

A SPUR IN THE PRACTICE OF VIRTUE: CATHOLIC CIVIL SOCIETY AND
INSTITUTIONAL SYNCRETISM IN VENETO 1866-1915

by

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(Under the Direction of STEVEN C SOPER)

ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the development of the Italian Catholic movement in the late nineteenth century, which had managed to organize a significant program of workers' societies, journalistic efforts and rural financial institutions in over the last decades of the nineteenth century. Using the records of the national Italian Catholic Congresses, the Opera dei Congressi, alongside pastoral visitation records from Venetian bishops, this paper examines the theoretical and concrete development of the Catholic movement to offer insight into the Church's novel associations working in concert with the older ecclesiastical structure of the Church. This paper examines one of the core assets the Italian Catholic movement had in developing an ideologically conservative social welfare program in rural Northern Italy without forming a traditionally Catholic political party at the national level – the centrality of local parishes in the quotidian lives of rural Italians as a potential site for Catholic activism in Italy.

INDEX WORDS: Italian History – Post Unification, Catholic Church, Public Life, Social History, Institutional History, Opera dei Congressi, Catholic movement

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BA, University of Georgia, 2018

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay is the final research effort concluding five years of work and study at the University of Georgia's history department, first as an undergraduate, then as a graduate student. This work owes an indelible debt to the guidance of my major advisor and mentor, Steven Soper, whose commitment to both teaching and research are exceptional examples to aspire to. Both I and my work have significantly benefitted from his instruction, advice, and conversation. My committee members, both John Short and Scott Nelson, have also been exceedingly helpful teachers in my entrance to the world of historical scholarship, and I have enjoyed attending research seminars with both in my time as a graduate student. Beyond these three, I want to acknowledge the significant contributions to my life as a scholar made by John Morrow, Chana Kai Lee, Elizabeth Brient and Daniel Rood whose colloquiums, seminars and intellectual engagement has been a simultaneous challenge and joy. To everyone else in the History department, students, faculty and staff who have made this work possible, I offer sincere thanks. Above all, I thank my wife, Amanda Bowers, for support and encouragement throughout this process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1 CATHOLICISM IN UNITED ITALY.....	1
2 EARLY CATHOLIC ACTION.....	10
3 PARISHES ON THE PERIPHERY.....	24
4 CATHOLIC CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE SPIRIT OF ASSOCIATION.....	43
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	48

CHAPTER 1: CATHOLICISM IN UNITED ITALY

Bishop Antonio Farina came to the vicariate of Bassano in September of 1864, where he would remain until May the following year. His objective was a routine tour of every parish in Bassano, a tour he would take in every other vicariate in the diocese of Vicenza, over which Farina was bishop. In the small town of Cassola, with just over seven hundred inhabitants, Farina was faced with the not-uncommon problem of disciplining parish priests who refused to follow ecclesiastical authority and who engendered unorthodox political views. The priest in question, Pietro Bonvicini, had been reported to the Austrian authorities in December of 1861 for speaking publicly against the “established government” and pontifical authority, rhetoric which likely supported Italian independence. More recently, Farina had complained that Bonvincini and other priests in Bassano refused to wear the correct headpieces as decided upon by a recent synod. When Farina arrived, he was informed of another local scandal involving Bonvincini: the priest had been seen walking to the oratory just before morning mass with a cigar hanging from his mouth. Smoking, while not a forbidden act for Catholic clergy, had historically been seen as impure. Thus, Bonvicini’s brazen cigar-smoking had rendered him unclean before the act of leading mass – a role which demanded uprightness and utmost purity of the clergy. This impiety before sacred ritual prompted Farina to dismiss him later that year, either in zealous defense of the faithful of Cassola’s access to morning mass or as a useful pretext to dismiss a willful priest.¹

¹ Cisotto, Gianni. *La visita pastorale di Giovanni Antonio Farina nella Diocesi di Vicenza (1864-1871)*. Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura. 1977. This chronology given by editor and historian Gianni Cisotto is approximate, as not all of Farina’s visitations were dated. Taken from a table giving the prospective dates following the forward titled *Prospetto Cronologico della Visita nei Singoli Vicariati*. cii-cviii. 50-1.

Farina's tour of Bassano, formally referred to as a pastoral visitation, was a routine tour of every parish in the diocese, to address problems in the more isolated rural parishes. The seat of apostolic authority in a diocese is typically a Cathedral located in the largest city in that diocese, surrounded by a myriad of parish churches in the countryside.² As one of the reforms codified at the council of Trent, pastoral visitations were intended to encourage apostolic authorities to be more engaged with the smaller, generally poorer, parishes outside of the city. At least once his lifetime, every bishop was expected to carry out a full audit of the diocese with specific attention to the total infrastructure of Catholic worship in the Diocese. These visitations functioned as a diagnostic on the "religious-moral and material state" of the parish.³ All personnel involved in rites and ceremonies – including the sacraments or oration – were listed, as were any relics, shrines, and other notable works of art. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, faced with a significant challenge by the new Italian state and the emergence of radical politics, alongside the inventorying of the spiritual apparatus of each parish, visitations began to record new Catholic associations which worked to create a Catholic public life. Farina's dismissal of Bovincini for not wearing the correct headgear and insufficient personal conduct regarding religious ceremony speak to how these visitations were meant to enforce orthodoxy and eliminate elements that disrupted clerical authority.

Three decades after Farina's tour, the subsequent bishop of Vicenza, Antonio Feruglio conducted a considerably different tour of the diocese – one that catalogued new apparatus for parochial engagement with the parishioners. Starting in the visitation in 1895, Feruglio noted a

² Though there is some variation, the pastoral visitations in Vicenza were grouped by vicariate – the intermediate pastoral rank of authority subjected to apostolic, or diocesan, authority. These vicariates represented smaller sub-regions of clerical authority and were constituted by local parochial congregations.

³ Nardello, Mariano. *La visita pastorale di Antonio Feruglio nella diocesi di Vicenza: (1895-1909)*. Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura. 1985. The exact wording Antonio Feruglio used to describe his visitation to Vicenza that started in 1895. The language Feruglio deployed is specifically diagnostic, noting that any troubles would need to have "remedies" applied by him while he was present. 9.

significant increase in Catholic associational life. Alongside the older questions about the spiritual health of the parish, Feruglio's visitation in Vicenza provided an illuminating look at this new development in Catholic society: a dense network of Catholic youth circles, workers' societies, newspapers and rural banks. These newer institutions were distinguished from the local confraternities and other *opere pie* recorded in earlier visitations.⁴ Feruglio's visitation revealed these novel Catholic associations, modeled on associations developed by Venetian liberals, but in areas where liberal efforts had generally failed to take root.⁵

The existence of novel Catholic associational life stemmed from the Italian Catholic movement, an effort on the part of both Italian clergy and laity, to develop novel associations and institutions, to engage with the Italian public, promote social welfare and strengthen Catholic religious belief. By the turn of the century, these new Catholic associations were described by Leo XIII as "a spur in the practice of virtue". What did that mean? In reference to social welfare institutions like rural banks and worker's societies, the aim was "not only to dignify the duty of the rich toward the poor, but to elevate the poor themselves, for, while it urges them to work in order to improve their condition, it preserves them meantime from danger, it refrains immoderation in their desires."⁶ In the context of other Catholic associations – press efforts,

⁴ *Opere pie* is a term used to describe the myriad of local clergy-approved works of charity conducted by the laity. These organizations had less strict rules than those of more complex organizations like confraternities, but they were given certain indulgences and support from clerical authorities. I will use this term to refer to these local charity efforts, but another technically correct translation would be pious associations.

⁵ Soper, Steven. *Building a Civil Society: Associations, Public Life, and the Origins of Modern Italy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). This book's exploration of liberal associational life in Veneto after unification directs careful attention to the rhetoric and language of association deployed by Venetian liberals. For many of the young intelligentsia cultivated at the University of Padua, Venetian freedom from the hated Hapsburg regime and joining into the Italian state was a moment of revolutionary change and opportunity. The leaders of these associations, which ranged from lending libraries to self-help financial associations, sought to seize the moment of unification to revolutionize the Venetian public life and, by promoting democratic engagement with public institutions, work against the discourse of 'backwardness' in Veneto. These associations were most successful in the Venetian cities of Padua and Vicenza and struggled to reach the Venetian peasantry in the hinterland, in spite of the best efforts of pioneers like Luigi Luzzatti, Emilio Morpurgo, and Fedele Lampertico.

