the end of the era of Catholic political unity. This unifying principle has to merge all the various forms of Catholic »irrevocable values« on issues of life, family, education, solidarity and religious freedom and has to be capable of regenerating the social and moral fabric of the nation. Finally, Catholic renewal and cultural engagement are urgently needed to face the ethical challenges looming on the horizon and caused by new concepts of life and the ever advancing frontiers of science. The latter seems to be a particularly popular terrain where the Catholic world can be engaged in a reflection enriching the public debate and counterbalancing other orientations. In other words, Italian Catholicism must contribute to defining the new situation by sharing its thoughts and experiences to the problems of the present. In so doing, it can reverse the cultural delay of the past.

These are the policies and intentions of the »Cultural Project« launched by Italian Church leaders in the mid-1990s¹⁹, a project underlining the public rather than the spiritual role of religion. This is why the changes of the Church in terms of culture and identity have immediately generated strong resistance among grass-root Catholics who feared it would not only conceal old temptations of integralism and of new hegemonial claims, but would also engage the Church and the Catholic world in a task not considered theirs. However, thanks to the power of the religious institution, but also for lack of effective alternatives, these indications prevailed over time and still constitute the most influential line of »ecclesiastical politics« in the Italian context.

Catholic Activism and Lobbying

Thus, at the heart of the »Cultural Project« is the Christian anthropological contribution to relevant questions concerning the present historical conditions, during a period in which

18 *Franco Garelli*, *The Public Relevance of the Church and Catholicism in Italy*, in: *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 12, 2007, pp. 8–36.

19 Cf. *Camillo Ruini*, *Per un progetto culturale di orientamento cristiano*, Casale Monferrato 1996.

– according to the Church – there is a need for strong ideas and compelling proposals. Faced with an enormous ethical void and a considerable demand for meaning, the Catholic field is called on to present more suggestions, to lay out its own convictions more clearly without suggesting uniformity in choices and orientations and drawing on and reinterpreting its legacy of ideas and experiences.

This involves, for one thing, relaunching the Christian thought. For another, the faithful have to contribute on crucial issues of our times such as on the solidity of the family, the meaning of life and death, how to realise solidarity today, how to combine truth and subjectivity, on the profound questions of bioethics and genetics, ecological problems, the power of the new media, limits and possibilities of science and so on.

This strategy of increased public and communicative presence of the Church in Italy has caused a period of intense activism by bishops and Catholic groups which shared this line of action in particular. During the last ten to 15 years, there have been several big religious events indicating that the expression of faith has rather turned to public places and has become an opportunity for the ›masses‹ to get involved into religion. The participation of Italians in these religious happenings has usually been very high, whether promoted by the Vatican (such as the Jubilee in 2000 or the World Youth Days) or organised by national ecclesiastical groups (such as the canonisation of local saints, Eucharistic congresses, important Catholic association meetings). In this context, the various offices of the Italian Episcopal Conference have done important jobs for the various initiatives in updating programs and public relations in order to involve the local churches in their specific sectors (e.g. family, catechists, youth, work, solidarity). Furthermore, the Italian Church has not missed any opportunity to defend and promote national values and national unity in public, which it considered to be under threat from the crisis of the civil society, the spread of localism and political party programmes (such as the one of the Lega Nord) that base their electoral success on territorial division. In addition, the Church repeatedly appealed to those in the public sector responsible for dealing with problems of unemployment or temporary work in a period of profound economic crises. Moreover, it invited Italians to rediscover the meaning of human and Christian solidarity, not least toward foreign immigrants, which is why it clashed with some social and political groups merely following a policy of law and order.

However, the presence of Italian Catholicism has its particular strengths when it reflects and states its position on ethical-political questions at the core of the public debate. These are issues on defending the family, intervening on bioethical and genetic questions, the secularism of the state, religious pluralism and so on.²⁰ In this way, the Church and Catholic groups take their rightful role in the cultural confrontation caused by advanced modernity that demands to redefine the rules in many settings both of private life and public coexistence.

