

How Berlinguer proposes to end his country's woes

An Italian Communist Encyclical

James V. Schall

We should add that the actual Italian crisis is a part of and a moment in a crisis which is so profound that it strikes all the lands with capitalist regimes and which roots itself in what we have not hesitated to define as a new phase in the history of the world.

Enrico Berlinguer

The fate of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) is instructive beyond the borders of Italy. Its relation to democracy and religion may yet provide a pattern for a number of other countries.

As a result of the June regional and administrative elections in Italy the Communist Party vote rose 5.5 per cent since the 1972 General Elections. In fact, this was a greater increase in party strength than during all the previous two decades. This puts the Italian Communist Party practically on a par with the Christian Democrats (D.C.), while it gives the PCI control of most of the major cities and regions in Italy.

Interpretations of why the Communists have gained strength in spite of the Portuguese example are legion. For some it is merely a psychological quirk that incites the Italians to vote extremes when they think something is wrong. For others it is the so-called corruption in the Christian Democratic and Socialist parties as contrasted with the supposed clean bill the Marxists present. A London *Times* editorial of June 18 probably summed it up as well as any:

Whatever foreigners may think, Italians are no longer frightened by their home-grown communists, whose condemnation of Senhor Cunhal's behaviour in Portugal evidently carries conviction. By their vote on Sunday (June 15), the election may be said to have served notice that they will not flinch from

propelling the communists into power if the Christian Democrats are unable or unwilling to change their spots.

This interpretation is quite common in Italy and in Europe, the old notion that signs of political corruption aid the Marxists, who are somehow exempt from the sins of our lot and somehow deserve their reward.

My own view tends to be a bit more cynical. I believe the Italians are geniuses at getting on the winning side. From Rome it begins very much to look as if there is no sense in taunting the next conqueror. Far better to create your own political space so that the grim realities of Russia or Eastern Europe or Vietnam will be avoided. If we must have fascism, the Italian variety is the mildest, so if we must have Marxism, Mr. Berlinguer's heresy seems the best. In all of the last four major wars in Europe the Italians began on the losing side and switched to the winning side. Alexander Solzhenitsyn maintains that World War III is already fought and lost by the West. My feeling is that instead of frightening the Italians into a more democratic stance, the grim Portuguese example had the opposite effect of making the best deal possible with the new age.

How the Italian Communists see themselves is, then, of some moment. Back in March the Fourteenth Italian Communist Party Congress was held in Rome. It was at this meeting that the strategy of the Party to gain actual power or a share in it was publically set forth. In the light of the subsequent successes of the Party in the regional elections in June, and its probable effect on changes in government during the two years remaining before the next general election, it is well, I think, to take a look at how this party looks at Italy and the world, an analysis presented in Secretary Enrico Berlinguer's rather ponderous public address to the Congress.

Furthermore, in view of the international importance of the Italian Communist Party the long official dis-

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course is of more than passing importance, particularly because of the situations in Portugal, Spain, France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and all countries with significant Catholic percentages. In one sense this speech of Mr. Berlinguer is little less than a straightforward claim of Italian Communists for the intellectual leadership of world communism—a claim Italians have felt was unjustly denied to them ever since Gramsci and Togliatti.

In context, spirit, and length (about six full seven-column pages in the March 19 issue of the Party daily, *L'Unita*) the speech reads like nothing so much as a modern encyclical. Indeed, in their own way, the recent papal documents, especially *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931, the Christmas Addresses of Pius XII, *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in Terris*, *Populorum Progressio*, and *Octagesima Adveniens*, have already gone over pretty much the same ground—the need to reconcile a “faith” with liberty and democracy, the acceptance of democracy, the sharing of wealth, the reconstruction of the social and political orders, the importance of the poor and the Third World, national harmony, the need of international peace and the avoidance of nuclear war, the need for European unity, the accent on concrete results and not on ideological abstractions, the need to conciliate diverse groups, to respect the opinions of others, the stress on morality and honesty in government and society. There is also a rather pronounced triumphalism in Mr. Berlinguer, typified perhaps best by the March 18 headlines of *L'Unita* greeting national and foreign delegates—*La grande forza unitaria del PCI decisiva per la salvezza e il rinnovamento del Paese*. I do not, of course, wish to suggest that the erstwhile Communist Party secretary has plagiarized anything from his neighboring Roman sovereign, but when his address is compared to the encyclicals, the broad similarities in tone and content are striking.

