

Politics and the Vatican

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The hopes for a diminution of the "Italian factor" in the Vatican's concerns seem destined to founder. Despite new attitudes that emerged at the time of the Vatican Council, older patterns persist and impose themselves.

When the Socialists entered into a coalition with the (Catholic) Christian Democrats in 1962, it looked as if the Vatican would gradually reduce its links with Italian politics. This prospect would have been consistent with the encouragement the Vatican Council, just under way in 1962, gave to Catholics to collaborate with others in the building of the terrestrial city. Consistent also with Pope John's alleged remark: "Italy should be no more important to the Vatican than the Philippines."

These incidents suggested that the unfortunate effects of the unification of Italy against the papacy were at last being sloughed aside. The result of that clash with history has been that even though the Vatican has adopted some of the worst aspects of Italian government, its overall attitudes are frequently tinged by resentment against the liberal Italy that seized the Papal States. More specifically, the Vatican long ago became accustomed to controlling the Catholic vote, and it never renounced this right. But at the beginning of the 1960's the stage seemed set for the Vatican to end its tutelage. And it seemed then that it was disposed to withdraw gracefully from the field of victory.

It is necessary to go back just over a century to understand how the Church rebounded from its defeat in 1870 to what must be termed a victory. Only then will we be able to understand why, following World War II, its political success carried the seeds of its present problems. After the Papal States were invaded, the Pope made himself a prisoner in the Apostolic Palace, the Savoy king moved from Turin to Rome, where Parliament was dominated by liberals and anticlericals disapproved of by the Church, and the Holy See instructed Catholics not to vote.

Mussolini healed the rift between the Church and State

when he settled the "Roman question" with the Lateran pacts. He was confident he could control the Church's political influence. An earlier Italian prime minister and foreign minister, Sidney Sonnino, had been shrewder when he wrote that Italy should come to a lasting agreement with the Vatican only when it was in less Italian, more international, hands. Within twenty years of the Lateran pacts Mussolini was dead, fascism had been swept aside, and with it the Savoy kingdom. The two new political forces were the Catholics (Christian Democrats) and the Communists. It is often overlooked that the political presence of Catholics in united Italy made itself felt only after World War II. In the 1948 elections the Church went in, boots and all, to block the Communists and help the Christian Democrats begin their uninterrupted rule with various coalition partners.

Came Pope John and the blessing for the Christian Democrats to accept as coalition partners the Marxist Socialist party. The political calculation was neat: A center-left coalition introducing needed social reforms would erode Communist support. The Vatican reduced its links with the Christian Democrats. It was predicted it would avoid further myopic gaffes, such as printing on the front page of *L'Osservatore Romano*, just before John Kennedy faced his first Presidential election, a series of mandatory principles for Catholic politicians, which looked to be universal verities, but which were intended to apply only to the Italian situation.

But things have not turned out as hoped. Once again the Vatican is following the Italian situation anxiously, and seems to feel itself almost as besieged as it was when King Victor Emmanuel's troops entered Rome in 1943. Vatican withdrawal from Italian affairs was so partial and so brief that some outside observers can be excused for being unaware of it.

What went wrong? When the Christian Democrat-Socialist coalition did not introduce promised social reforms, the Communist vote increased. At the same time, demands for divorce and abortion gained unexpected momentum. The Church once again was on the defensive and disconcerted by the behavior of "Catholic" Italy. The Vatican should have recognized

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that thirty years in power is too long for any party. Italy has suffered from its de facto single-party system. Christian Democrats, like many other politicians, have not fulfilled their promises or their expectations. Although skilled in maintaining power, they have not grappled convincingly with society's problems.

The Communist success is a measure of their failure. The claim of the Christian Democrats was that a juster society could be built without the Communists, but they have not provided persuasive evidence. Italy did achieve the difficult transition from a dictatorship to a democracy, but it has been marking time for the past twenty years. There are still many Fascist provisions in its penal code; hospitals are still inadequate; universities are overcrowded; pensioners often have to wait more than a year after retirement before receiving payments; politicians still get away with incomprehensible gobbledegook. Persisting injustices go some way to explain the success of the Communists. On the national scene they are lily-whites, the uncorrupted opposition in a regime where scandals are frequent. Moreover, they still have a legitimacy deriving from a lion's share in the Resistance movement. Political legitimacy in postwar Italy is proportionate to antifascism, and on this scale the Communists come out on top. Communists justify their attempts to reach an agreement with the Catholic party because the latter also participated in the Resistance; they also are an antifascist mass movement.

