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Italian Catholics and the Social Question

The Emergence of a Social Consciousness and Social
Action Amongst Conservative Catholics in late 19th
Century Italy

by

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Abstract

The *Opera dei Congressi e dei comitati cattolici in Italia* was established in 1874 by conservative Catholics, known as the *intransigenti*, as a means of drawing together the numerous Catholic societies and individual Catholics into a united Catholic movement to oppose the anticlerical actions of the new Italian State and push back the increasing secularisation of Italian society. The organisation was to exist for 30 years during which time it held 19 national congresses, the proceedings of which form the basis of this study. Through their efforts to reassert the influence of Catholicism in Italian society, these Catholics were increasingly brought to confront the severe contemporary social problems: the evident suffering and exploitation of many workers and peasants, and their growing resistance and political agitation which were arising from the development of capitalism combined with the continuing impact of semi-feudal residues and pressures from an increasing population and the policies adopted by the governments of the late 1800s. These problems were generally referred to as the social question. The *intransigenti* attempted to deal with the social question at both a theoretical and practical level, trying to define their understanding of what composed a truly Catholic society and what was therefore unacceptable about contemporary Italian society, and involving themselves with the establishment of a network of institutions and associations through which they thought Catholic principles could be restored to what they believed to be their rightful place and the causes of social conflict and suffering removed or at least ameliorated. Major divisions were to emerge within the *Opera dei Congressi* over the most effective response, from a Catholic viewpoint, to the social question, and the degree of importance socio-economic issues should have within the organisation. These divisions, together with changing papal policies, were ultimately to lead to the dissolution of the organisation. The history of the *Opera dei Congressi*, however, reveals the emergence on the part of a growing number of devout Catholics, of a social consciousness, of an awareness that Catholics, both lay and clerical, had a moral, spiritual and practical responsibility to grapple with the social question in a way that had effective results and, based on that social consciousness, the development of a small but significant network of institutions to implement Catholic social thinking. These Catholics saw that individual acts of charity were no longer sufficient but rather that questions of social justice were involved. Through their work, although it was often flawed and contradictory, they laid the basis for a Catholic social movement and new approaches to the problem of the Church's relationship to modern society.

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Abbreviations

A.C.S.	Archivio Centrale dello Stato
BASMCI	Bolletino dell'Archivio per la storia del movimento sociale cattolico in Italia
Federterra	La Federazione nazionale dei lavoratori della terra
Sem	Semestre

The congresses are cited in the footnotes according to their number

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Introduction

The role of the Church¹ and Catholicism in Italy was undercut and threatened in a fundamental manner by the unification of Italy, with its takeover of the Papal States and invasion of Rome, and the anticlerical policies of the new Italian State. The response from Catholics, both lay and clerical, was mixed. Some Catholics, including members of the hierarchy, described as liberal Catholics, supported the political transformation. These Catholics were ultimately caught between the defensive position adopted by the papacy and the anticlerical stance of the early governments of united Italy.

Conservative Catholics close to the Church reacted in a defensive yet active fashion. Through their actions these conservative Catholics, known as the *intransigenti*, were to create a militant movement to defend the centrality of the papacy, the Church and Christian values in Italian society.

Initial moves were made by the *intransigenti* during the 1860s to form a national organisation to implement these goals. Their attempts were unsuccessful due to Government laws and their fears that the Government would act against them. They tried again a few years later with the consequent establishment in 1874 of the *Opera dei Congressi e dei Comitati Cattolici in Italia*.² It was to exist for 30 years, during which time its level of activity varied considerably while its effectiveness in achieving its goals was frequently undermined by internal conflict. It was dissolved in 1904 by Pius X because of irreconcilable divisions between different factions of *intransigenti* and the implications of the organisation's situation for papal politics. Nevertheless, during its existence, the *Opera dei Congressi* came to comprise the main organisational forum of Catholicism, outside the Church itself, apart from the more directly charitable organisations such as the Conferences of St Vincent de Paul and the various pious associations. Although the *intransigenti* always denied it, the *Opera dei Congressi* did play a political role, unifying Catholic opposition to the liberal-controlled State and providing a means of expressing that opposition outside the formal structures of the Church itself.

