

The challenge of a christianity incarnated in daily life.

The creation of a movement formed by Catholic graduates and professionals was an idea pursued with determination by Don Giovanni Battista Montini, Igino Righetti and Angela Gotelli, when, at the beginning of the thirties, they led the branches of the Federation of Catholic University Students (FUCI). The announcement of the new proposal of religious formation and Christian militancy addressed to former university students was made in 1932, during the congress of the FUCI of Cagliari, and the following year, after a long gestation, the Movement of Catholic Graduates formalized its foundation, starting its activities in the dioceses and at the national level, not without effort.

The difficulties of organizing the Catholic Graduates were accentuated by the resignation of Montini from the FUCI in 1933, officially motivated by his growing commitments to the Vatican Secretariat of State, but in reality strongly urged by the curial circles that, concerned to maintain the Concordat peace of the Lateran Pact of 1929, did not fully share the line imprinted by the Brescian priest to the formation of intellectual Catholics. In fact, in previous years, as part of the more general reflection on the crisis of civilization and the inclusion of Catholics in social life, the leaders of the FUCI had insisted above all on the care of the moral and spiritual formation of individual members and not so much on the mobilization of masses in view of the Christian reconquest of society, as it was instead vagered by authoritative representatives of the Vatican curia and Catholic Action. Montini's "project culture", which drew on Jacques Maritain's thought and adapted it to the Italian context for the construction of a "new Christianity", intended to give the Catholic laity an autonomous role, recognizing their ability to intervene - albeit within the indications drawn from the ecclesiastical magisterium - in professional activity and in the wider social sphere.

The organization of the Catholic Graduates was rooted in this cultural ground and the very insistence on this line contributed to the removal of Montini from direct responsibility for the new movement. Ecclesiastical Assistant of the Graduates was nominated in 1934 Monsgr Adriano Bernareggi, then coadjutor bishop of Bergamo, although if in fact, Montini did not interrupt the collaboration and the exchange of reflections with these intellectual circles, continuing discreetly to weave a network of contacts to educate the "Catholic ruling class". The game went beyond the choices of individuals: even on the basis of a religious interpretation of the modern crisis (according to which the difficulties in which societies struggled originated from their turning away from God), the awareness prevailed among Catholic intellectuals that the era of a "sacred Christianity" was over and that the laity had to give a testimony able to ferment from within the "mass".

The opposition that emerged within the ecclesiastical structure was added to the constant vigilance carried out by the fascist regime over the leaders of the Catholic Graduates, obstacles that at least in its initial stages, held back the new movement, which in any case, to reassure political and religious authorities, was closely included in the organizational framework of Catholic Action. To observe with circumspection the first steps, there were those circles of Catholicism that considered excessive the autonomy of action and thought that this new group of laity was looking for. It was not only sectors of the Roman Curia that opposed the project by Montini, Righetti and Gotelli. A certain adversity was expressed by that part of the national leaders of the Catholic Action (in particular, Luigi Gedda and Armida Barelli, presidents of the youthful branches) who aimed at an organizational centralization in view of a greater unity of action of the laity and at the strengthening of the role of the Catholic Action within the fascist Italy: the objective of such tendencies was to control more closely the activity of the branches of the association and, in parallel, to integrate more extensively the ecclesiastical institutions and the Catholic laity in the national political life. At the same time, Father Agostino Gemelli's project of Catholic opposition to the secular State and of the formation of the new ruling classes, which had its most articulated realization in the Catholic University, found in the initiative of the Graduates a problematic concurrent force that addressed itself to the same social circles and above all was able to develop those Catholic ferments in search of a confrontation that was not antagonistic, but however competitive, with "modernity".

Subjected to the religious perspective indicated by the Catholic Graduates, there was also a political and cultural choice that attempted to maintain a certain distinction from Fascism. The public voices of opposition to the fascist regime were extinguished in Italy, towards which - especially after the conquest of Ethiopia, the Spanish War and the proclamation of the empire in 1936 - the majority consent of the Italians and the Church was now close; the reference to Christian universalism and to the unity of Catholics remained in the Catholic Graduates (and to a less clear extent in the FUCI), which should have taken place beyond political differences. Also through the reading and the diffusion of the reflections coming from abroad, in particular from France and Germany, the Catholic Graduates envisaged the realization of a "Christian order" which, in its indeterminacy, made it possible not to follow the identification between the Fascist State and the Catholic State, hypothesized and practiced by authoritative sectors of the Church. They were those of the Graduates, references and reflections that intended to

attenuate the ideological and national contrasts and had their immediate translation in the work of enhancing the role of the professions in the construction of society.

Despite the insistence on the themes of morality and the spirituality of the professions (or, perhaps, precisely through the persistence of these advances), Montini posed a crucial question that overcame the albeit significant problem of the possibilities of action of Catholics in a totalitarian system. Although in the movement of graduates there were tendencies that supported the need for a greater incidence of Catholic intellectuals in the national culture and intended to condition Fascism from within, Montini with Righetti and Gotelli convincingly supported the efforts for an autonomous cultural reflection, to avoid sectoral category specialism and open Catholics to a wide-ranging reflection.

The complexity of the organization of modern society rather than an obstacle was considered a challenge posed to Christianity, which required forms and, above all, contents adapted to the scope and direction of the transformations emerging in Italy in the process of modernization. The choice to act in environments of life - as proposed by the intellectual movements of Catholic Action - required the strengthening of a religious experience that was both personal and communal, able to generate vital forms of Christianity because they were incarnated in the concrete places of daily experience. Timoroso, which remained unrealistic reflections and limited to the elite circles in which Montini had matured, supported the choice of the Catholic Graduates to involve other forces, through the national study conferences and the Social Weeks, and made possible, from 1936, the organization in the guest quarters of the Camaldolese of the annual Weeks of religious culture of the movement.

The consequences produced by the vision that Montini shared with the small group of Catholic intellectuals were both ecclesiological (in particular the redefinition of the relationship between clergy and laity), spiritual (the enhancement of the personal conscience of each individual member of the faithful), and political (Catholic associationism and the Church in general should not so much be the organizer of the presence of Catholics in the public arena as form the faithful with a view to their responsible inclusion in social life). These were issues that were not new to Catholicism in Italy either, but that appeared even more urgent at the end of the thirties, with the worsening of international tensions, the decomposition of the foundations of fascist power and, then, the outbreak of the Second World War. The cultural deepening and the demanding spiritual discipline proposed to intellectuals and professionals, if they avoided the open contention with Fascism, suggested, however, an alternative idea of society, an idea which was nourished during the "Montinian season" by a significant part of the future Catholic ruling class.

Montini's project", realistic and at the same time ambitious, in reality was not always consistently conducted, so much so that some realizations seem controversial and not a few were the rethinks and adaptations. The contrast exercised by influential sectors of Italian Catholicism, beginning with those present in Catholic Action itself and in the Catholic University, the difficult political circumstances in which the group around Montini acted and the desire not to depart clearly from the wavering Vatican strategy towards the fascist government made the experience of the Graduates at times incongruous with the imagined objective, that is to form the consciences of believers to grow in Italy a response to the crisis of the mature Christian laity.

Culture as service remains the most enduring legacy in Catholicism of that intense season of commitment. Montini, often isolated, but never alone in this work of renewal of the Church, attempted a response to the crisis of Christianity in years particularly tormented for Italian society. The different results of the choices made after the war by many members of the Catholic ruling class who had had a certain point of reference in the priest from Brescia show how Montini's "intellectual lesson" had spread, far beyond the confines of Catholicism, thought and actions able to accompany the changes that in the second post-war period irremediably modified the profile of Italian society.