The Communists have consistently bent over backward to reach an understanding with the Church. The most unnerving aspect of the Communist presence, from the Church's point of view, is that the Communists have acquired many of the Church's former characteristics. Even when the anticlericals and liberals were running the country, the Church could still claim, with some reason, that it had its finger on the people's pulse. No matter what the powerful of the land might say, it retained its influence over the majority of Italians, because it knew how to get through to them. Now the Communists are the champions of the poor, demanding more hospital beds, more playing space for children, more cheap housing, more public transport, an end to featherbedding.

Communists have acquired a dab hand at ritual, while the Church is seeking new forms. From the funeral of Palmiro Togliatti, the postwar Communist leader, to union demonstrations the Communists manage to dramatize their beliefs effectively. Feast days and processions used to be eagerly anticipated in small Italian centers, but now there are the feasts of the Communist daily *L'Unità*. There are over five thousand of these a year, up and down the peninsula, and they comprise a circuit that can attract such top singers as Charles Aznavour. Some songs, a rousing speech, pork rolls for all, and who needs processions? The Church has the unsettling feeling that, with the Communists, it is faced with another church that draws on the sources of its own strength. But while the Communists are well-disciplined, the formerly "monolithic" Church is plagued by internal dissent, by Christians-for-socialism, who are widespread in Italy. They criticize the Church

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with Marxist criteria. Often their starting point is impatience with alleged collusion between the Church and the Christian Democrats.

People abandoning the certainties of Catholicism for those of Marxism were not unknown in the past. What is new is Catholics using Marxist categories and terminology while claiming that these are proof they have a more profound faith. Vatican concern with Communist success, then, is partly due to the similarities between Communists and Catholics and, even more, because of Catholics who espouse Marxism.

If these were not troubles enough, there has been a resurgence of "lay" initiatives, as they are called in the unfortunate but revealing Italian political terminology. The Socialists, Republicans, and Liberals, coalition partners of the Christian Democrats, have elements of anticlericalism, libertarianism, and individualism that brought them into conflict with Catholics in the past. However, as minor coalition partners these parties were careful to propose government programs that did not upset the political applecart. But private members' bills proposed by a Socialist and a Liberal resulted in divorce legislation in 1970. This was reconfirmed in the 1974 referendum, and now a referendum on abortion is due later this year unless forestalled by legislation or general elections.

This has been a sudden acceleration of history. Few expected the divorce bill to pass or be reconfirmed in the referendum with a 59 per cent favorable vote. No one imagined that the depenalization of abortion would become a live issue in Italy so quickly. Pope Paul spoke of a "vulnus" to the Concordat when divorce legislation was proposed. From Australia he spoke of his "great sorrow" at Parliament's decision when the legislation was approved at the end of 1970. It was the first time the Italian Parliament had voted for a measure the Pope has repeatedly attacked. The Vatican gave somewhat half-hearted support to the campaign to abrogate the divorce law, attacking in characteristically snide fashion those Catholics who pointed out that a civil law was being tested, not a sacrament. The vote was a heavy defeat for the Vatican: It showed it was no longer keeping abreast of a rapidly changing society. In January the permanent Council of the Italian Bishops' Conference pointed out their inadequacies. The Council not only reiterated that Catholics cannot be Marxists, but also condemned the lay parties.

That leaves only the Christian Democrats as worthy of the Catholic electors' support. It is rather like the priest in an Italian film who says from the pulpit that he will refrain from talk about parties and confines himself to

recommending that the faithful vote for a party that is both Democratic and Christian.

The bishops seemed to be saying that there is a distinctive Catholic social doctrine. But even if there is, parties must be judged on program and performance, not on their label. The bishops conceded the Communists have laudable aspirations, but many of them are unhappy about the treatment of the Catholic presence in education and social welfare in the Communist-administered regions of central and north Italy. They probably calculated that silence would be taken as acknowledgment of the inevitability of continued Communist advances, whereas it is likely that a proportion of their increased support last June was due to a swing protest vote. The bishops would claim to be talking solely at the level of principles, but it is difficult to sustain this when the bishops have not slammed the abuses of power of the Catholic parties.