This thesis is concerned only peripherally with the political role of the *Opera dei Congressi*. Its central concern is with the social consciousness and action of the *intransigenti*. The organisation which embodied the ideas and aims of the *intransigenti* existed during a period of, not only considerable political change, but also of far-reaching social and economic transformations as the already harsh conditions of many

¹ For convenience the Catholic Church is referred to in this thesis as the Church.

² Hereafter referred to as the *Opera dei Congressi*.

of the urban workers and peasants were adversely affected by the increasing dominance of a capitalist mode of production in Italy and its acceleration by the new State. Amongst a number of the *intransigenti* there gradually emerged an awareness of the extent of the social problems developing in Italian society. Their understanding and approach to these problems was to have a major impact on the history of the *Opera dei Congressi*.

The *Opera dei Congressi* was a hierarchically organised body reflecting the hierarchical structure of the Church and of contemporary Italian society. Although excluded from national political power by the unification of Italy and the response of the Church, the *intransigenti* were predominantly members of the dominant class, being either members of the aristocracy or from professional ranks. This did change to a degree in later years when the direction of the *Opera dei Congressi* was under challenge from a younger generation of militant Catholics with more democratic ideas. The older *intransigenti* believed, however, that social and religious hierarchies were both natural and divinely inspired. The relationship of the *Opera dei Congressi* to the clergy was envisaged as one of lay subordination, in particular, of total obedience to the pope. Membership was not restricted to the laity as a substantial proportion of members were clerics. Members were chosen on a selective basis. They were either prominent Catholics or representatives of Catholic associations. Despite the emphasis on hierarchical principles and organisation the *intransigenti* regarded the *Opera dei Congressi* as a populist^(or popular) organisation, as a means by which the masses could be influenced and the secularisation of Italian society opposed.

The *Opera dei Congressi e dei Comitati Cattolici* had a dual focus as was reflected in its name: the national congresses held at varying intervals over its 30 year existence and a four-tiered committee structure following the structure of the Church and headed by a president. The national congresses brought together eminent Catholics and representatives of Catholic associations, providing an opportunity for mutual support and reinforcement of the *intransigenti*'s opposition to the liberal State and for the public display of Catholic fervour in the face of widespread anticlericalism. They were also the occasion on which proposals were made of practical means to implement the aims of the organisation. The material dealt with at the congresses was divided into five sections as they were called. The sections gradually assumed a permanent existence separate from the congresses with particular *intransigenti* responsible for the examination and study of issues belonging to their section and the presentation of reports and proposals for action to the congresses. Socio-economic material was the responsibility of the II Section. For some time this section was also responsible for

issues relating to charitable institutions and impulses, reflecting the traditional Catholic response to social problems, but this approach was gradually modified.

The *Opera dei Congressi* was directed by the *Comitato Generale Permanente* under which there were regional, diocesan and parish committees.³ The various committees were meant to represent the *Opera dei Congressi* throughout Italy, to draw ordinary Catholics into the organisation, to marshal support from them and to establish a well-disciplined grass roots structure through which Catholic values could be defended at a local level. The committee structure never matched the goal of the *intransigenti* of representation in every diocese and parish of Italy nor were all the committees active in any sense, but at its strongest, in the mid to late 1890s, the *Opera dei Congressi* was reasonably widespread and particularly active in parts of Northern Italy. Regional, diocesan and parish congresses were held by the appropriate committees but these were far more infrequent and sporadic than the national congresses. As with the Northern concentration of the committee structure, the more regular regional and diocesan congresses took place in the North. Initially members were encouraged to work to establish lay Catholic associations with specific aims such as workers' mutual aid societies, youth groups, women's associations and societies to promote Catholic education. Gradually the more hardline *intransigenti* moved to exercise control over autonomous lay Catholic associations and many of these organisations did pass into the orbit of the *Opera dei Congressi* although not without dissension.