⁶ Leo XIII. *Gravis de communi*. 1901. Vatican.va. 17.

social welfare institutions, social clubs and religious societies – this meant religious, moral and, perhaps more importantly, political and economic instruction. These novel associations organized under the myriad of parish, diocese, and regional committees, under the Italian Catholic Congress, or Opera dei Congressi, represented a significant change in the public practice of Catholicism in Italy, which, by the end of the nineteenth century had particular impact on the smaller communities in rural Italy.

The Catholic movement was itself a response to complex and momentous challenges to Catholic ecclesiastical authority in unified Italy. The ruling liberal elite of the Risorgimento were decidedly anticlerical and had invoked a variety of efforts to curb the authority of the Church at the outset of unification. The more dramatic points of tension included the Roman Question, the long-standing debate about the temporal authority of the Papacy in the newly united Italy, but other problems reverberated into the quotidian life of Italians: the sale of Church lands, a civil-marriage statute that did not recognize marriages carried out by the clergy, and the power to appointment of new bishops over a given diocese that the Italian state had claimed for itself. However, this sweeping transition of authority from Catholic tradition to the new Italian state at the highest level did little to change the influence the parochial clergy had on their parishioners. For faithful Catholics, it was for the clergy to command and the laity to follow suit. To complicate things further, by the end of the century, Catholicism would face new ideological challenges from socialism and anarchism, which threatened to sever the bond between the common parishioner and the Church entirely.

Historians of the Catholic movement have predominately focused on the leadership and organization of the Opera dei Congressi, with particular attention to the ideological and social thought of its most prominent laical leadership and ecclesiastical elite, but there has been less

attention paid to the organizational structure of the Catholic movement as one of the foremost components of its success.⁷ Since the parish structure of the Catholic Church gave the Catholic movement a potential parish committee in every city, town and village in Italy, Catholic associations were able to pursue innovative journalistic efforts, social welfare programs and credit institutions that borrowed from models pioneered by liberals to much greater effect in the Italian countryside, in a phenomenon I call institutional syncretism. By institutional syncretism I mean, the use of the traditional parish structure to promote and develop the flowering of new Catholic associations by way of parish committees and local clerical oversight – that is, the addition of new authority to the existing clergy. This provided Catholic activism with a potential administrative anchor to promote grassroots Catholic associations – an anchor that existed in every town in Italy. Since the parish priest was already an integral figure in the lives of most Italians – carrying out the necessary rituals for birth, confirmation, marriage and death – the Catholic movement’s promotion of local, parish-level organizations also promoted parish priests into new positions as newspaper editors, creditors, and public activists. Furthermore, the parish was particularly useful for the purpose of promoting such institutions in a rural context, since even the smallest communities would have potential administrators in priests and orators as well as potential spaces for administration in pastoral structures like churches. In this way, the parish served simultaneously as an extension of the authority of the Church and fertile ground for

⁷ For more see: De Rosa, Gabriele. *Il movimento cattolico in Italia: dalla restaurazione all'età giolittiana*. 1a Ed. Bari: Laterza 1988; Dutton, Robin Anne. “Italian Catholics and the social question: the emergence of a social consciousness and social action amongst conservative Catholics in late 19th century Italy.” PhD diss, Australian National University, 2013; Gambasin, Angelo. *Il Movimento Sociale nell’Opera dei Congressi, 1874-1904, contributo per la storia del cattolicesimo sociale in Italia*. Rome: 1958.

These texts work as excellent primers for the larger history of the Italian Catholic movement, predominately focusing on the leadership, ideology and social efforts of the Opera dei Congressi, but generally eschew attention to more localized details of the movement. While each functions as a detailed overview of the larger movement, as a group they generally do not explore the local context of the Catholic movement or what the development of this Catholic civil society meant within that provincial context.

new associations to address the social and economic problems in the oft-forgotten Italian countryside.

The development of the Catholic movement's programs in the context of rural Italy is a difficult subject for historians to address entirely. While, broadly speaking, European historiography has an understandable bias towards urban histories – a bias that extends from the considerable difficulties in gathering sufficient rural sources for serious study – the success of the Catholic movement in rural Italy can also speak to larger questions about politics and locality as larger themes in Italian history, specifically. Indeed, in histories of liberal Italy, the Church is a comparatively minor player compared to the centrality of the Church in histories of nearly every other period. In Axel Körner's history of politics and culture in Bologna in the same period, Catholicism of a particularly ideological or political dimension plays a relatively minor role compared to the political and artistic elite.⁸ While some historians have viewed of the response of the Catholic movement to challenges of the new Italian state and agricultural crisis at the end of the century favorably, they also point out that the eventual labor struggles of the twentieth century indicate that Catholicism struggled to respond to the needs of the majority of Italians.⁹ Though this begs the question of why Catholicism, such a prominent force before unification proper and in the subsequent periods of Italian fascism the Italian Republic founded after the Second World War, was able to maintain its vitality while on the metaphorical back-foot in the years following unification? While this paper cannot alone answer this, but it can

⁸ Körner, Axel. *Politics and Culture in Liberal Italy: from Unification to Fascism*. Routledge, New York: 2009. Körner argues that local administration, in some way's inseparable from local cultural engagement, was a vital mechanism for the developing Italian bourgeoisie's ascent into the political world previously dominated by the aristocracy and the clergy. He argues that Italians closely identified new liberal institutions with local authority that was made concrete by relationships with the cultural experts and intellectual elites. Körner sees the social efforts of the Catholic movement to be hampered by their own political bias, noting that when faced with socialist pressures Catholics and liberals were forced to become uneasy bedfellows. 10-11. 272-3.

⁹ Pollard, John. *Catholicism in Modern Italy: Religion, Society and Politics since 1861*. Routledge, New York: 2008.

offer some insight as to how the Church defended its hierarchical authority over the Italian laity in a period so defined by anticlericalism. Furthermore, it can speak to a general underestimation of the significance of the Catholic movement generally in the last decades of the nineteenth-century.

As historian Raymond Grew noted in his essay “Catholicism and the Risorgimento”, many histories of liberal public festivals celebrating unification have, perhaps, been too broad in their assumption that a large swathe of the Italian peasantry were alienated by the political programs encouraged by liberal after unification, an assumption that largely stems from the failure of these movements to communicate their interests in consistent political language. Risorgimento historiography often describes the Italian peasantry as either politically reactionary or agnostic, ultimately interested in more immediate affairs such as the price of grain. Of course, that the peasantry did not articulate their needs or wants in a politically legible manner, meaning direct political action or broad alliance with a given political party, does not mean that the peasantry was a passive body being acted on by disconnected politicians. He notes that historians of Italy tend to conclude that the masses’ political illegibility suggests political apathy or alienation – which we have no evidence of. The benefit of studying Catholic development of its own public life by the construction of a robust associational program is that it offers historians insight to the styles, techniques, and effectiveness of mobilization without political parties or organization.¹⁰

One of these methods of organization was the development of parish committees, which, as will be addressed in greater detail later, were local associations led by parochial clergy that by the end of the century had the potential to offer some material recourse in the midst of the

¹⁰ Raymond Grew, “Catholicism and the Risorgimento”, *Studies in Italian History from the Risorgimento to the Republic* Peter Lang, New York: 1986. 47-8.

agricultural crisis. These associations, as the other associations that could be connected to them were not as ubiquitous as parishes themselves, as they required a certain amount of local activity and organization to be formed in a given parish – motivation to form a committee was not itself sufficient, as there were procedural requirements that demanded resources that some parishes may not have to spare. As a result, the geographic distribution of parish committees was not even, predominately finding success in the North and, most of all, in Veneto. By using Venetian pastoral visitations and the published documents of the Opera dei Congressi to analyze the organizational structure and development of Catholic associational life in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and examine how the Catholic movement developed within the context of Venetian society, the centrality of the parish in the organization of Catholic action and association can be observed. While the initial focus the Congress paid to social and religious life saw little success in the early development of Catholic action in rural Veneto, the adoption of social welfare and agricultural reform associations, programs of most use in rural and agricultural regions like Veneto, significantly expanded the proliferation of parish committees and Catholic action in the region generally.

