

## CHRISTIANS, POLITICIANS AND SANCTITY (1942-1948)

### *Towards a more Christian society*

While the war was raging and many were expecting a profound renewal for the future of humanity, in 1942 Giordani published two volumes: "Christian Society" and "The Social Encyclicals from Pius IX to Pius XII", proclaiming the need for a new social order with a Christian vision and a truly new politics. In the second of these two works, his aim was to launch in one organic document those voices of authority and their 'prophetic vision' expressed in a solemn warning to the world: that the root of all evil 'is humanity's separation from God' and that to rise above 'the destruction of humanity' Catholics would have to overcome the 'increasing gulf' between the human and the divine.<sup>103</sup>

For some years he had been soliciting the lay faithful and the priests to reflect on the causes of the expanding atheism (at that time the term 'secularisation' was not used). Igino considered that never in history had there been 'a period as tragic for Christianity as they were currently living in' which witnessed the betrayal of a Christian culture and the 'catastrophe of an atheism imposed by law on an entire people'. He declared 'that each and every Christian, even the most mediocre, lives a double anguish' caused by the divisions between the followers of Christ and 'the destruction' of faith in God. His suffering was not merely a passive disapproval but rather a vigorous encouragement to focus more on a lived out

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<sup>103</sup> Id., "Ragioni di queste Encicliche", introduction to "Le Encicliche sociali," Studium, Rome 1942, pp. V-VII and XXIII.

Christianity that could build a 'civilisation permeated by God'.<sup>104</sup>

His main instrument for action was his pen and he continued to write. He published two more books and a number of articles on the social doctrine of the Church; then with the passing of the war, he continued with his journalistic rhythm – from 11 June 1944 to 18 April 1946 he launched his missives through the pages of *Il Quotidiano* which he had collaborated in founding and of which he was the first editor.

Giordani's work focused on education in the social principles of Christianity and his purpose was to help Italian Catholics to discern among the confusion of incitements received from the Marxists on the one hand, and from the secularists on the other. In the face of problems which had arisen in the restoration of Italy, devastated by the war and debased by dictatorship, he insisted on the priority of a moral reform inviting all Christians to participate and to place 'all their moral and religious energy at the service of the city', with the aim of transforming politics into 'Christian politics'.<sup>105</sup>

But apart from these vast themes addressed by Giordani, it is important to indicate two essential facts. The first is the way in which he reacted to the regime; even though he could be expected to take revenge, he never displayed any resentment; he was always above it all. He exhorted everyone to overcome their sentiments of antifascism and to look with serene objectivity at what was termed as 'purging'. He wrote: 'May we live for justice, not vendetta'. He continued: 'We must not add hatred to hatred' but 'we must free ourselves from the accumulation of deteriorating zeal'.<sup>106</sup>

Secondly, it is interesting for us to note how he reacted in the face of criticisms mounted against him by some exponents of

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<sup>104</sup> Id., *I motivi dell'ateismo*, in "Il Frontespizio", 9 (1937), pp. 4-7; cf. also volumes: *Dio*, Salani, Florence 1945 and *L'ateismo*, Colombo, Rome 1949.

<sup>105</sup> Id., *Di fronte allo Stato*, in "Il Quotidiano", 2.7.1944 and "Politica avanti tutto" in *Il Quotidiano*, 31.12.1944.

<sup>106</sup> Id., *L'epurazione*, in "Il Quotidiano", 4.7.1944 and *Costume politico*, in "Il Quotidiano", 12.7.1944.

Catholic Action with whom he felt aligned. They either saw his writings as 'too polemical and rather bitter' or else 'they found that his social writings had little bite'; still others found him to be too 'revolutionary and left-wing'. It's true that he was polemical, not against people but against principles. One intervention which was particularly influential was when he stated the importance of not creating confusion between Marxism and Christianity (there were some who advocated Catholic communism) and to be aware of the dangers of secular anticlericalism whose adherents promoted drawing on the collaboration of Catholics in politics but ended up sterilising all Catholic spiritual values. Regarding his "left-wing tendencies", criticisms about his comments on the use of riches even reached the ears of the Pope. Giordani responded to this by explaining he was simply citing Chrysostom (*M*, p. 105).