Berlinguer begins his analysis globally—in an absolute system all bases have to be covered. He suggests that the capitalist world is everywhere in evident crisis—inflation, unemployment, pollution, energy, anxiety, the usual litany. This dire situation Berlinguer contrasts with the socialist world, which, not surprisingly, turns out to be doing quite nicely for itself, thank you. “The Concom countries have in general had from 1973 to 1974 a net increase in industrial production of 8.5%.” To be sure, on this rather narrow criterion, for the last twenty years we all should have become Japanese or German or Taiwanese, while currently we should wish to be Brazilians or Kuwaiti. But the lesson Mr. Berlinguer proceeds to draw from this prosperity of the East Europeans is interestingly an ethical one, a theme he constantly harps on. “It is almost universally recognized that there is a morally superior climate in these (socialist) countries, while capitalist societies are ever more struck by a decline of idealism and ethical val-

ues, of processes always more full of corruption and degradation.” Mr. Berlinguer obviously had not yet had occasion to read Mr. Solzhenitsyn’s comments, but this is still a marvelous ploy, with which he has a field day in his biting comments on the Christian Democrats, who have a quarter century of skeletons in their own closets. Indeed, the one weakness perhaps in Mr. Berlinguer’s whole approach is the danger that the instances of corruption may so completely discredit the D.C. that there could be no compromise with it. With supreme paradox, Mr. Berlinguer offers a moral hand to the D.C.

Berlinguer places Italy within the world context. He believes Italy has a special vocation to be a universal nation uniquely positioned to transcend the major divisions in the world—a place where communism and Christianity live together, where there is side by side industrialism and poverty, where the East meets the West, where Europe meets Africa. Mussolini had a somewhat similar vision, though this was not mentioned. But recalling the tradition of the Communist theoretician Antonio Gramsci (which based itself on Italian-humanist, Catholic, and Roman backgrounds) Berlinguer notes that Italians are the people most apt by their cultural background to see the problems of the whole human community, the ones most interested in peace and world unification. His approach is the familiar one of avoiding war and reorganizing the world so the poor nations are not exploited by the capitalists, among whom the Americans have a special place. He makes the Leninist jump from the proletariat of his own nation to those of the rest of the world, though this time the Italians are not exploiters but models to show how we should treat others. Even though the United States is the head capitalist and selfishly refuses to readjust its economy, still the Party Secretary seems to approve détente with Russia as a way to avoid war. Berlinguer does not want to leave NATO, but believes the policy of the two opposing blocs must be overcome. He sees Italian independence and influence as a vital necessity in this process of working through NATO to surpass the present bloc system.

Fascism, of course, is the main internal and external enemy. Berlinguer stands behind all efforts of the “masses” to change governments in Spain, Vietnam, Chile (he neglected Uganda). Internally, this means a policy of law and order that provides an adequate police, army, and law against violent groups of both the right (fascists) and left (significantly he did not call them Maoists but adventurists). Berlinguer has sought to identify his party squarely on the side of civil peace. This has cost him some ideological glamor, but in the Italian context it was a shrewd move. He is thus able to imply, probably with justice, that Communist participation in government would guarantee the suppression of any random political violence in Italy. He also promises a thorough cleaning up of civil corruption and scandal. This makes a tempting package. And so far the only response to Berlinguer is not that what he

maintains would probably not come about, but that one cannot be sure what else would come along that perhaps Berlinguer could not control.