Not only have there been reflections and public proposals put forward on these issues, but also numerous committees and forums of experts and scholars on different subjects have been set up at national and local level to establish a better definition of the ›Catholic‹ vision in different sectors and to act as pressure groups in society.²¹ Moreover, there have been mass events to support the Catholic position, such as the ›Family Day‹ promoted in 2007 by the ›Forum of the Family Associations‹ in Rome which attracted more than one million people and promoted the family as a community based on the ›stable union of a man and a woman and open to natural generation‹.²²

20 Cf. *Roberto Scalon*, *Bioetica e sfera pubblica*, Milan 2005.

21 *Garelli*, *The Public Relevance of the Church*, p. 33.

22 *Marco Bracconi*, *Family day. In piazza il mondo cattolico. »No ai Dico, noi il nocciolo della societ *», in: *La Repubblica*, 17.5.2007

Many other public battles have been fought by the Italian Church and groups of faithful defending the so-called »dear to Catholics« values, for instance the demand to keep the crucifix in public places, to reaffirm the religious character of some public holidays which have taken on a more and more secular meaning, to introduce references to Christian roots into the European constitution, to oppose the widespread idea of parts of the Italian society that the concept of state secularism implies an attitude of indifference and sometimes even hostility towards religions without taking into consideration the contributions of the Church and Catholicism to the common good.

The Impact of a New Activism of the Church on Italian Politics

The cultural change of the identity of the Italian Church has had significant effects on the political sphere. The end of the Christian Democrat political experience was both a problem and an opportunity for the Church. It was a problem because there no longer was a political actor which used to mediate between the Church and politics for more than 30 years and to represent Catholic values and interests in Parliament and to safeguard the majority religion. Yet it was also an opportunity, because it enabled the Church to directly address political issues and to interact autonomously with public institutions, to personally negotiate the defence of religious interests, to make the various parties and different coalitions aware of its most important issues. This kind of lobbying was a modern and until then unusual course of action and placed the Church in an even more central position in public dynamics. It also caused considerable perplexity in many social and Catholic circles.

The new course of the Church has also lessened the importance of political Catholicism and its activities which had already been weakened by the disappearance of the DC and its inability to re-establish itself in the imperfect two-party system of the ›Second Republic‹ (the period from the mid-1990s until today).²³ On the one hand the progressive political spectrum, which initially was united in the Partito Popolare, unsurprisingly joined forces with left-wing parties, first in the Ulivo (led by the Catholic Romano Prodi) and then by becoming part of the Partito Democratico merging with reformists from the ex-Communist Party. The conservative spectrum on the other hand was absorbed by political initiatives promoted by Silvio Berlusconi who has created a common front consisting of moderate and right-wing parties. They accept and support economic liberalism but oppose any left-wing programmes and formally defend interests of the Church and the Catholic world. The political middle currently has enormous difficulties in finding its place and is constantly swinging between the centre-right and the centre-left. It attracts more or less attention according to the circumstances but is rarely decisive on issues of the national balance of power. Catholic presence in Italian Parliament is still substantial, but too dispersed to influence significant political decisions. Furthermore, the two major coalitions that have formed the government for some years have mainly leaders without strong affiliations towards the Church; which again shows the current weakness of Catholicism in the public sphere. This does not prevent Catholic politicians from being highly appreciated by many in the parties they belong to, and in particular by numerous representatives of local administrations, thanks to their mediation skills and technical competence inherited from their experiences in the Christian Democratic party. However, they are rarely in any powerful position where strategic decisions are made and they frequently hold differing opinions on the ways how to promote those »non-negotiable« Christian values on which the Church insists and which are probably often shared by politicians of other parties.

23 Cf. *Pietro Scoppola*, *La Democrazia dei cristiani. Il cattolicesimo politico nell'Italia unita*, Rome/Bari 2005; *Rosy Bindi*, *Quel che è di Cesare*, Rome/Bari 2009.

The fact that the Catholic vote is now open to different choices has changed the political scenario and the possibilities of the entire political spectrum. Since today elections are won by attracting moderate or floating voters, Catholic voters who are very close to the Church (and are usually more moderate or uncertain) become the objects of desire of almost all political parties because they are considered to be the deciding factor of victory or defeat. This outlines a tactical interest of politics towards religion by promising to defend Christian values in society for merely electoral ends.