While the committee structure and involvement of the *intransigenti* with associated groups formed a significant part of the history of the *Opera dei Congressi* this thesis is concerned primarily with the social and economic concerns of the *intransigenti* as they emerge in the proceedings of the national congresses, specifically the proceedings of the general assemblies of the congresses. Associated material such as proceedings from the meetings of the *Comitato Generale Permanente*, private sessions of the congresses, letters between prominent *intransigenti* and published articles written by *intransigenti* have been used to some extent but the focus is on the proceedings of the general assemblies. The selection of primary source material was partly due to the availability of source material and the need to restrict research to manageable levels. It was also shaped by the belief that the proceedings of the general assemblies of the congresses by themselves illuminate the emergence amongst the most conservative part of the Italian Catholic world of a more widespread social consciousness as Catholics faced the social problems then rampant in Italian society. Although the public nature of

³ Later in its history there was a *consiglio direttivo* which stood above the *Comitato Generale Permanente*.

the occasion influenced the approach taken to the material brought before congress members, nevertheless, the proceedings reveal clearly the work accomplished by the II Section in regard to socio-economic issues as well as giving an indication of the diverging paths being taken by various of the *intransigenti* in relation to these issues. The work done by the various committees and associations adhering to the *Opera dei Congressi* in regard to social problems is also reflected in the often extensive reports given to the congresses on regional and diocesan activity.

What then were the *intransigenti* dealing with in their statements and reports on social and economic issues? They were responding to what was loosely termed the social question which basically encompassed a constellation of social problems deriving from a pre-capitalist mode of production still prevalent in agriculture combined with limited industrial development and the increasing dominance of a capitalist mode of production both in agriculture and industry, as well as political action and opposition by workers and peasants to the worsening conditions they were experiencing as a result of this economic situation. Other factors exacerbating the conditions of urban workers and peasants included Government action to create an internal market and to open up the Italian economy to international competition, high taxation, and a severe shortage of employment opportunities both in agriculture and industry for the increasing population. Combined with these factors was the severe economic crisis which lasted from the late 1870s well into the 1890s. The *intransigenti* found themselves amidst a society experiencing appalling poverty, malnutrition, widespread unemployment and suffering, the answer to which many workers and peasants found in either temporary or permanent emigration. Others turned to the socialist movement which grew quickly in the late 1800s, threatening the existing social order. This concrete situation is outlined in some detail to compare and contrast the statements and actions of the *intransigenti*.

The *intransigenti* were far from comprising a united group, particularly when it came to social issues. While they held many positions in common they were deeply divided over the approaches that they should take to the changes occurring in Italy during the late 1800s and early 1900s and the purpose of the work of the *Opera dei Congressi*. The divisions deepened in later years as a younger generation began to agitate for a new approach. The diverging approaches split roughly into three groups: the hardline *intransigenti*, the *cristiano sociali* and later the Christian democrats. These groups were not totally clear-cut in the positions they adopted nor were they always in conflict with each other, but they were sufficiently so as to distinguish coherent trends and distinct approaches.

The hardline *intransigenti*, who controlled the direction of the *Opera dei Congressi* for most of its existence, always gave precedence to its role as defender of the Church and the papacy with its socio-economic activity in a subordinate role. The most prominent amongst these *intransigenti* was Paganuzzi, a conservative Venetian lawyer who dominated the *Opera dei Congressi* for much of its existence and held the presidency from 1889 to 1902. The *cristiano sociali*, on the other hand, believed that socio-economic issues needed to be given far greater prominence because of the seriousness of the problems. These *intransigenti* were clustered around the II Section. Few in number in the early years, the *cristiano sociali* increased, although not greatly, in the 1890s when the socio-economic issues became overwhelmingly important. It was also the work of these *intransigenti* which influenced the direction taken by the younger generation of militant Catholics. The latter can be grouped together under the label Christian democrats although the differences between them were often great. They saw the need to build up a mass movement which was both social and political and they did not shy away from the political implications of their activities. They played a pivotal role in the disbanding of the *Opera dei Congressi*, causing deep divisions within the organisation and fighting for its reform along democratic lines. Their action was broadly based on democratic values. Hints of these lines and ideas, of grass roots activity and of the Catholics going to the masses can be found in the work of the II Section although the *cristiano sociali* always followed an essentially paternalistic line. The Christian democrats do not emerge all that often in the proceedings of the general assemblies of the congresses because attempts were made to avoid open conflict but the pressure on the *cristiano sociali* is obvious and even on some hardline *intransigenti* who paid lip service at least to the social question.