We touched on this earlier on when we spoke of Righetti. Seeing the accumulating mountain of criticisms from his companions in the faith, he said to himself in distress:

'the most bitter surprise for me now is this – that in doing good, you are misunderstood by the good and in defending religion you are insulted by religious people'.

But in all this he perceived a divine tactic: all this happened, he said,

'so that the good you do may be between you and God and that human praise should not take the place of this, or even worse, a worldly prize' (*DF*, 29.10.1944).

In that situation, rendering it even more painful, a priest high in authority suggested to him that he 'submit all the important articles of his newspaper for a cautionary censorship'. While he kept all criticisms to himself, transforming them into stepping stones for his ascetic life, this 'cautionary censorship' posed a problem for him. He decided to express his thoughts 'openly and with humility' in a letter to Monsignor Montini on 22 July 1944. He explained that he could accept the censorship of theological themes,

in fact he desired this, but to have everything he wrote censured signified a lack of trust in him and this caused him 'a kind of paralysis' which prevented him from writing. He felt like he was a 'director directed, no longer able to function'. Therefore he declared his readiness to resign without any problems, grateful to his superiors, 'always happy and ready to serve the cause of the Lord' wherever and however they might wish.

The censorship didn't eventuate. Giordani continued to be a director of the journal despite the continuing clash of ideas. At the same time the approval of Church and political public figures continued to grow and especially the esteem of the public. A sign of trust, which he always highly treasured, was the task entrusted to him by Catholic Action in November 1945: to formulate together with Monsignor Civardi and Guido Gonella the definitive text of an 'appeal to Italian Catholics' in view of the election for the Constituency.<sup>107</sup>

"CAN A POLITICIAN BE A SAINT?"

He participated in those elections as a candidate upon the request of a collaborator of De Gasperi.<sup>108</sup> Twenty-two years previous to

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<sup>107</sup> M. Casella, *Cattolici e Costituente*, Perugia 1987, p. 158. The Constituent Assembly was charged with formulating the fundamental laws for the new Italian State, no longer Fascist but Democratic, with a plurality of political parties; besides electing this said Assembly, on 2 June 1946 the people had to vote to respond to the institutional referendum, to choose the type of government they wished: a monarchy or a republic.

<sup>108</sup> The politician from Trent had been the last Secretary of the People's Party and became the first Secretary of the Christian Democracy. He was elected by acclamation at the congress of Naples in July 1944, just a month after the American troops had freed Rome from the German Army's occupation (which remained in northern Italy till the end of the war: May 1945). Already in 1949, De Gasperi had held secret meetings with the new party; and in the writing "Reconstructive Ideas of the Christian Democracy" of 1943, he had traced out its guiding principles and the historical tasks to be faced after 20 years of dictatorship and the aftermath of the lost war.

this, Fr Sturzo had encouraged Igino to take part in a similar event, which had been unsuccessful because the votes were controlled by the regime in power (*M*, p. 63).<sup>109</sup>

Now, and once again without any ambitious solicitation on his part, he was offered a nomination on the list of candidates. After asking Msgr Montini's advice, he accepted though 'with little conviction'. He was concerned about professional and political problems. Mostly, however, it appears that he felt the need to consolidate his spiritual journey while he continued to throw himself into what he had defined in 1925 as 'a futile life'. He asked himself:

'Can a politician be a saint? Can a saint be a politician? Now that you are becoming a politician perhaps you can find the answer to this problem' (*DF*, 6.4.1946).

The big challenges – as in every electoral race – soon became evident, and amongst them were the attacks against Igino even by the Church, from the pulpit, for his Republican choices (there was an institutional referendum). Igino played their game and regarding his internal adversaries and his external competitors, he reacted with this inner attitude:

'I am not afraid of you because I love you! This is what we have to say to our brothers who are our adversaries' (*DF*, 20.4.1946).

On June 2, the Republic won and Giordani obtained enough popular consensus to be included as third on De Gasperi's list. Very soon the question was magnified in him:

'To spread holiness through the inadequate page of a magazine; to spread holiness in a corridor of aimless steps... who could ever work this miracle?' (*DF*, 2.8.1946).

That "corridor", as it was referred to jokingly by politicians was, and still is, a hall in Parliament House and the magazine Igino

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<sup>109</sup> Giordani had been a candidate for the elections in April 1924.

referred to was the organ of Christian Democracy *Il Popolo*. Giordani had taken over the directorship of this magazine just two days earlier. He wanted to live both these realities as a way towards holiness, not only for himself but for everyone, and for politics itself. It became always more important for him:

‘... to sanctify everything that is in connection with us: thought and custom, love and marital relationships, work and money, democracy and freedom’ (*DF*, 20.12.1946).