However, Catholicism itself also has a strategic interest in politics. Politicians and political parties, being well aware of their own weakness and difficulties in controlling the process of globalisation, often turn to religion for cooperation not only in terms of religious symbols and values, but also regarding the contribution which religious groups can offer in order to face various social emergencies. The outcome is often the formation of a completely new configuration between politics and religion. Among these is, for example, the present case of the right-wing parties which champion church interests (and in this respect they are supported by the Church), although their leaders lead extremely secularised life styles and have highly secularised views of their public role; or the long-standing current conflict between the Lega Nord and the Catholic Church over issues of national unity and foreign immigrants, despite the fact that most members of the Lega come from the Christian Democratic culture and continue to declare themselves Catholic.

VI. REACTIONS IN THE SECULAR AND IN THE CATHOLIC WORLD

The new strategy of the Italian Church has started in a time of profound public insecurity which at a global level is represented by the subprime financial crisis and by Islamic terrorism and at a local level by the significant immigration flows, the crisis of the welfare system and a political elite unable to control such complex processes. By offering itself as a cultural reference to the nation, the Church fills this gap and presents an answer to this widespread public uncertainty. This raises the question of how the different social actors in the political and religious field will react on such a strategy and what role the Vatican plays, since it is always attentive to national dynamics and actions by Italian bishops.

The secular world and the non-Catholic religions are very critical of the new strategy of the Italian Church. They accuse it of wanting to maintain its traditional hegemony, despite being in a country which is now marked by pluralism.²⁴ Numerous irreligious and anti-clerical pamphlets, both very popular in Italy, flank religious titles on the shelves of Italian bookshops. Intellectuals and opinion leaders publically criticise ecclesiastical social doctrines which, in their opinion, are contrary to the principle of the separation of state and Church, and which address topics beyond religious competence and use politics to maintain Catholic hegemony.

Particularly severe is the criticism towards the intention of the Church to align the entire nation to Catholic ethical precepts concerning issues of life, family, marriage, sexuality, procreation, and fight against AIDS. These precepts are considered antiquated and out-of-touch with new forms of conduct of life and different attitudes towards values. This anti-religious sentiment usually remains silent, but sometimes explodes onto the public

24 For more on this issue see: *Gian Enrico Rusconi*, *Come se Dio non ci fosse*, Turin 2000; *idem*, *Non abusare di Dio. Per un'etica laica*, Milan 2007; *Piergiorgio Odifreddi*, *Perché non possiamo essere cristiani (e meno che mai cattolici)*, Milan 2007; *Giulio Giorello*, *Di nessuna chiesa. La libertà del laico*, Milan 2005; *Aldo Colonna*, *Catechismo anticlericale per credenti e laici*, Castelvecchi 2008; *Carlo Augusto Viano*, *Laici in ginocchio*, Rome/Bari 2006; *Giovanni Filoramo*, *La chiesa e le sfide della modernità*, Rome/Bari 2007.

scene, as it happened a few years ago, when some protesters – students and professors from an Italian university – tried to block a public conference to be held by Benedict XVI at the same university. However, it is worth remembering that there are some non-believers – usually called »devout atheists« – who appreciate the recent »battles over values« by the Italian Church acknowledging its courage in proposing important objectives to the nation in a period of crisis. They openly express their approval by recognising the »de facto« role of Catholicism as a reservoir of symbols with which a society of common values is to be built.

The Catholic world holds different positions. Various engaged groups give their approval to the new strategy, others fear that identity will become more important than charity and solidarity. The former seem more active and dynamic than the latter, also because in the present day Catholic dissent does not tend to erupt in public but rather remains confined to the individual conscience.