It would take nearly two decades for the Catholic movement, first starting in earnest in the first meeting of the Opera dei Congressi in Venice in 1874, to fully develop a program of broad success in Italy. One significant problem at the moment following unification in the 1860s was the maintaining religious followers in the context of modern Italy. A near constant commonality with visitations in the nineteenth century is anxiety about rising anticlerical sentiment and increased religious indifference. A priest in Caldogno, a fairly large suburb outside of Vicenza, reported to Feruglio that “Not a few [of the population] are indifferent [to

religion] or infected with liberalism or with materialism.”¹¹ Indeed, one of the functions of the pastoral visitations was to make sure that the hierarchical relationship the clergy held over the vast majority of Italians was defended, which meant that anticlerical pressures from the new state or rival liberals needed to be refuted or turned back as much as possible. As such, much of the focus of the initial Congresses was in combatting the “persecution of the piazza” as the Italian liberal state sought to remove the centrality of the Catholic imagery and worship from the public spaces in Italian cities. The first attempts to organize the Church’s recovery in these public spaces was the first meeting of the Opera dei Congressi, who sought to combat liberalism in the sphere of Italian public life by creating its own, decidedly Catholic, civil society.

¹¹ *La Visita Pastorale di Antonio Feruglio*. 157.

CHAPTER 2: EARLY CATHOLIC ACTION

The first meeting of the Opera dei Congressi, held in Venice in 1874, was the first national meeting of Italian Catholics. Per the Congresses' statutes, the meetings were not to exceed five days in length, meaning that most of the meeting time was dedicated to speeches from the Congress leadership, spurring the nascent Catholic movement to action, and fielding deliberations on the best way to promote the objectives of the Congress.¹² The Congress met in June, with five main sections dedicated to specific goals of the Catholic movement, each with its own administrative presidencies, vice-presidencies, and secretaries under the larger Congresses administration, including promotional and organizational committees. These sections were directed to pursue Catholic interests in the promotion and preservation of religious worship, charity, Catholic journalism, Catholic education efforts, and Christian art and culture.¹³ The plurality of this leadership fell under the more conservative wing of Catholicism following Italian unification. These *intransigenti* were, broadly speaking, ideologically in line with Pius IX in their resistance to the modernizing influence of the newly unified state in the lives of most Italians. In contrast to more moderate clerics, intransigents held intensely orthodox positions on the Roman Question, the *non expedit*, and Papal infallibility. As a result, many of the first speeches at the first Opera dei Congressi were characterized by a highly polemical tenor when

¹² *Documenti di Opera dei Congressi I*, Vol. I. Venice: 1874. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.* The second section would go by several different names throughout the Congresses. Initially labeled as 'charity' in 1874, the second section would also be titled Christian economics, sometimes using both titles, as the scope of the second section shifted from the broader context of alms-giving to the promotion of institutions that promoted 'Christian' social welfare. This paper will not catalog each of these nominal shifts but note that as early as the second Congress ideas about how to address material need were shifting to include broader, decidedly Catholic, theories of social and economic problems and solutions in Italy. 28-9.

discussing injuries inflicted on the Church – injuries inflicted not only in 1861 but stretching back to 1789.¹⁴

Indicative of the scope of the Opera dei Congressi, was its five separate sections that were intended to either promote Catholic moral and political interests or to assert Catholicism in the liberal-dominated Italian public sphere. Its first section on religious worship was predominantly concerned with the promotion of spiritual issues, one of the most pressing of which was the defense of Sunday as a holy day of rest and worship – to which the Congress suggested boycotting institutions that violated Catholic law on days of worship and that artisans and shop-owners be mindful of work expected of employees – that workers not be forced to break divine law for economic purpose.¹⁵ The second section was dedicated to Christian charity, which initially, in the 1870s, referred to existing Catholic poor-relief societies like the *Società de San Vincenzo di Paulo* and extended to addressing problems such as destitute orphanages in the countryside, with a few concrete ideas suggested to address these issues.¹⁶ The fourth section promoting Catholic education predominately consisted of furious speeches condemning the Italian state’s promotion of secular education and the exclusion of Catholic authority from public education altogether and the fifth was dedicated to the preservation of Christian art, with particular attention to the eroding landscape of religious edifices on public buildings, threatening a gradual secularization public spaces: piazzas, cemeteries, and theaters.¹⁷ With a myriad of

¹⁴ De Rosa. *Il movimento cattolico*. De Rosa notes that in the years following the Syllabus of errors in 1864, moderate Catholics had been “beaten” and “reduced to nothing”, particularly in the leadership of Catholic activism. Rather, the passionate laity, largely drawn from old-money, that gave speeches at the Congress in Venice were conservative, not only socially and politically, but in their hard-lined opinions on Catholic issues as well. 55.

¹⁵ *Deliberazioni dei Primo Congresso Cattolici Italiani in Venezia, Firenze, e Bergamo*. Bologna: 1878. These were published records of the deliberations for the initial three Congresses in Venice, Florence and Bergamo. They are brief notes on the efforts the Congress voted to endorse in the earliest days of the Catholic movement. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* The Catholic Congress regarded cemeteries, though not traditionally a secular space, as an area particularly threatened by the removal of religious influence. The disregarding of Catholic rules regarding the burial of

concrete and theoretical efforts to promote and defend Catholic issues, the foundation undergirding nearly all of these endeavors was to be the work done in the third section, the production and dissemination of locally produced Catholic journalism and special interest periodicals so that Catholic activism possessed a print culture to rival those of Italian liberals and eventually socialist and anarchist advocates.¹⁸

According to the president of the third section, Giuseppe Sacchetti, a writer and early Catholic journalist that had been promoting increased religious press efforts since 1864, the Church's enemy was 'revolution' itself. For Sacchetti, the success of liberalism was rooted, fundamentally, in its imbrication with the emergent world of public life and public opinion:

The revolution needs a false enthusiasm, which depicts the cries of four scoundrels as public opinion; because it cannot create real enthusiasm. It is not possible for peoples to animate the revolution; this snake that poisons, this tiger that tears, this she-wolf that devours, this filthy harpy who steals from the poor man's bread, the food that fed his children and instead leaves you with the filth of the dirtiest immorality.¹⁹

Sacchetti's concept of 'revolution' was an amalgam of liberalism, anti-clericalism, and immorality. This was emblematic of the opinions of most of the leadership in the Opera dei Congressi. Furthermore, the notion that public opinion, as mediated by the popular press and the new world of civil society, was decidedly set against the Church was not a circumstance to which leadership of the Opera dei Congressi was keen to acquiesce. Rather, Sacchetti and other intransigents were calling on Catholics, both clergy and laity, to take up the weapons of the

unbaptized children and non-Catholics in areas separate from baptized Catholics were specifically mentioned as concerns. 31. 26. 30.

¹⁸ Ibid. 27.

¹⁹ *Documenti I*. Sacchetti the president of the committee over the press efforts of early Catholic action. He had started his career in Catholic printing long before the Opera dei Congressi. From 1864-66, he printed *Letture cattoliche* in Padua, a Catholic interest periodical, to combat the perceived monopolization of press materials by liberal and anticlerical forces. The periodical would be one of the first contributions to what Catholic activists called 'the good press', which stood opposed to liberal and 'immoral' texts more commonly available for most Italians. 59.

revolution – popular press, civil society, and parliamentary procedure – and contest the “persecution of the piazza” in full view of the Italian public.²⁰

Perhaps the most obvious innovations that Catholic action adopted from liberals was, of course, the Congresses themselves. Attendance to the Opera dei Congressi required biennial dues at five lire a year to the national congress and nomination from other members to assure that those in attendance were either clergy or committed Catholic laity. The purpose of the national meetings was stated as “[inquiring] about the state of the Works already existing in Italy” and “to provide for their greater diffusion”, along with the promotion of new efforts and studies so that Catholic associations and individuals could “run to the defense of the Church”.²¹ The congress was interested in organizing and studying, at the national level, the existing local efforts of various Catholic association and sought to animate innovative associations in the defense of Catholic interests by way of legislative body. The adoption of parliamentary procedure was new for Catholics in Italy, and it allowed a platform for unprecedented communication between the laity and the clergy for the promotion of Catholic interests.

Per the articles of the congress, existing *opera pie* and other lay efforts were to be in “direct” correspondence with the national Congress and, thus, “helping [the Promotional Committee]” at the national level “with their advice...transmitting documents and materials to the same committee with the greatest possible care”.²² As such, the Congress assessed Catholic activism at a local level, often periodicals promoting specific religious issues funded by a zealous layperson or innovative priest, that were then presented at the congress and possibly, by popular vote, promoted in the literature of the national congress. Such documents were often

²⁰ Ibid. 54.

²¹ Ibid. 13-5.