The suggestion that he is not his own man—the Republican Party Congress in Genoa was worried on this point—brings an obvious pain in Berlinguer's already pained expression. He seems exasperated that he cannot simply be taken at his word. Berlinguer recounts again and again his record, his known agony over Czechoslovakia, his loyalty to democracy, albeit to a very powerful form of government. And he seems to realize deep down what his critics worry about. *He* may be trustworthy enough, but what about those good-time companions who came trooping to his congress from all over? He is less than clear on all this.

For this reason Berlinguer attempts to spell out his plans down to the fine particulars. He takes on a kind of Hegelian rhetoric to talk about the "objective situation" that determines and influences his thinking. By implication Berlinguer rejects the subtle charges of his critics who have read Marxist literature and who have seen how Marxists once in power operate. He maintains that Italy must be judged by Italy, not by Russia or Czechoslovakia, that Italian Communists must be judged only by what they themselves propose in the concrete situation. On this basis he can retain his honor and his word.

The main interest in the Fourteenth Congress and its aftermath is Berlinguer's by now well-known proposal for the historic compromise. In Italian terms this means an agreement between the two great political groupings that have dominated the scene and the voting for the past twenty-five years. Post-World War II Italian politics have been designed structurally to keep both fascists and Communists, principally the latter, out of power. It has successfully done this through a multiparty electoral parliamentary system that allows the so-called center parties to maintain a majority. The Socialists, the Liberals, the Republicans, and the Christian Democrats have thus been able to deny on the national level (though less and less on the local level) the Communist Party a share in the rule of the nation. Mr. Berlinguer, following a hint from Togliatti years ago, has decided that any recombination of the present party system is bankrupt and unable in any case to meet the scope of Italy's present crisis. He must, therefore, make the present situation appear so serious that all grounds of comparison are eliminated. He thus wants in the long run to propose something really new that would strike presumably at the heart of the problem. This is an alliance between the two largest parties, long at loggerheads, to gain a vast national-safety alliance on a plan for common action, a proposal not unlike that Americans used to form under the heading of bipartisan foreign policy.

Berlinguer seems to have arrived at this notion from the results of the Allende experience in Chile. The latest coup in Chile seemed to argue that a Catholic

nation cannot be taken over either by force or election by a minority Communist party, even if that party is fairly large. Since by definition he rejects the Cuban model, this means that a social agreement must be made that would preclude the almost certain rightist reaction. This is also a rejection of the classic popular front thesis common to the French left, which sees the way to power through cooperation with other left parties, especially the socialists. The current falling out of the French Socialists and Communists added strength to Berlinguer's analysis. What he offers to the Catholic party is also of interest. He knows that the D.C. is in deep electoral trouble, as the last three elections have demonstrated. He knows further that there is a strong current of leftist thinking in Catholic union and university circles. But he is not bent on splitting the Catholics. What he wants is rather a precise cooperation and planning on specific national issues that would be backed up by the substantial votes of a great majority. In this context he would offer a reworking of the Vatican-Italian Concordat on generous terms. Further, he could allow the D.C. the major cabinet posts. He could allow space for the D.C. quietly to clean out its own house and introduce badly needed new faces. The Italians are tired of the same old faces, the same old party formulas. This is Berlinguer's ace in the hole.

But Berlinguer insists he is talking politically, not religiously. He sharply distinguishes religious faith from membership in the D.C. He has read what Vatican II said about religious freedom and interprets it as any other American or European liberal might:

...We affirm the principle of the lay state (also in the socialist state which we wish to construct), that is, a state which is not able to identify itself with a single party or a particular ideological or political conception. Nor should this state give privilege to one particular religious faith or church or current culture at the expense of the others, but it should assure the fundamental conditions for a free material, intellectual, and moral development of every person and of the diverse social formations in which this personality is expressed.