Discussion of social and economic issues came to occupy a significant proportion of time at the general assemblies of the congresses. Frequent reports were given on rural and urban conditions and there were a number of speeches touching on characteristics of the capitalist mode of production. These reports and speeches were generally of a condemnatory character and often gave strongly ideological explanations of social problems tracing them back to liberal and materialist theories, the French Revolution and beyond to the Reformation. The reports made by members of the II Section from an early date began to reflect an attempt to examine the social question in a more critical and detailed fashion than the ideological expositions although they often retreated into ideological explanations. The *cristiano sociali* regarded theoretical studies as crucial to understanding the scope of the problems involved in the social question. This view brought them into conflict with hardline *intransigenti* who wanted them to abandon this work in favour of organisational work around social issues. Hardline *intransigenti*

such as Paganuzzi failed to fully comprehend the issues with which the *cristiano sociali*, and later the Christian democrats, were grappling, instead taking an extremely narrow-minded view of the direction and purpose of the *Opera dei Congressi*. The *cristiano sociali* and Christian democrats, on the other hand, were responding to the social needs they saw around them and in the case of the Christian democrats, to the political implications of those needs. Nevertheless it was the hardline position which predominated during the 1890s causing some frustration amongst the more socially oriented *intransigenti*. The condemnations of capitalism and of the conditions of workers and peasants emanating from the congresses at times sounded as if they were being made by socialists, reflecting the existence of some common ground between Catholics and socialists although the challenge of socialism to the Church's influence over the masses was such that this common ground could hardly be acknowledged.

The studies of the II Section were also intended to form the basis for practical action focussed on a range of charitable, and later more distinctly socio-economic institutions which the *intransigenti* took up. This organisational work had the support of the hardline *intransigenti* although they saw its value more in terms of building an extensive and united Catholic movement in defence of the papacy and opposing the growth of the socialist movement than in terms of socio-economic assistance for and of itself. These *intransigenti* were suspicious of the tendency of these organisations to follow a relatively independent line and they were opposed to the development of Catholic peasant and worker groups which recognised class divisions and the inevitability of class conflict in disputes about working conditions. Opposition to socialism was also a strong motivation behind the organising activities of all the factions who were aware of the attraction to workers and peasants of socialist associations stressing as they did the interests of workers and peasants against those of the *padroni*. The *cristiano sociali* and the hardline *intransigenti*, however, worked from the premise that it was possible and necessary to re-establish close links of co-operation between the classes through Catholic socio-economic organisations composed of both *padroni* and workers. Their ideal was the medieval corporation although altered somewhat to suit the contemporary situation. The *cristiano sociali* gradually conceded that class-based organisations were more appealing to workers and peasants but they continued to maintain that inter-class organisations were the ideal institutions to resolve social problems. The Christian democrats, taking a more realistic position, slowly began to establish organisations to defend the rights of workers and peasants and it was from these activities that Catholic unions emerged. These developments were a challenge to the hierarchical and paternalistic views of the hardline *intransigenti* and, to some extent, the more moderate but still paternalist, views of the *cristiano sociali*. As to the strength of the Catholic

socio-economic movement, the major part of which was linked to the *Opera dei Congressi*, although it never corresponded to the strength of the socialist movement, a strong network was established in parts of Northern Italy and to a lesser extent elsewhere.

The major divisions over social issues that arose gradually within the militant lay Catholic movement as represented by the *Opera dei Congressi* emerged partly because questions about social justice could not be dealt with without addressing their political implications. The responses of the *intransigenti* were made more acute by the seriousness of the contemporary situation - the severe challenge both the capitalist processes of transformation and the widespread appeal of socialist and democratic ideas were posing to the established order. The *intransigenti* split along lines of a conservative, defensive position towards the existing power distribution, a more moderate position invoking ameliorative action but which was still largely conservative and a more radical position which involved a reassessment of the social, economic and political order in terms of a Christian perspective of social justice. The divisions also emerged from a different understanding of the implications of their Catholic faith, although the implications were both political and social. For both the *cristiano sociali* and most but not all the Christian democrats, the more primary concern came to be the reconciliation of their Catholic faith with the obvious injustices around them, and for them that reconciliation could only come through social action and studies.