The majority of the population continues to declare itself »Catholic«, even though many Italians believe that one can be a good Catholic without necessarily sharing the whole set of ecclesiastical precepts, above all those concerning sexual and family ethics. However, they also approve that the Church defends its principles without yielding to the prevailing culture. In other words, there is a need for important and solid references which can be used by each individual as he or she prefers. Italian Catholics are too numerous not to be divided even over the most important objects. Along with the »active believers« (approximately 20% of the entire population) there are those who express a discontinuous religious practice as well as the »do-it-yourself Catholics«; but first and foremost, there is a marked increase in the number of Catholics defined as »Catholic by tradition and culture«, a group that assigns great importance to the ethnic and cultural dimension of their forefather's religion. This outlines a new style of »belonging without believing« that puts its trust in a Catholicism that fights for traditional values in a period in which those are under threat from cultural and religious pluralism. Many politicians – above all those from the centre-right and currently governing the country – share this attitude; they have adopted a secularised lifestyle, but publicly acknowledge and appreciate what the Italian Church is doing for the nation. It is also due to this consent that the Church feels authorised to play such an important role in Italian social and cultural life.²⁵

Finally, just a word on the always present question of to what extent the Vatican influences strategy, choices and day-by-day life of the Italian Church. Certainly, the power of the Vatican to address Italian bishops is evident. Italy is too close to the global centre of Catholicism to avoid a particular kind of care and attention. However, the analysis on which this paper is based on confirms that the Italian Church has been able to follow its own way and to build a specific strategy of public presence as a reaction to the on-going secularisation process.

VII. CONCLUSION

The panorama of the Italian Church and in particular the pathway Italian Catholicism has followed over the last decades illustrate the relationship between religion and modernity in the age of globalisation. Starting from a situation characterised by economic, political and especially cultural deficiency at the beginning of the last century, Italy has bridged this gap in less than a hundred years through an accelerated process of modernisation which first and foremost started after the Second World War. In this period of time, the country has turned into an industrialised economy, has become an integral part of the

25 *Garelli, Catholicism in Italy in the Age of Pluralism.*

Western democratic system, has been able to set up numerous modern institutions, avoided the experience of the East European Communist regimes and has witnessed its citizens becoming richer, freer and more educated.

According to the paradigm of secularisation the control of the dominant religion (Catholicism) over society should have progressively diminished during this period of growth and modernity. Certainly, Catholicism is no longer a state religion, the social sphere is separated from religion these days and the level of religious practice has decreased over the years.

However, the paradigm of secularisation can not answer some important questions such as 1. why and how could this process been guided by a Catholic party for over 40 years; 2. why is Italy still characterised by a level of religious practice significantly higher than in the rest of Western Europe and rather similar to the level in the United States; 3. why, similarly, can Italy still rely on a high level of Catholic associations which have involved not less than 10% of the adult population over the last decades; 4. how can the renewed public activism of the Catholic Church and especially of its top level executives, in particular during the last ten years, can be explained?

The process of advanced modernity has rather caused the diffusion of pluralism than triggered secularisation within and beyond the religious field. Religious affiliation has become a question of choice nurturing, among others, the phenomenon of »belonging without believing« (typical of people who see themselves affiliated to Catholicism rather for ethnic and cultural than religious or spiritual reasons). Apart from that there is a consistently convinced and active minority which has rediscovered faith. In addition, the Catholic world (reflecting the wider society) is internally considerably differentiated and divided into numerous groups and associations which are characterised by different religious sensibilities and varied fields of engagement. All these developments are to be seen against the background of growing non-Catholic religious confessions increasingly gaining space although they still remain a minority phenomenon.

In the meantime, the country has undergone the process of globalisation which has caused cultural openness and changes in the political and economic sphere exposing the population to the problems of production delocalisation, employment instability, new migratory flows, national identity crises, local claims and so on.

An enormous degree of uncertainty has arisen from these factors and developments. It gradually erodes the fabric of shared values on which civil life is based on. This tendency is perceived as a threat not only by politicians or members of the managerial class but also by common people who every day experience situations in which each individual concentrates on his or her own particular interests without the prospect of a common good or without following even the elementary rules of mutual respect. Therefore, the question of shared values which allow us to live together is of growing importance in modern societies exposed to the processes of globalisation.

It might be surprising that this situation is able to open up new opportunities for religious institutions such as the Catholic Church to play an important role in the public sphere. Due to their tradition, they are capable to contribute to the reconstitution of the bare minimum of shared values which are threatened by the most recent outcomes of the process of modernisation.