Mr. Berlinguer insists that religious faith is a valuable thing. This, of course, is itself of profound significance. Religion is given a legitimacy in Italian Marxism. This is why the Italian Marxists feel they are better positioned to be a model for the future of socialism than, say, Russia or even China. The world is full of religious people who seek a civil order to live with and in. If communism sets itself against such good and sincere people, it would only invite struggle, as the Italians have clearly experienced. The better way is to cooperate, comprehend. Chile proved that alternate paths were failures. The recent lesson from Portugal, to be sure, may be quite different. Could it

be that the fastest way to Marxism in Catholic countries is not via the parties or the unions but through the army and religion? This would force some cold new thinking in Party headquarters along the via delle Botteghe Oscure.

What is significant in Mr. Berlinguer's speech, in retrospect, is its audacity. From the Communist side it clearly proclaimed national independence from outside (notably Russian) control. And ever since at least *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931 Catholics have been wondering if some practical compromise with socialism were not feasible. John XXIII later, in the early 1960's, made this seem even likely with his effort to account for the historical changes within Marxism. Berlinguer's emphasis on patient, objective, critical attention to concrete shifts in an ideology must owe much to John. But the present initiative comes from the Communist side. It has rather embarrassed the D.C., frightened the other parties, and raised eyebrows in Marxist circles throughout the world. Whether it could work within the definite limits set forth remains to be seen and tested. It is a gamble, perhaps more for Berlinguer than the D.C., since its failure would once and for all stigmatize Marxism as intolerably totalitarian even when it does not want to be. The persistent, effective suppression of intellectual and religious freedom in the Soviet Union, China, Eastern Europe, and now in Yugoslavia with the silencing of *Praxis* is a sober reminder of the present risks. We read Berlinguer:

The guarantee of our attachment to liberty and the democratic process—an attachment which is not just of this or that Communist, of this or that person, but of the entire Italian Communist Party—rests essentially on what we have actually done and are doing. But it depends also on two other things: on the existence of autonomy; and, above all, on the political consciousness of citizens and their attachment to liberty.

Dare the Italians take a chance? There is nothing in the Marxist record that would seem to allow them to do so. Yet, as I have suggested, I believe the terms of discourse are now different—the pragmatic Italians may no longer see the question as one of preserving liberty but of getting on the winning side on a world scale in the best possible terms. Liberty may no longer be the relevant criterion.

There is one further caveat which probably not even Mr. Berlinguer anticipated. Let me cite an article, "St. Peter's Troubled Détente," in *The Economist* of July 5:

As Mr. Henry Kissinger has learnt through his own attempts at working out a détente with Russia, in any such détente both sides must be pretty evenly balanced and each must be able to deliver what has been agreed. The Catholic Church has already a rather weak hand and is rapidly losing strength; ever fewer people are going to church even in the tradi-

tionally Catholic countries of southern Europe and Latin America. Unlike western governments, it cannot impose military or economic sanctions. Besides—and this is perhaps even more important—it is having to cope with revolutionary tendencies from within that are getting steadily stronger in Italy, Spain, Portugal, and various Latin American countries....But how can Catholic revolutionaries be fought when the Church has effectively disarmed itself against communism in recent years?...

But if the 'progressive' tendency gains even more ground inside the Church, the communist governments of eastern Europe may wonder why they should negotiate with a partner so manifestly weak. Why make concessions which may later prove to have been unnecessary? This skepticism about the validity of the Catholic Church as a worthwhile partner in a religious détente with the communist world means that no serious concessions from the communist side will be forthcoming for quite a while yet—certainly not during Pope Paul's lifetime.

This suggests that Mr. Berlinguer's real problem may well be the weakness of the Catholic Church in Italy, not its strength. Certainly it seems true that there is no longer much difficulty in convincing young Catholics to vote Marxist. Mr. Berlinguer may well be able to get all he wants without compromising anything.

The final remark I should like to make about Mr. Berlinguer's "encyclical" concerns its worldview. Berlinguer, like all Marxists, is always *in lotta*, struggling. There are clearly defined enemies. But the major portion of the nation and humankind are members of the revered *classe operaia*. The problems of the world are thus reduced to a few bourgeois types, to fascists, to imperialists, none of whom in the nature of things are many. The violent ones, the corrupt ones, are few and can be controlled by the Marxist system, which, judging from the lack of criticism of it in Berlinguer's speech, must be doing just fine. The world can be at peace. People can be "companions." The wondrous thing humans can work for is this complete cosmic order that alone seems to give meaning to individual persons and political acts. The ethic and the morals are all derived from this perspective; even religion is mostly praised because it now is recognized as a positive contributor.