²² *Deliberazioni*. 13-4.

periodicals detailing endeavors by local laity to promote religious issues. One example promoted at the first congress was *Il Pellegrino in Terra Santa*, a Florentine monthly periodical published by the Italian Committee for Caravans that sought to organize groups of Catholic worshipers to undertake pilgrimages to Palestine. Noting that such a difficult venture might have been too difficult for the majority of Catholics, the Congress encouraged similar periodicals to promote Italian shrines and pilgrimage sites as well and encouraged the organization of more accessible regional pilgrimages.²³ In another case, the publication of Gregorian sheet music in Milan prompted the Congress to imitate these efforts by endorsing the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia, which promoted the publication of Catholic sheet music and, by extension, the practice of holy music by the laity.²⁴ This transition from local activism to congressional review to congressional promotion effectively meant that the Opera dei Congressi was a body meant to both process information and, to some degree, develop concrete programs to promote them. A vital mechanism in both of these cases was the efforts of local Catholic presses which served as the informational capillaries between local and national Catholic activism.

In 1874, the Opera dei Congressi attempted to bolster Catholic activism at the regional level through the production and distribution of Catholic press efforts. Following suggestions for the creation of Catholic night schools for artisans and other urban workers, the Congress recognized the Catholic press's need in the matter of trained typographers, for which those night schools were a proposed training institution. With such an initiative, it was hoped that the

²³ Ibid. 8.

²⁴ Ibid. Few cultural efforts by the Opera dei Congressi bore much fruit outside of youth circles and societies, with the exception of its promotion of holy music. The original hope was to use Catholic-led night schools to train, among other things, students in Gregorian chanting to encourage a return in popular support for holy music. Though these ambitions in the field of education were never realized, the Associations of Saint Cecilia was a moderately successful Catholic popular culture association. While the promotion of Christian art periodicals didn't see much life in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Association of Saint Cecilia did have established chapters in a handful of major Italian cities. 63-4.

Church could have at least one major Catholic newspaper in operation in every province in Italy, working for “the publication of newspapers, containing illustrations of historical points, moral and family stories” which would reinforce Catholic moral and religious values. The Catholic press aimed to be as accessible as possible, with the express order that stories covering political, economic and industrial news of the day be conveyed in layman’s language. Furthermore, the goal was to set prices “very low” so that more could be printed and disseminated.²⁵ All of these efforts were to be organized at the diocesan level in special press committees that worked with parish committees in the diocese to disseminate printed literature in the countryside.

Following the first Opera dei Congressi, the organization of Catholic associations at the parish level was not something that motivated laity could start without organizational supervision, usually in the form of parish committees. While the general management of Catholic press efforts was under the purview of the press committee, managed at the diocesan level, parish committees were often the disseminators of those printed materials.²⁶ Initially suggested at the second national Congress, parish committees served as the ‘joint’ between the established ecclesiastical structure of the clergy and the Catholic laity in communities outside of the more populous cities which often served as diocesan seats. Parish committees were to be under the direction of – or, preferably, presided over by a parish priest – with at least five other Catholics on the committee. These committees were also responsible for the development of local associational efforts, with stated requirements that associations which attended to spiritual doctrine, finances, and journalism work in accordance with the local parish committee.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid, 27-8.

²⁶ The byzantine networks of committees for the production and distribution of Catholic press materials was, per the Congress, under the purview of a press committee and organized at the diocesan level, with the assumption that the press committee and diocese committee would be comprised of many of the same individuals and, thus, cohesive with the larger program of Catholic action in that diocese.

²⁷ Ibid. Stated associations that demanded parish committee observation included Catholic presses, associations protesting public blasphemy, religious education and training, and financial matters. The latter referred to the

The Catholic associations promoted at the initial congresses in the 1870s were a mix of older *opere pie* and more innovative associations which more closely resembled liberal civil society. The promotion of new chapters of poor relief societies like the *Società de San Vincenzo di Paulo*, originally founded in 1833, was meant to help extend Catholic charity efforts in more areas of Italy. One novel association, the *Opera di S. Zita* – initially based in Rome, offered housing and some financial support for unemployed women and recently dismissed domestic workers – demonstrates the interest of the Congress in promoting historically new associations that used cooperative and mutual-aid elements, predominately concerned with direct aid to those most vulnerable in a given community. Furthermore, the Congress suggested taking the existing Catholic mutual aid societies and bringing them under the name of an existing society, the Roman *Associazione cattolica artistica ed operaia di Carità reciproca*, to standardize the operations of Italian mutual aid societies into a regular program.²⁸ Alongside the call to better organize Catholic mutual aid societies in general, subsequent Congresses encouraged promoting cooperative welfare institutions to protect impoverished priests, aid for the sick, and resocialization efforts for prisoners leaving incarceration.²⁹ With these recommendations the Opera dei Congressi had hoped that both older mutual aid societies and newly promoted associations could organize their respective chapters to operate in concordance with the larger,

Danaro di s. Pietro, a fundraising venture to support the Papacy while Pius IX remained a ‘prisoner in Rome’, and the *Opera dell’accompagnamento del SS. Viatico* which provided some traveling resources for priests who needed to get to dying parishioners who were out of the way and could not travel to partake of the Viaticum, a eucharist given just before death. 44.

²⁸ Ibid. 20.

²⁹ *Deliberazioni*. 19. 44-9. The congress did not generally support a large variety of operating *opere pie* or confraternities, as these laity-driven institutions were generally founded with local connections between a wealthy elite and clergy to attend to specific, local issues. That said, the Congress did encourage following the model of one specific urban poverty relief organization, the Florentine *Arciconfraternità della Misericordia*, in the Congress in Bologna, 1876. 47-50. *Documenti* I. 143-4.

national efforts of Catholic activism, thus streamlining the Catholic laity's engagement with poverty relief.

Aside from these charitable associations, the Opera dei Congressi also promoted a robust course of intellectual, social and religious associations. There were associational efforts to promote Catholic lending libraries that preferably operated free, with educational and popular books written in popular form, stocked with books donated by local Catholic associations, as well as the production of "renting guides" with the intention that the "purpose of the library remain Catholic." To buttress these efforts, there were suggestions for the promotion of Catholic reading rooms, to offer recreational spaces outside of the church for Catholics, and the creation of Catholic scientific clubs aimed at schoolchildren. Social clubs in the form of workers' circles, youth and women's groups were also suggestions emphatically stressed by the initial Congresses, as developing networks between these groups and Catholic authority were seen as a vital element in the Church's entrance into the world of modern Italian public life.³⁰

Of course, with such a diverse range of ideas and potentialities, the reality was that very few of these efforts could be adopted in a concrete way and that the parishes most likely to have both the financial resources or population of supporters necessary to carry out these programs were concentrated in larger Italian cities. The general sentiment of the Congresses was that the pastoral conditions of the countryside did not demand the immediate attention of Catholic activists, but that the condition of Italian workers and cities urgently did. Chapters of the *Società de San Vincenzo di Paulo* were founded almost exclusively in larger cities, with chapters writing the Opera dei Congressi from Genoa, Ferrara and Pisa.³¹ Catholic press efforts were also predominately urban, both because smaller parishes lacked the resources to manage a press and

³⁰ Ibid. 28. 13-14. 74-9.

³¹ *Documenti di Opera dei Congressi* II. Bologna: 1876. 55-6.

because press efforts were centered at the diocesan level – the seat of which was exclusively urban. But more than the material results of early Catholic activism on the Opera dei Congressi being best suited for urban spaces, where the rhetoric of Catholic action was predominately aimed with its focus on urban and industrial problems.

At the second meeting of the Congress in Bologna there was extended discussion of the problems of urban poverty and industrialism, but the disparagings were generally centered on Catholic morality. Giuseppe Benincori, engineer and secretary of the second section that year, noted that problems relating to industrialization had severely wounded the moral and economic character of many Italian families – with particular attention paid to women and children working in factories. Benincori acknowledged the “genius of Watt” but noted that these technological innovations had mostly resulted in a serious breach in family norms where children were robbed of the time to learn and grow, and families robbed of the benefits of female domesticity. These were strongly gendered arguments, where the woman, “enslaved to industry” was forced to abandon thought of her future as a mother and pragmatically work to make ends meet. In response to Bernicori’s rhetoric, the Congress encouraged Catholic factory owners to offer women paid leave for childbirth and early childcare.³² Bernicori’s speech was emblematic of the bombastic tenor of Catholic activism on issues regarding the social question in the early Congresses – moralistic in tone, overly optimistic in the religious conviction of the industrial elite and light on concrete methods to combat systemic economic inequality.

In an effort to develop more a concrete Catholic response to the social question, the 1876 Congress promoted a series of studies for the creation of effective charitable associations.³³ By the third Congress in Bergamo 1877, some of those exploratory studies were shared with the

³² Ibid. 172-6.

³³ Ibid. 21.

