

The Church and la Politica Italiano

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WE WERE SEATED in the chapel of the building serving both as mission headquarters and home of the West Milan (Italy) Branch. Our young gospel doctrine teacher was presenting a lesson on the role of government according to Alma 50–60. Nearing the end of the lesson, she came to a quotation from one of the Brethren: “I even believe that our elected national leaders are honest men and base their decisions upon what they believe to be for the good of the people as they see it.” She stopped, struggled to hold a straight face, but did not succeed. Her apologies for laughing were not heard, for everyone else was equally stricken.

The class’s reaction did not surprise me much, for once as elders’ quorum instructor in the same branch I had tried to teach a lesson on the political responsibility of church members. The lesson moved sluggishly. Even though my Italian was passable, we seemed to be speaking different languages. I was addressing the question from the perspective of an American accustomed to generally well functioning political institutions and to a relatively narrow spectrum of political views. I knew that the political scene in Italy was vastly different from that of the United States, but what I did not realize until then was that being politically active, and assuming a measure of responsibility for one’s political system meant something totally different to them that it did to me.

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Afterwards an energetic young member of little more than a year asked me if we could talk. He began, "Don't get me wrong, I want to do what is right. We just talked about how members should be politically aware and active. But what is the best way to do that in Italy? I have difficulty supporting either major party. The Christian Democrats, I consider corrupt so I am forced to vote Communist. What's the alternative?"

His position was no different from a minority but nonetheless large number of the branch members and was the same as that of a large share of the Italian electorate who vote Communist but consider themselves middle class bourgeoisie, not red flag carrying leftists. He was in effect saying that he was not sure if he had a choice which was totally consistent with Church teachings as he understood them.

The roots of this political non-choice go back to the fall of Mussolini's Fascist regime before the advancing Allied armies toward the end of World War II. The Italian Communist Party (PCI), its ranks swelling with militant former resistance fighters, made an unsuccessful move to fill up the postwar vacuum. Instead, the Christian Democratic Party took control. When the left factionalized a few years later (into the Communist, Socialist and Social Democratic parties), there remained no single party which could even come close to beating the Christian Democrats at the polls. Christian Democrat governments followed one after another for the following thirty years. Never in opposition and plagued with continued charges of corruption and frequent scandals, the party gradually lost credibility. The problem was that for most people there was no acceptable alternative. Only the Communists were powerful enough even to challenge Christian Democrat rule.

Sensing the opportunity, the Communists began a facelift in the 1970s. Throwing off their work duds and donning white shirts and ties, they were no longer the party of the oppressed working masses, but rather the party of reform, of good government—of everybody. Party secretary Enrico Berlinguer, a Sardinian nobleman, provided the party with a strong middle class image. Only the name remained the same. At least that was what the party wanted the middle class to believe. And many did believe it.

Communist support grew until after the parliamentary elections of 1976. By that time the Italian political scene was thoroughly polarized, with the Christian Democrats on one side and the Communists on the other.

And so the dilemma for Italian Mormons. Another young member told me, "I cannot vote for the Christian Democrats because I consider that a vote for corruption. I don't yet trust the Communists. So I vote for the Socialists. But they are so small that it is like throwing my vote away."

For many members, however, disillusionment with the status quo was sufficient encouragement to vote Communist. There seemed to be no ideological commitment. I never met a Mormon card-carrying member of the PCI (Communist Party). And no one even admitted leftist sympathies. (This contrasts with Finland where over several years I have met a number of members who have expressed strong leftist ideas, but none who ever admitted voting for the Communists.)

One member told me that in the United States he would have been a

Democrat, and in Germany, a good Social Democrat. But in Italy he was a Communist. He was not equating the three. He was saying that Communism to many Italian Mormons was not an international movement or philosophy. The PCI was an Italian institution. It was the party of dissent, the only alternative.

"But how can you be so sure? Since there is no real precedent, aren't you taking a gigantic gamble?" was my usual rejoinder. It usually succeeded in producing a worried wrinkle, too, for most members did worry about this. The consequences of gambling and losing were well understood.

To someone who had heard Ezra Taft Benson's rousing condemnations of Communism and its supporters as I had, it seemed strange that Italian Mormons could vote a red ticket without fear of provoking some Church reaction. Most Italian Mormons, however, had not heard the fiery sermons on the subject.

Responding to my curiosity on this, a mission president told me of his having been instructed by a member of the Twelve to avoid completely statements or comments against Communism. Although he did not elaborate, the implication was clear. In an Italy where the Communists were strong and not many steps away from sharing at least some power in government, the Church felt it had more to lose by openly opposing the Communists than it had to gain by maintaining what some leaders probably considered doctrinal purity. Being the politically conservative institution it is in Utah would only have further identified it as American—a profile greatly resented by many non-American members. It would have created strong (and perhaps even violent) enemies among nonmember Italians.

On one occasion I saw what happened when the urge to take sides overcame the Church's resolve to remain neutral. Just before President Kimball's visit to Italy in the summer of 1977, all members of Italy's parliament (including the neofascists) except PCI deputies reportedly were sent written invitations to attend his Rome address. The uproar in the press (which before then had only rarely acknowledged the Church's existence) was almost exceeded by that heard in priesthood meeting: "Why," demanded one elders' quorum president, "don't we have mission leaders who understand our politics?" Another told me of how hard pressed he was to explain the Church's move to his work colleagues when he could not understand it himself. A few thought I, as an American, could explain the Church's position. The couple of times I tried taught me it was better to be quiet and to listen.

For the most part the Church, too, has decided to be quiet even though members in Italy are not always sure how much it listens. But the silence, although not altogether disagreeable to a former Utah Mormon, is a loud one. It emphasizes the importance of expediency.

It also may reveal something about the struggle to keep up with the internationalization of the Church that must be taking place on a high level. Given the Church's clear desire to move into countries where political forms are sharply different from our own, this internationalization is bound to make political "no comment" an even stronger part of the Church position than it is now.