Also in politics, therefore, but who would be able to work this miracle? The experience that probably weighed most heavily on him was the editorship of *Il Popolo*. In carrying out this task, he was criticised for being ‘an editor with his own ideas’, as he himself narrated. He wasn’t about to have his journalism exploited by others in order to extol the virtues of some and denigrate others. Now it was happening to him all over again, but even worse than when he was editor of *Il Quotidiano*. He had to struggle in order not to be reduced to a puppet on a string (*M*, pp. 113-114). Because of pressure from Attilio Piccioni, Secretary of the Christian Democrats, he was forced to resign on 28 April 1947.

The following day he addressed these words to God:

‘May this suffering and this humiliation serve to demolish the superstructure of vanity and to place me with a naked soul, face to face with you, Lord’ (*DF*, 29.4.1947).

He lived this second-half of his political career not so much on a cultural plane, as he had in the twenties, but within the establishment. And here he encountered more difficulties than expected: ‘misunderstandings, calumnies, ridicule, derision and abandonment’, provoking ‘bitterness and disappointment’ in him. At times he was tempted to give up. All this, he confessed

‘drowns the voice of God and obscures the vision of spiritual things. I find myself below the level of the most elementary demands of Christian asceticism’ (*DF*, 25.6.1947).



But more often than not Igino perceived in these trials

‘a chance offered by God to become a saint...the prime material which cements holiness if it is burned in the fire of charity with the wisdom of humility’ (*DF*, 11.9.1947).

His activity was very much enriched by a brief experience he had as a Councillor in the municipality of Rome, to which he had been elected in November 1946 with over two hundred thousand votes. At one point he was offered the position of Assessor which he turned down, and he also turned down the candidacy offered to him for successive local council elections; he felt he would not have had time to ‘concentrate seriously’ on the tasks given the ‘gruelling activities’ he was already engaged in (*M*, p.114).

Among these activities was his work as a lecturer, columnist and director of *Fides*, as well as an author of books. In the first three post-war years (1945-1947) he published twelve books, some on politics: *From Horde to Order* (1945); others on the social doctrine of the Church such as *Our Father, a Social Prayer* (1946), and still others of a spiritual nature: *God* (1945); *Jesus of Nazareth* in two volumes (1946); *St John of God, the People’s Saint*, and others among which the powerful fourth volume of *The Social Message: the Great Fathers of the Church* (1947).

Instead, 1948 was one of the few years of his life in which he did not publish any new books. This was mainly due to his involvement in the stormy election of 18 April when he succeeded in being elected as a member of the first Republican Parliament. He then made a few trips overseas and for political reasons he travelled to London (in April) and Austria (in October). He was invited to France for a commemorative conference and then to Portugal. In August, he participated in a conference of “Moral Rearmament” in Caux, Switzerland, together with Mya, who even sang some songs – Igino informed us in *English Diary* – and there he gave three brief talks.

Towards the end of summer he ended up at a meeting that was destined to become the central event in his life.

### *The Hand of the Father*

In re-reading the life of Igino, all the events leading up to that meeting of September 1948 make us reach one conclusion which is obvious to Christian believers but which nonetheless deserves to be highlighted here.

For him, as for each one of us, there needs to be the certainty that we are being guided by the Father in the circumstances of our private and public life, seeing them as signs of protection and stepping stones along the way towards a higher goal. Without going so far as to claim it was a miracle, we can state that on at least two occasions a miraculous intervention did occur on the part of the Father who wanted to preserve Igino for a very particular role in the Church.

As part of this providential plan we can look back at what happened to him in December 1915 on the hill of Oslavia on the Giulio front. A bullet penetrated the high part of his helmet 'without even touching the scalp', he tells us (*M*, p. 52). Also providential was the outcome of the attack on Mussolini he personally made in the press in December 1924, the details of which we have already recorded. And even though that page seemed also to the historian Maurice Vaussard to be 'of a vehemence unheard of' (*M*, p. 65), there was no violent backlash launched against Giordani by the Fascists who for lesser reasons beat up socialists and popularists to the point of assassinating more than one just a few months before the appearance of his article.