Congress which dedicated acute attention to problems facing industrial workers: long hours working exhausting jobs, no restriction on labor laws for women and children, alcoholism, and abysmal housing conditions. The Congress entertained some associational responses to some of these problems, including mimicking temperance leagues to combat alcoholism among workers and encouraging charitable associations to take up efforts to improve urban housing, but there is little evidence that much came of these declarations.³⁴ These inquiries effectively identified existing social problems and acknowledged them at the highest level of Catholic activism but failed to materialize either a concrete or abstract response to industrial problems.³⁵ That said, the Bergamo Congress did dedicate a significant portion of its time to discuss the efforts of some philanthropic industrialists who had succeeded in developing a philanthropic and paternalistic response to problems facing Catholic labor.

One of the larger presentations of the Bergamo Conference focused on one such industrialist, Lèon Harmel, a wool manufacturer whose factory town outside of Reims provided extensive worker support of a particularly Catholic variety. Originally founded in 1840 by his father, Harmel's factory would have been, in many ways, an ideal model for Catholic industry for the majority of Italian clergy and Catholic activists. The factory was closely imbricated with the existing local Catholic associations with several workers being members of the *Associazione delle figlie di Maria*, a women's lay association dedicated to religious education and training in Catholic morals, and the factory's sick workers attended by a local women's chapter of the

³⁴ *Deliberazioni*. 81-3.

³⁵ De Rosa, *Il Movimento Cattolico*. De Rosa's analysis of the first three Congresses is more optimistic, arguing that by the Congress in Bergamo (1877) the Opera dei Congressi had more successfully 'diagnosed' the problems in Italy's social question. This may be an overstatement. It is true that the Congress was no longer arguing that urban poverty stemmed the natural 'vice' in the city and that it was addressing specific, systemic problems in Italian industry. That said, their grasp on the 'cure' for that diagnosis remained vague and hobbled with endless moralistic conjecture. More important than the acknowledgement of proletarian problems, quite evident to most by 1877, would be the development of concrete efforts to support Catholic workers, which would not come until the period following *Rerum Novarum*. 70-1.

Società de San Vincenzo di Paulo.³⁶ Furthermore, Harmel's factory enforced a strict separation of the sexes with distinct and separate workspaces and rules prohibiting cursing to support Catholic anxieties about worker behavior. Harmel placed limits on the length of the workday, with the general rule that night work be avoided as much as possible and a rigid observation of Catholic festivals and holidays.³⁷ Benefits for workers included, per Achille Sassòli Tomba's study into Harmel's factory, better conditions if not better wages, and the opportunity to buy into a company sponsored worker savings bank. The bank, established in 1862, served as social security in the case of sickness, midwife fees or the cost of burial and paid an interest of five percent annually and a ten percent bonus for deposits made by members between twelve and eighteen years old.³⁸ The Congress applauded the paternalistic efforts of figures like Harmel as the Catholic ideal of the capitalist gentleman but, again, there was little the Congress could do other than encourage other capitalists to similarly invest in the material conditions of their workers and, more importantly to the leadership of the Congress, the spiritual and moral conditions of those workers. All said, the most that the Congresses in the 1870s could do was to encourage Italian industrialists to do in like manner, ultimately resulting in a program that encouraged class collaboration between workers and *padroni*.³⁹

³⁶ *Documenti di Opera dei Congressi* III, Bergamo: 1877. 408.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 399-402.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 420. Similar savings banks had been suggested in previous meetings of the Opera dei Congressi, with the Congress ultimately not offering much support for the idea. Per Gambasin, a Dr. Cesare Pecci had written the first Congress in Venice to encourage the development of Catholic banks, but Gambasin does not indicate what the character or structure of such banks would have been. Gambasin, *Il Movimento Sociale dell'Opera dei Congressi*. 129-30. In the Congress in Bologna (1876), there had been deliberations on Catholic workers' banks, but the deliberations were not recorded in the official documentation, with the Congress ultimately choosing to not pursue the effort. *Documenti* II. 21.

³⁹ De Rosa, *Il Movimento Cattolico*. De Rosa notes that leading Opera dei Congressi figures, like Sacchetti and Albani, were ultimately too concerned with the revolutionary impulse on the part of the workers to endorse too loudly workers' associational efforts that positioned themselves in opposition to *padroni*. Again, in a manner of thinking too common amongst intransigents, it was hoped Christian morality amongst capitalists would prompt them to take care for worker's needs more seriously. It was a paternalistic and moralistic approach, argues De Rosa, but it was one of the few forces supporting the "lowliest peasant" in the midst of the *anni neri*. 72.

This attention to industrial issues, again, did not materialize objective resources to help Italian Catholic workers on the part of the Opera dei Congressi, but there were some innovations to promote Catholic presence in Italian public life. What would prove to be perhaps the most successful of the innovations promoted by the Opera dei Congressi in the 1870s was the development of routine regional pilgrimages. Promoted at the diocese level, Catholics were encouraged to organize routine, group pilgrimages to local shrines and monuments organized by parish priests and in concert with important festivals and holidays. Starting from the initial promotion of pilgrimage as spiritual worship in the first Congress in Venice, by the third Congress in Bergamo, Catholics were encouraged “that in each diocese and region a Shrine be designated, to which the Catholics of the diocese or region have agreed [to go on pilgrimage] every year”, an effort the Congress suggested “if possible, be done all at once”.⁴⁰ The goal was to organize Catholic associations at the diocesan level and create populous, spiritual worship experiences that encouraged Italians Catholics to engage in a participatory and public experience that served as both an act of spiritual faith and also a public demonstration of Catholicism. Furthermore, Catholic pilgrims were to be “directed and cared for” by local Catholic associations and *opere pie*, which was useful “not only for Italian pilgrims, but also “to Catholics of other nations” traveling to Italy’s wealth of Catholic shrines.⁴¹ The results were initially modest, but the advocacy for pilgrimages had started the process of developing associational ties between the parochial, vicariate and apostolic levels. Associations were already encouraged to be prominently represented in religious processions, present at vital rituals – such as the first communion of an infant – and a myriad of other cooperative functions, all of which constituted

⁴⁰ *Deliberazioni*. 67.

⁴¹ *Documenti* III. 65. 78-9.

local demonstrations.⁴² What made regional pilgrimages more remarkable was that they encouraged associational engagement not only in the center of the diocese, where the majority of Catholic associations were located, but added groups coming from the periphery parishes in the countryside. While the numbers of early pilgrims were modest, the use of these existing ecclesiastical connections in concert with a developing Catholic civil society established a foundation the later Catholic movement would make greater use of.

But the concrete results of these pilgrimages were still modest, a reality which prompted reverend Giuseppe Beltrame, a committee member of the first section, to note in his speech on religious works in Bergamo “Gentlemen, we have done little, it is true, I confess; but courage! we have done enough to [engender] fear from our enemies, who note: the Catholics do not give up and are not discouraged.”⁴³ To what degree the ‘enemies’ he referred to, either the Italian state or rival liberals, were afraid of the Catholic movement was debatable. Perhaps more plausible was his comment in a closing address that the efforts of the Catholic movement in all functions – press, associations and even pilgrimage demonstrations – “will contribute in Italy to determine [its] double unity, and to bring Catholics together in a way that all the points of the circumference are united together...in a manner whereby the rays join the whole center to the periphery.”⁴⁴ This indicates that some in the early leadership of the Catholic movement imagined themselves actively working to complete the process started by the Risorgimento but, apparently, left incomplete by liberals. This was to bind Catholics towards the spiritual ‘center’ of the Catholic Church by, in no small part, asserting the presence of Catholicism in the Italian public sphere. This effort was accomplished functionally by directing the efforts of the

⁴² *Deliberazioni*. These efforts seem to have been to encourage Catholic associations to have a public function, effectively serving as a demonstration of the associational ‘strength’ that the Catholic church could muster. 8. 70.

⁴³ *Documenti* III. 170.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 366.

periphery's parish committees to work in concert with the efforts of a diocese, diocese committees with the regional committees, and regional committees with the 'center' of the Catholic movement, the Opera dei Congressi. That is to say, in the 1870s, even if a robust concrete program of Catholic action had not been realized on a large scale, the organization of the movement and its close connection with the capillary ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church provided leverage to mobilize the parishes in the Italian countryside in a manner that had escaped Risorgimento liberals.