What has all this to do with the Church's world headquarters? Hasn't there been a slide from talking about the Vatican to talking about the Italian bishops? A slide there has been, because the twain are intermingled. The Bishop of Rome is Pope. He lives in the Vatican, in the Vatican city-state, but his cathedral is not St. Peter's, it is St. John Lateran, outside of which the Communists always hold their mass rallies. Although he has a vicar, he is Bishop of Rome and, what is more, Primate of Italy.

The Italian Bishops' Conference, unlike others, does not elect its president. Its president must be the Bishop of Rome. But as the Pope's direct involvement in Italian affairs would be an embarrassment, he appoints the president of the Episcopal Conference. He can never have a high profile. The president at the moment is Cardinal Antonio Poma, Archbishop of Bologna. The Church's central bureaucracy, the Roman Curia, has been internationalized since the Vatican Council, but the internationalization stops at the Secretariat of State. The Secretary of State, Cardinal Jean Villot, who is French, is little more than a figurehead. Almost 80 per cent of the Secretariat staff is Italian, and sometimes it seems that 80 per cent of their time is devoted to the 7 per cent of the Catholic world that is Italy.

Pope Paul explicitly backed the recent statement of the Council of the Italian Bishops' Conference. But even when this ratification is not given, the conference itself is rarely free from nudges from Higher Authorities when it touches sensitive issues. Bishops who attended the Vatican Council or subsequent Synods will be familiar with this remote control, the hint that Big Brother is always watching. One result is that the Vatican blames the bishops, and the bishops blame the Vatican when the vote is not delivered.

The Vatican's relations with the Christian Democrats, who claim to be a party of Catholics rather than a Catholic party, are perhaps even more ambiguous and unsatisfactory. Pope Paul's father was a parliamentarian of the Popular Party, the predecessor of the Christian Democrats, and successfully led a campaign against the introduction of divorce. Pope Paul knew many of the older Christian Democrat leaders when he was a chaplain

for student Catholic Action groups at the University of Rome.

Paul's successor as Under Secretary of State, Cardinal Angelo Dell'Acqua, had a close and easy relationship with many Christian Democrats, but his successor, Archbishop Giovanni Benelli, Paul's righthand man, lacks this intimate knowledge. The Vatican did loosen its links with the party and lost control of some of its flanking organizations such as the powerful workers' movement, ACLI, which was important in preventing the emergence of one huge Communist-led labor union after the war. Now it tends to have the worst of both worlds: It is still identified with the party to a large extent, but is unable to influence it to a great degree.

Although the postwar Christian Democrat leader De Gasperi battled with some success against Pius XII for the autonomy of the party, Vatican support for one Christian Democratic leader rather than another used to be crucial. A piquant example of a reaction to Vatican influence came during a presidential election. At a certain point it seemed that Amintore Fanfani, who was not the official Christian Democrat candidate, could be elected with Communist support. The Vatican then spoke out for party unity, and Fanfani withdrew. When Senator Ludovico Montini, the Pope's elder brother, voted the following day, Communist deputies called out to him, "Tell your brother to stop voting."

Nowadays Vatican signals are quite often ignored by the Christian Democrats, but Vatican support remains crucial for the success of a second Catholic party, which is recurrently proposed. The Vatican can use this power to threaten the Christian Democrats or restrain the dissatisfied. This seems to have happened since last June, as the Vatican counts evidently on a renovation of the Christian Democrats. Probably it would consider its interventions a holding operation while this is taking place both in the party and in society. But will it ever take place in a way the Vatican will consider satisfactory?

The renovation should be spurred by a convention late in 1976 of the whole Italian Church, almost a national pastoral council, on Evangelization and Development. But before that, in June, there may be a donnybrook over the Rome municipal elections, for the Christian Democrats could well lose control of the city for the first time to the opposition spearheaded by anticlerical Radicals.

Rather than achieving greater detachment from Italian affairs, the Vatican seems to be plunging once more into the fray. The involvement could discredit the Vatican internationally, since if it continues to misjudge Italian affairs, its assessments of wider developments will carry progressively less weight.

Involvement in Italian affairs is a prize temptation for Italian popes. It seems unlikely that the Vatican will ever transfer to Manila or elsewhere, as the German theologian Karl Rahner suggested. Would a non-Italian pope be more detached? Perhaps. But interplay with Italian affairs is inevitable for the Bishop of Rome. Anyway, a non-Italian pope may not be elected before the next millennium. The Italian factor is likely to bulk large in Church affairs at least for the remainder of this one.