Another preparatory step was his meeting with Mother Oliva Bonaldo, as already mentioned. This meeting presents surprising analogies between themes and episodes in anticipation of what is about to happen, but with a more ample dimension and with a very different result from Igino's relationship with Chiara Lubich.



The prolific correspondence between him and Mother Oliva Bonaldo, being of an intense spirituality, remains as an important testimony. From her letters, it's possible to draw out various vicissitudes of Igino's soul and family life through her constant reference to his letters which have unfortunately been lost.

Mother Oliva went with one of her sisters to visit him where he lived at Monte Mario in 1938. It may have been in September and she probably wanted to ask him to write an article. In a letter of 2 October she thanked him for the article he had written on Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, on whose spirituality she wanted to model the new order she was founding: the "Daughters of the Church."

The correspondence with him became more frequent as of January 1940. In her letters, mostly from Treviso, she began calling him 'my first-born son'. First of all she sent him 'the priestly prayer of Jesus' and then one of her writings called "Breathing Mary", so he could join in their daily meditation which focussed on the relationship with Our Lady (17-28 March 1940). She proposed they remain united in the Eucharist. 'Yes, let us communicate with each other always: let us be consumed in unity'. More than once she asked Igino's help in sorting out the typical difficulties that beset a newly formed order. She did this to the point where she demanded from him a specific role: 'Didn't I say you have to be a founder?' (30.7.1941).

Her idea was actually to associate with the order of the "Daughters" a group of lay people and priests called "Children of the Church",<sup>110</sup> at the head of which she intended to put Igino. She already called him "Igino of the Church" (*English Diary*, 30.4.1940). In fact this is how our friend subsequently signed his letters and even an article written for *Fides*.

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<sup>110</sup> S. Garofalo, Preface to Mother Oliva Bonaldo, *Lettere a Igino Giordani, op. cit.*, pp. 5-6; cf., also Id., *Storia di un Carisma*, Città Nuova, Rome 1982, pp. 101-102.

Igino followed these suggestions with docility. One morning he went to St Peter's Basilica and during communion asked to bind himself in charity with Mother Oliva, according to her request (*English Diary* 30.4.1940). During the Mass for the feast of St Catherine, Igino had asked this Saint 'to make Mother Oliva similar to herself' (*English Diary*, 30.4.1940).

He admired Mother Oliva's very elevated spirituality and her intelligent and courageous hard work for the Church, which gave him 'the impression of a Mother of the Church and called to mind the image of the Fathers of the Church'. He wrote this in a Vatican magazine after her death.<sup>111</sup>

Nevertheless he didn't always accept what she suggested, for example, to be more attentive to the spirit of St John of the Cross ('You don't like him much' the Mother reprimanded him, 11 May 1942), but most of all he didn't support her aim to bind him to her Order with a specific commitment.

He prostrated himself in humility on a spiritual level but he evidently did not find it attractive to be incorporated in an organised scheme. Apart from his total independence, he was imbued with the type of spirituality in which he had been formed and which was consolidated in him: a spirituality that was profound, robust, individual, even though it was multi-directional as we have seen.

In any case the Spirit stimulated him to continue to grow and this is illustrated in his *Diary of Fire* of 1947 and 1948: his severe examinations of conscience (25 June and 3 July 1947; 5 August 1948); his insistence on giving value to 'being misunderstood and scorned' (29 April, 4 and 13 May, 11 September 1947; 23 January, 10 February and 1 August 1948); his dwelling at length on Paul's 'It's Christ who lives in me'; his desire to lose himself in Christ. He repeated a prayer he had placed on the lips of the candidate for martyrdom in *Christus patiens* (p.174): not to pass to the next life

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<sup>111</sup> I. Giordani, *La povertà cristianamente cercata*, in "L'Osservatore Romano", 7.8.1976.

but to live it down here in a divine elevation: “Lord take me and give me yourself”. It calls to mind the invocation of St Nicholas of Flüe which he expanded: “Lord, take me from myself and give me completely to You” (DF, 21.12.1947).

In another great flowering of emotions of the spirit, we will choose only one as a starting point: *‘We must carry the virginal smile of Mary to this impoverished and sad world and there it will flower like a perennial springtime of life which is Jesus among us’* (DF, 14.7.1948).

Two months later he met Chiara Lubich.