The Jesuit General Congregation closed in Rome about a week before the Communist Party Congress began. One of the most controverted, or at least most sensitive, issues of this Congregation was a proposal to discuss changing the Society's fourth vow, obedience to the Holy Father, a change the said Holy Father apparently let the assembled fathers know in no uncertain terms he did not want. Following the close of the

Congregation Pedro Arrupe held a press conference to explain the major issues involved in the Congregation. After he had evidently spoken at some length on what were problems mainly of internal Jesuit structure and practice, a reporter from (I believe) *L'Unita* itself rose and respectfully inquired: "But Father General, what do all these small points of organization have to do with the great problems of the world, with the poor, the sick, war, injustice, peace?"

This inquiry, its spirit in retrospect, strikes me now as elucidating the greatest weakness in Mr. Berlinguer's document and analysis. For it is mainly concerned with the "great" problems, even when it professes to be most concrete and detailed. Nothing is held out except this national and international social order. All complexities of the person, of destiny and meaning, are found locked within these narrow Marxist elaborations. The ordinary human being who exists is told that his or her reality—his or her ills and derangements—is all due to a deformity in the public order. Humans have liberty without interiority. Hope is reduced to rearrangement. There seems nothing more transcendent than international peace and brotherhood, perhaps a goal worthy enough, yet so vague, so tenuous. The vision, in other words, is so vast that it does not deal with anyone who ever lived. There is religion with no religious dimension.

This is close to what bothers me about the vision of this surely sincere man. There is no mystical or transcendent sense to it, only morals. There is nothing to break through the politics and economics to the human person. We live in an age that no longer much believes in the initial absoluteness, hence the destiny, of each person, no matter what that person's social condition. We end up, not surprisingly, in believing only in social conditions.

In the end I found that Mr. Berlinguer, for all his far-ranging intelligence, depressed me. By chance, I fortunately came across two small items that seemed to set things back in place—one a letter from a theologian friend, the other an old Peanuts cartoon. My friend wrote:

I spent the morning at a college meeting defending

theology's place in the core curriculum. Sometimes I begin to think the Catholic college scene is mad.... Anyway, I lost my temper and probably made some enemies and certainly blew my "self-contained woman" image. And I didn't care. The very idea of the humanities is under attack as students scramble to prepare for a job rather than a life, and professors destroy their own universities by running madly with them. Newman, we need you!

Enough of that. I was so angry that I went straight from school to a florist and bought a bunch of tulips to remind me of all the beautiful things that are....

Schroeder is, in my next instance, shown contemplating a rack of classical recordings, one of which he buys with a pleased look on his face. On the way home he encounters Lucy, who asks: "What's that, Schroeder?" "This is a new recording of Brahms' Fourth Symphony." Lucy, puzzled, inquires: "What are you going to do with it?" "I'm going to take it home, and listen to it." Lucy begins to tap on the sidewalk: "You mean you're going to dance to it?" "No, I'm just going to listen to it." Finally, perplexed and a bit angry, Lucy shouts: "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

It was these two transcendent things I found missing in Mr. Berlinguer's world—the beauty and the listening that have little to do with social or worldly problems. This lack makes me doubt, not Mr. Berlinguer's honesty, but the completeness of his complete world. Italians are a most unsentimental people, as Peter Nichols said in his recent book. They do not deceive themselves about where power more and more lies today. Nevertheless, we need a world, ultimately, safe also for the ridiculous and for the anger that is mindful of beautiful things. If there is a struggle for the heart and mind of man going on today—and there is—it may well be centering on Italy, on whether beauty, ridiculousness, and things for their own sakes (as Aristotle called them) are allowed to continue in our civilization.