The questions with which the various factions of the *intransigenti* were grappling have continued to trouble and divide the Catholic clergy and laity up to the present and the history of the *Opera dei Congressi* reflects the continuing, unresolved conflicts over issues of social justice and the responses that Catholics think should come from the Church itself. The activities and efforts of the *cristiano sociali* and the Christian democrats, in the end result, were directed at making the Church more relevant to the masses and more responsive to their needs. The *Opera dei Congressi* is an example of these tendencies emerging in an organisation closely tied to the Church and submissive to the directions of the Church hierarchy with clergy as well as laity as members. While the social doctrine of the Church strongly determined the direction taken by the II Section in particular, the *Opera dei Congressi* gives evidence of lay thought which was developing independently of the line laid down by the Church. In the late 19th century these processes were more advanced in other European countries than Italy but the work done by the *cristiano sociali* and the Christian democrats indicated that Italian Catholics were capable of developing along similar lines.

The social doctrine of the Church has only been considered here in regard to the major papal encyclicals and their influence on the social consciousness and action of the *intransigenti*. This is because it is such a huge and complex field of inquiry in itself but also because this thesis is concerned primarily with the emergence of social action and thought within an organisation closely linked to the Church but to some extent independent of its control. The fate of the *Opera dei Congressi*, its disbandment by the pope, indicated the authoritarian role the papacy believed should be exercised over lay action, particularly because such action carried strong political implications. The II Section was permitted to continue to operate independently but its action was to be closely controlled by the hierarchy.

The significance of the militant Catholic movement lies not only in the emergence of Catholic social thought and action in Italy but also in the fact that it is the background from which political Catholicism sprang. The emergence of the Christian Democratic Party in Italy can be traced back to the ferment of these years and to the *Opera dei Congressi* and the emergence of a lay party operating between the Church and society. Furthermore the same contradictions of conservatism and more radical concerns which were contained within the *Opera dei Congressi*, divided the modern Christian Democratic Party whether in its former shape of the *Partito Popolare* or of that of the existing Christian Democratic Party. There was conflict between the more conservative approach operating from the top down and a more democratic approach of reconquest of the masses through action amongst and with the masses.

The militant Catholic movement of the late 19th century has been examined in some detail by Italian historians but very little of this material is available in English. The period of existence of the *Opera dei Congressi* was, however, a crucial transitional one in the history of Italy, politically, economically and socially. The responses of the *intransigenti*, both intellectual and practical, to the impact of capitalist processes of transformation, offer an important perspective of those processes in a country in which Catholicism had and continues to play an important part. Moreover, the role the *intransigenti* played in relation to the social question and the forces they represented were not insignificant even if the strength of the *Opera dei Congressi* varied considerably throughout the country.

The approaches taken by historians to the *Opera dei Congressi* have varied. In general, different historians have emphasised different aspects of the organisation depending on their particular interest, persuasion, or purpose. Furthermore Italian historians, more so than those of English-speaking origin, more clearly reflect in their work their

political persuasions. The often conflicting views taken of the *Opera dei Congressi* derive partly from this different approach. However, that the *Opera dei Congressi* provides such a rich resource for historians also derives from the complexity of the organisation and its relationship to institutions such as the Church, to the State and the ways in which its members reflected and interacted with social, economic and political processes.

Prior to the late 1940s and more particularly the early 1950s the studies of the Catholic movement in Italy were limited both in terms of quantity and profundity of approach. Historians had generally approached the area from a liberal perspective, concentrating on the political role of the Catholic movement and of the *Opera dei Congressi* and treating a heterogeneous movement as if there were no divisions. In addition there were some studies by Catholic apologists. From the early 1950s there was a shift in approach which broadly began to re-evaluate the significance of the various currents of the Catholic world through the 19th and 20th centuries. In regard to the *Opera dei Congressi* research began to appear which reassessed the significance of the *intransigenti* and the relationship of the Catholic movement to Italian society in a more complex fashion than had occurred before. The shift was determined largely by the new political situation but also by factors such as changes in historiographical approaches as the old ones stressing political concerns were shown to be inadequate, and the increased availability of archival material.