CHAPTER 3: PARISHES ON THE PERIPHERY

The most significant period of Catholic action in Italy followed the declaration of *Rerum Novarum* by Leo XIII in March 1891, which condemned both laissez-faire capitalism and socialist radical politics. Many of the Catholic movement's most common social talking points were manifested in *Rerum Novarum*, which discouraged tensions between classes and encouraged unions of both employees and employers in the promotion of social and economic justice. Although the larger issues pertinent to the social question that Catholics had raised in the initial Congresses do not translate to a Catholic sympathy for labor, *Rerum Novarum* did prompt Catholic activism to address, in a concrete manner, poverty in Italy. Per Leo XIII, employers were not to deal fraudulently with workers "by force, fraud, or by usurious dealing" because "the laboring man is, as a rule, weak and unprotected." Furthermore, he cautioned that mutual aggression between wealthy and laboring classes was itself a social danger and simultaneously encouraged workers to be wary of the promises of socialist labor organizers. *Rerum Novarum* allowed for workers to strike when necessary, albeit under the guidance of local clergy. The circumstances that called for workers to strike would have been familiar issues to any who had attended the Opera dei Congressi in previous decades. The encyclical allowed strikes against employers that did not allow sufficient time off for religious worship, that provoked moral laxity by mixing of the sexes in working spaces, that laid unjust burdens, degrading conditions, or demanded labor in excess of a worker's age or sex.⁴⁵ On the subject of labor, the stated position

⁴⁵ *Rerum Novarum*. Leo XIII. Vatican.va. These were all common talking points in the initial Congresses addressing the abuses of industry against Catholic faithful and transgressions of Catholic morality. 19. 20. 36.

of Leo XIII and, thus, the intransigent leadership of the Congress was staunchly antisocialist, and *Rerum Novarum* predominately focused on the threat working conditions posed to prevent workers' practice of Catholicism or caused a breach in Catholic conceptions of morality.⁴⁶

That said, *Rerum Novarum* did direct Catholic attention to the real problem of industrial working conditions and stimulated some Catholic effort to protect workers from abusive employers. *Rerum Novarum* itself reads as a continuation of the established social rhetoric that had been present at the Opera dei Congressi meetings in the 1870s – predominately concerned with worker's conditions as they related to Catholic moralism more so than a coherent program of social justice. While *Rerum Novarum* had prompted the beginnings of a nascent Catholic labor movement, its focus on the concerns of urban and industrial workers gave no direct attention to the Italian peasantry who had become increasingly proletarianized following the agricultural crisis of 1873.⁴⁷ For the majority of Italian peasants, the material circumstances were as scant as they were for urban workers, with problems of hygienic housing and malnutrition being commonplace throughout rural Italy. These rural conditions had driven many young men, faced with an evaporating labor market and few occupational prospects, to emigrate and look for work elsewhere, first in Italian cities, then elsewhere in Europe or the Americas.⁴⁸ Furthermore, rural Italians found little recourse from existing Catholic charitable institutions,

⁴⁶ *Quod Apostolici Muneris*. Leo XIII. Vatican.va. 1878. *Quod Apostolici Muneris* was one of the first encyclicals given by Leo XIII, in which he described socialism as an extension of the previous 'sects' of danger spelled out in the Syllabus of Errors. 5-7.

⁴⁷ Agócs, Sándor. *The Troubled Origins of the Italian Catholic Labor Movement*. (Wayne State University Press, Detroit: 1988). In this book, Agócs argues that the development of the Italian Catholic labor paradigm was hindered by Catholic social thought and its dual acknowledgement of social inequality without a coherent program on social justice outside of Christian rhetoric on charity. As such, Christian thought on social hierarchy encouraged 'mixed unions' of both wealthy employers and laborers to discuss issues important to both and come to some agreement. These 'mixed unions' were and lauded by Italian economist and Catholic activist Giuseppe Toniolo and Medolago Albani, the head of the second section of the Opera dei Congressi – titled Christian Social Economy as of 1879. 50-5.

⁴⁸ De Rosa. *Il movimento cattolico*. De Rosa notes in 1886 some 61,484 people – mostly of men – would leave Northern Italy. By 1887 that would rise to 134,446. 82-3.

with the plurality of orphanages, houses of recovery, hospitals and previously mentioned Catholic cooperative charities concentrated in the larger, more populated parishes of Italian cities.⁴⁹ Though, throughout the 1890s that was a circumstance that was changing.

By the end of the century, there was a significant expansion of Catholic associational life among rural parishes and smaller communities – parish committees, Catholic worker’s societies, Catholic rural banks, and agrarian indemnification associations – all founded in progressively rural contexts.⁵⁰ Indeed, following *Rerum Novarum*, Catholic activists began to advocate a program of reformist efforts aimed specifically at the problems faced by Italian small farmers, sharecroppers and agricultural laborers in hopes of providing an alternative to socialist and anarchist efforts to radicalize the peasantry.⁵¹ Furthermore, the intransigent laity of the Congress demonstrated an increased collaboration with a new generation of younger, motivated clergy of a more reformist spirit, working to develop new social welfare and cooperative aid programs to support those living on the margins in Italian agriculture. The result was a groundswell of local Catholic activism, that encouraged a broad expansion of local parish committees and rural Catholic associational life in the Italian countryside.⁵² While *Rerum Novarum* had propelled

⁴⁹ *La Visista Pastorale di Antonio Farina nella Vicenza (1864-71)*. Farina’s visitation to the vicariates in Vicenza, the majority of the Catholic social infrastructure was seated in the urban parishes which had the larger population to both support and finance them. In smaller cities the most common resource coordinated with the church were midwives. Part of Farina’s questionnaire for his visitation had been to inquire how many of these local midwives had been certified by a doctor, but these checks for technical medical skill were nominal at best. 8-9.

⁵⁰ Gambasin. *Il movimento sociale nell’Opera dei Congressi*. Gambasin refers to the period starting in 1889-97 to be the golden age of the Italian Catholic movement. This stemmed largely from intransigent control of the administration of the Opera dei Congressi and a contemporaneous crisis in Italian liberalism. According to Gambasin, this period offered a pivot from the older clerics for whom issues like the Roman Question remained central, to younger activists more interested in the social and economic development of Italy put the Catholic movement in a greater position to effect social programs. 356-7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* Following the Congress of Genoa (1892), roughly half of the deliberations at subsequent congresses addressed the agricultural question. 5 of 9 in Genoa (1892), 3 of 6 in Rome (1893), 4 of 8 in Pavia (1894) and Turin (1895), and 4 of 7 in Fiesole (1896). 446.

⁵² *Ibid.* Gambasin notes that Paganuzzi, President of the Permanent Committee of the Opera dei Congressi, preferred a more intimate union and close link between Catholic lay-activism and the clergy and, in questions of leadership, preferred immediate collaboration with priests. 292-3.

Catholic activism in the 1890s to seriously examine systemic issues in capitalism generally, the expansion of Catholic conceptions of social questions to include agricultural issues was driven by parish-level activism and the acknowledgment of critical problems in rural Italy. These efforts were carried out by parochial priests who were able to use the Opera dei Congressi as a national platform to address rural problems – the most controversial of which was the proliferation of Catholic rural banks.

These banks gave the parochial clergy new bureaucratic and financial roles in rural Italian communities in addition to existing spiritual ones. The historiographic consensus as to the effect rural banks had on the wellbeing of Italian agricultural communities is divided, with older histories vindicating these efforts as beneficial for small farmers in agricultural Italy, with less access to credit than wealthy, urban planters.⁵³ Other early histories of the Catholic movement ultimately understood the efforts as laudable, driven by evangelical ardor to help the impoverished Italians, even if the material results are difficult to ascertain.⁵⁴ Subsequent scholarship ranges from skeptical to refuting any positive the effect that Catholic rural credit offered Italian small farmers.⁵⁵ In most of these histories the meaning of these new associations under parish committees are examined on a national or regional level, with little attention to what

⁵³ De Rosa. *Il movimento cattolico*. De Rosa argues that in areas like Veneto, where mulberry cultivation and access to silkworm cocoons were key to the success of the smaller farmer, rural banks proved more effective a support than other cooperative associations like mutual aid societies. He notes that the rural banks offered greater access to the silk trade which was useful for these small farmers who had previously lacked access to credit for the acquisition of tools, seeds, and silkworm pods was more productive than farmer's pooling meager profits. 83-4.

⁵⁴ Gambasin. *Il movimento sociale nell'Opera dei Congressi*. Gambasin's admiration for the social efforts of the Catholic movement tends to paint his reading of Cerutti as well-meaning cleric, with purely social and apolitical intentions to institute rural banks. Of course, Cerutti's commitment that only Catholics were capable of addressing social needs was explicitly anti-socialist, which does present some problems with this analysis. 9-10.