Notable were the approaches taken in the studies that appeared from historians such as Fonzi, De Rosa, Gambasin, Scoppola and Candeloro, their positions ranging from Catholic apologist to Marxist.⁴ In the following decades there have been controversies and discussions over the studies of the 1950s and further research has appeared which has deepened the knowledge of the area. There has been continued discussion over the relative weight of the political and ideological, as opposed to the economic and social significance of the *intransigenti* and of the other currents of Catholics.⁵ More recently

⁴ G.Candeloro, *Il movimento cattolico in Italia*, 3rd Edition, Roma, 1972; A.Gambasin, *Il movimento sociale nell'Opera dei Congressi (1874-1904)*, Roma, 1958; G.De Rosa, *Storia politica dell'azione cattolica in Italia, L'Opera dei Congressi (1874-1904), Vol.1*, Bari, 1953; F. Fonzi, *Storia e storiografia dei movimenti cattolici in Italia*, Roma, 1976; P.Scoppola, *Orientamenti dell'8 recente storiografia sul movimento cattolico in Italia, Quaderni di cultura e storia sociale*, III, N.2, 1954, pp.94-108.

⁵ Fonzi, *Storia e storiografia*, op. cit., pp.87-117; P.Ballini, *A proposito di movimento cattolico e della genesi del blocco clerico-moderati, Studi storici*, 14(1973), N.3, pp.670-80; F.Mazzonis, *Ancora a proposito di movimento cattolico. Cristiano sociali e intransigenti, Studi storici*, 15(1974), N.1, pp.174-83; C.Giovannini, *Come si studia il movimento cattolico, Studi storici*, 14(1973), N.1, pp.140-6; P.Pecorari, *Un contributo al dibattito storiografico sui cattolici italiani dopo l'unità, Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, Vol. 32, 1978, pp.203-15; G.Sofri, *Sulla storia del partito cattolico. Osservazioni a proposito di due libri recenti, Studi storici*, 5(1964), N.3,

Rossi has reassessed the *intransigenti*'s links with the development of capitalism.⁶ I have used this material to inform my approach particularly where I believe the historian in question has contributed to the knowledge of the area either in terms of information or in historiographical terms. Brezzi and Gambasin have both been useful in this context because of their extensive use of archival material to which access is difficult. Their areas of concern may seem to overlap with mine but the approaches differ. I have disagreements with parts of Gambasin's analyses primarily because he is writing from within the Church and this colours his approach. He tends to downplay the conflict over the social question and he also skims over areas I have looked at in greater detail. In regard to Brezzi, his study has a more detailed focus on the leading *cristiano sociali* while mine is more general. In addition his valuable study ends with the issuing of the papal encyclical on the conditions of the working class, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891 leaving 13 years of the existence of the *Opera dei Congressi* largely unexamined. My intention is not to conduct, however, a historiographical survey but rather to use the material of these historians where it has elucidated the proceedings from the general assemblies of the *Opera dei Congressi*.

This study takes the approach of a general survey of the social thought and action of the *Opera dei Congressi* set against the economic and social transformations of the late 1800s and their effects on workers and peasants. It attempts to show the evolution of a social movement within an organisation closely bound to the Church and the contradictions and conflicts which arose when its members either willingly or forcibly confronted the profound problems of the mass of the Italian population. One of the goals of the *Opera dei Congressi* was to return the masses to the Church, however, in attempting to do this the *intransigenti* had to face the problems endured by the masses. This study looks at how the *intransigenti* dealt with the social question, and how they reconciled their Catholic beliefs, their attachment to the Church, their own social and economic interests and questions of social justice, all of which are still of significance to the Church today.

pp.533-50.

⁶ M.G.Rossi, *Movimento cattolico e capitale finanziario: appunti sulla genesi del blocco clericomoderati*, *Studi storici*, 13 (1972), N.2, pp.249-88; M.G.Rossi, *Le origini del partito cattolico*, Roma, 1977.