⁵⁵ Lanaro, Silvio. "Movimento cattolico e sviluppo capitalistico nel Veneto fra '800 e '900" *Studi Storici*. Vol. 15. No. 1. 1974. Lanaro takes great issue with Catholic rural banks which were financially backed by local diocese banks, like the Catholic Bank of Vicenza that was founded in 1892, who themselves followed a more traditional shareholder model. In reality, per Lanaro, the investment of these banks was rarely in the expansion of agricultural credit, but in the developing industry in cities like Vicenza. As such, Lanaro casts significant doubt as to how interested the larger reality of Catholic banking was in the improvement of the lots of small farmers. 57-105.

it meant for the parochial priests to have access to new authority in community life. Unlike the previous Catholic efforts in promoting institutions like the Catholic press, which had predominately been printed in cities and disseminated by local priests, these more novel social welfare institutions placed the parish committee – and, thus, the parish itself – at the center. As noted in his chapter on the significance of the parish in Italian memory, historian Pietro Borzomati notes that “The parish priest of Veneto was considered, in traditional society, to be the custodian of almost supernatural powers...he was asked to intervene to ward off natural disasters, to propitiate the rain, etc.”⁵⁶ In communities with parish committees which had become, in many cases, the only arbiters of access to credit or agricultural insurance, how much more influential over the lives of their parishioners was the parochial clergy?

Following the declaration of *Rerum Novarum*, the meeting of the Opera dei Congressi in Vicenza in November 1891, generally served as an opportunity to expound on the points raised in the encyclical within the larger context of Catholic activism. As for problems pertaining to specifically agricultural workers, there had been some discussion of agricultural issues in previous Congresses, but little had come from it. The discussions of so-called *unioni rurali* were not taken down by the Congress in Vicenza, which may have stemmed from the lack of developed ideas on how to address the issue. It also speaks to the continued focus on the urban worker as the subject most in need of Catholic charity, at risk of temptation by sin – or worse – socialism and anarchism. Specifically, in Leo XIII’s letter to the leadership of the Opera dei Congressi, the Pope ordered the congress to look into the dual problems of “property and credit”, both of which were inaccessible for the majority of the Italian working class, and that the

⁵⁶ Isneghi, Mario. *I luoghi della memoria. Stutture ed eventi dell’Italia*. Bari: 2010. Borzomati, Pietro. “La parrocchia”. 69-91. Borzomati also note that for most Italians, particularly in rural parishes, the period following unification was tumultuous and that the stability offered by religious worship and ceremony should not be discounted. 71. 74-5.

Congress should “not delay in getting to work” on these issues. While this prompted some deliberation on efforts to support industrial workers, the Vicenza Congress elected to defer the purported discussions on rural unions to the subsequent Congress after more exploratory work had been carried out in “a strictly Catholic way”.⁵⁷

One of the most important figures in the development and planning of the Catholic response to address rural issues was priest Luigi Cerutti, secretary of the Social Christian Economy section of the Opera dei Congressi in the 1890s. Many of the programs advocated by Cerutti proved to be a blue-print to the development of Catholic action in rural Italy. Born in the small town of Mira in 1865, on the south side of the Venetian Lagoon, Cerutti would have had a provincial and modest childhood. The son of the Mira’s doctor, Giobatta Cerutti, Luigi would have been familiar with many of the worst conditions – malnutrition, pellagra and tuberculosis – faced by the Venetian rural peasantry. Ordained in 1888, Cerutti was a young priest when he first attended the Opera dei Congressi in 1891, convened shortly after *Rerum Novarum*, likely with his own ideas and ambitions with how to address agricultural problems in Italy. While he made no recorded statement at the meeting in Vicenza, Cerutti’s rhetoric and proposals to address the problems of rural poverty were prominently featured in the Genoa Congress in 1892.⁵⁸

In Genoa, Cerutti gave several speeches and presented a series of social welfare efforts aimed at both sharecropping peasantry and small farmers and directed Catholic activists to consider the perceived problems of political radicalism, emigration, and religious indifference within the larger context of economic scarcity. He argued that if abandoned to poverty, rural

⁵⁷ *Documenti di Opera dei Congressi IX*. Vol. I. Vicenza: 1891. 68-77. 227.

⁵⁸ Tramontin, Silvio. “Cerutti, Luigi”. Treccani.it. Treccani. Accessed 17 March 2020. The entry seems to be either heavily based on, or directly from Tramontin’s contribution on Cerutti in the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*. Vol. 24. (1980).

peasants were more likely to be misled by socialist or anarchist thinking and more likely to abandon their homes in search of better prospects. Furthermore, Cerutti argued that the efforts of press and religious life that had been central to the earlier Congresses were not sufficient to bring prodigal Italian back to the faith, noting “while a school without God and a corrupt and rotting press pervert our rural populations, a powerful economic malaise makes them miserable and desperate.” For Cerutti, addressing the economic realities of rural poverty was just as pressing a concern for the preservation of Catholic interests in Italian society as Catholic complaints on Italian secular education or attacks from the liberal press. Maintaining the position that Catholic associations were intended to carry out an exclusively religious function, Cerutti suggested the threat of socialists who, anxious to “raise their banners” in the countryside were targeting poor agricultural workers with propaganda. Since “the real help of the poor man cannot be offered by anyone than the Catholics” it was, he argued, the responsibility of Catholic activism to take serious efforts to combat rural indigence. Given the previous Congress’s charge to study agricultural poverty and conceptualize responses, Cerutti had examined and suggested associations to address these concerns, namely: “parochial credit associations, collective purchasing, [and] damage insurance for mortality or for the deterioration of livestock.”⁵⁹

Unlike previous associations promoted by the Opera dei Congressi in the 1870s – for example, the *Società de San Vincenzo di Paulo* – Cerutti’s suggestions were not meant to supplement worker incomes with laical charity nor dependent on pious laity to attend the sick. Rather, they alleged to offer immediate access to the vital mechanisms of credit and insurance to small farmers and sharecroppers. The most successful of these new ideas were rural banks, which Cerutti claimed “made credit real and beneficial, protecting the interest of the poor”.

⁵⁹ *Documenti di Opera dei Congressi X*. Vol. 1. Genoa: 1892. 160-5.

These agricultural credit unions, in theory, offered low interest loans to small farmers or sharecroppers who bought into the union to cover planting costs or necessary repairs, then paid back after the harvest. In all, Cerutti hoped that through Catholic sponsored credit it could be “demonstrated in light of the facts that only religion can make people happy, even materially.”⁶⁰ This claim was doubtlessly helpful in convincing Cerutti’s audience at the Opera dei Congressi in Genoa. Since the model for the bank had been invented by liberals, the religiosity of these efforts was less clear – thus not necessarily within the stated goals of the Congress as a religious organization. Where the associations promoted in the earlier congresses were, in many cases, advertised as extensions of older confraternities and *opere pie*, making the line between religious charity and cooperative association quite murky, the programs Cerutti was advocating were less religious in nature, dealing with finance and credit as opposed to charity or worship.⁶¹

To give some evidence as to what Catholic-led rural banking would look like, Cerutti turned to the work of Bishop Apollonio in Treviso, who had worked with the parish committees in Treviso to promote seventeen rural banks in the time since the Congress had met in Vicenza, with preparations to found another twenty six within the year. Cerutti highlighted the importance of parish and diocese committees as the origin of successful Catholic action, noting that parish committees were “the first and necessary step” to organize and carry out the functions of rural banks and indemnification associations, which could be set up by as few as five people

⁶⁰ Ibid. 162.

⁶¹ It should also be noted that these banks had a ‘confessional’ character, meaning that the parish committees would take into account the religiosity of the lender in the decision to offer a loan. The deliberations at the Genoa conference do not offer much insight on what the metrics of such assessments would be or how different paternalistic Catholic attitudes and paternalistic liberal attitudes on debt would actually be. An interesting extension of this research would be to compare the statutes and articles of both rural and Catholic banks to better understand the distinctions in these two models of paternalist lending. For the Opera dei Congressi, which stressed its commitment as a religious organization, the stated intention of these institutions was to direct the parochial laity in rural Italy to the Church, so there was a heavy focus on a potential borrowers commitment to Catholicism, at least in the general, which is to say the most abstract, level promoted by the Congress.

“who are animated by a true spirit.” Furthermore, he noted that the parish priests in Treviso, where Apollonio had done promising work for the development of Catholic rural banks, had lauded these efforts but put the question of an official endorsement to the Opera dei Congressi. This meant that the onus was on the Congress in Genoa to endorse concrete rural programs and, thus, not leave the more motivated parochial clergy as a deliberative footnote, as had happened in Vicenza the year before. Cerutti closed noting that Bishop Apollonio and the parochial priests in Treviso had not gotten bogged down in procedural vacillation, but “if they fought in battle, they won.” Following the presentation of this ‘experiment’ in Treviso, the Congress approved the operation of similar Catholic rural banks throughout Italy.⁶² This is reflective of a larger change in Catholic activism that followed *Rerum Novarum*, where the initial Congresses had dwelt on certain Catholic talking points – the Roman question, education, the challenge of anticlericalism from the government and press – starting in 1892, the Catholic movement began to actively establish homogenous institutions designed for broad adoption connected to parish committees, which themselves could, theoretically, be constructed in even the most remote communities.

The rural banks promoted by Cerutti were institutions with unlimited liability, originally based on the Prussian Raiffeisen model, and imported by economist Leone Wollemborg. Wollemborg’s rural banks were a network of small rural credit unions, which offered long term, low interest loans to help assuage the miseries that were brought on by pawnbrokers and usurers in the cycle of agrarian debt. The Raiffeisen model had been designed with the intention to keep the aristocracy out of the day-to-day functioning of the bank, as was more common in joint-stock and shareholder banking, and thus give farmers more stake in the venture. After founding the

⁶² Ibid. 163. 62-63.

first bank in Loreggia in 1886, Wollemborg campaigned aggressively to promote the model. While there is some evidence of Catholic participation in so-called ‘neutral’ banks – like the presence of archpriest Don Domenico on the board of a rural bank in Rovolon, 1886, formed shortly after a lecture given by Wollemborg on the benefits of the institution – there is no evidence that the clergy played a large part in the administration or development of these banks.⁶³

Ultimately, the capillary structure of the Catholic movement – from national congress to parish committees in the hinterland – allowed a robust program of reformist associations meant to help guide poor Italians back to religion by addressing the structural problems that caused agricultural poverty. One result of this was, by the turn of the century, parish committees were establishing Catholic rural banks at a remarkable rate, one not achieved by the efforts of Wollemborg. By 1897 ‘neutral’ rural banks in Italy were numbered at 125 while there were 779 Catholic rural banks.⁶⁴ What role did Catholic practice play in these banks? First, a bank required a previously established parish committee, which Cerutti strongly encouraged more parishes to organize, so that the bank was tied to the larger associational network of the Opera dei Congressi. Second, Catholic rural banks had a confessional characteristic, wherein the morality and honesty of the lender was gauged by his ability “to explain Christian feelings towards religion, the Church, the pontiff, Christian education of the children, [and] the sanctification of the holidays”.⁶⁵

⁶³ *La Libertà*. a. IV n. 2-3 (February-March 1889). *La Libertà* was a largely liberal periodical, aimed at publishing the gains of Paduan financial, social, and political associations. Rural banks and mutual aid societies were common organizations that were promoted in the paper. 18.

⁶⁴ Fabbri, Lia Gheza. "Crescita e natura delle casse rurali cattoliche". *Quaderni Storici* 12, no. 36 (3) (1977): 789-92. This data is taken from a table Fabbri presents showing the quick spread of Catholic rural banks from the founding of the first Catholic rural banks in 1892.

⁶⁵ Tramontin, Silvio. "Cerutti, Luigi". Treccani.it. Treccani. There were some Catholics who had suggested keeping the model of the bank neutral but given the deeply anti-capitalist tenor of the Catholic movement, Cerutti argued that copying liberals was itself capitulating existing banking establishments. Only by maintaining a religious

While rural banks proved to be one of the most successful efforts of Catholic action in the sphere of Italian agriculture, there were other ideas Cerutti promoted at the Congress in Genoa. To defend against the greater exposure to natural disaster smaller farmers had, where significant loss of livestock to disease and the threat of fire or hail could mean life or death, Cerutti called for livestock, hail and fire insurance accessible at cheap shares for Catholic farmers. To coordinate Catholic agricultural institutions, Cerutti called for agricultural associations that were meant to be accessible for smaller farmers. These associations were intended to improve access to production technology and ease some of the pains of local agricultural markets by both buying product for local use, thus not forced to compete with the dual problem of the relatively new Italian national market or the international market, and provide access for small farmers to purchase chemicals to increase yields: namely chemical fertilizer and copper sulphate – an herbicide commonly used in irrigation. Furthermore, Cerutti encouraged a Catholic edited agricultural newspaper to coordinate these associational efforts specifically regarding agriculture at the regional level. Other ideas that never materialized, at least not in broad adoption across the world of Italian agriculture, included Catholic bread ovens and consumer cooperatives which would, ideally, use collective bargaining through the local chapter of the agricultural association to negotiate cheaper prices to vital goods like clothes and food from local firms in bulk for cheaper access for members of the association.⁶⁶ In all, where liberal agricultural associations had been administered predominately by local notables in larger cities, Cerutti envisaged Catholic agricultural associations to be administered at the local level by parochial clergy and sympathetic laity and sponsor concrete and harmonious endeavors to directly address larger

qualification of the lender, could the institution – i.e. the practice of lending itself – be purified. Accessed 17 March 2020.

⁶⁶ *Documenti X*. 166-70. 258.

market woes felt by the agricultural working class.⁶⁷ The direct attention to these woes should itself be considered a significant factor in the Church's successes in the period, when liberal and state efforts struggled to bring about much real benefit in the midst of agricultural crisis.

Indeed, Cerutti's prominence at the Genoa Congress (1892) was itself a revealing detail – as many of the most successful efforts of Catholic action was led by an attendant priest of a relatively small parish. The early Congresses had largely been led by notable laity and more prominent members of the clergy, a rarefied rank of conservative elites in Italy. In Genoa, however, there was a significant showing from more modest clergy which promoted concrete reforms to problems more integral to the experience of provincial priests. Cerutti's speeches were buttressed by parochial clergy like archpriest of Berganze, Adrea Scotton, who argued that the established practice of sharecropping in Italy, the so-called *mezzadria*, was an honest arrangement between the tenant and the landowner in theory but had become exploitative as modern sharecroppers suffered the abuses of greedy landowners. These planters had, per Scotton, become “beasts” insistent on squeezing their tenants into unhygienic circumstances “forcing poor farmers to sleep, like acrobats, four or five in each room closet”. Such exploitation, Scotton concluded, often drove sharecroppers to turn to usurers to help ends meet.⁶⁸ The experience of parochial clergy like Scotton and Cerutti in the legitimate social ills in Venetian rural life was, perhaps, more useful for many parish priests than the prognostication of moral collapse in Italian society as a result of secular education and anticlericalism that the initial Congresses had indulged in. It seems likely that this attention to concrete solutions for real

⁶⁷ Soper. *Building a Civil Society*. Soper notes agricultural associations were reform-oriented, but the nature of this reform seems to have been of a rather typical progressive and paternal shade. Efforts like the Agrarian Defense League, established by staunch Catholic industrialist Alessandro Rossi in 1885, were created with specifically political leanings – namely to enact protectionist reforms. The period following the agricultural crisis in 1873 saw, per Soper, the consolidation of power into *sindicati agricoli* and the less effective *comizi agrari* into relatively ineffective federal and regional efforts to address concerns. 192.

⁶⁸ *Documenti X*. 268-70.

problems did catalyze local activism in the scattered parishes across Italy, as evidenced by a sharp increase in the formation of parish committees in Italy, particularly in the North.

While this increase in parish committees effectively opened the doors for Italian parishes to join a larger network of Catholic agricultural credit, insurance and agricultural workers' societies, it is important to note that access to these institutions required parish committees as a prerequisite. However, the organization of a parish committee was an investment that not every parish could manage. The parish of Ceneda, a smaller parish in the diocese of Treviso, reported in 1896 that two parish committee applications had to be reject because their "principles were unsure" following a complaint that prospective "committees are somewhat affected by their old age or their youth or their poverty."⁶⁹ This suggests that even in regions in northern Italy which served as the geographical center of the Catholic movement, the realities of an aging clergy and poverty were significant challenges in some parishes that made joining the Catholic movement at the regional or national level more difficult, limiting access to the larger program of Catholic programs. In the period shortly after unification, the parochial clergy of the diocese of Vicenza had lived in conditions that "allowed the clergy to live a substantially peaceful life, far from both indigence and abundance" but with population growth relative to a steady decline in the number of Italian clergy meant that the roster of parish priests, particularly in rural communities, was particularly strained.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *Documenti di Opera dei Congressi XIV*. Vol. II. Fiesole: 1896. 72.

⁷⁰ Giovanni Mantese, Ermenegildo Reato. "Vita religiosa e problem pastorali del clero vicentino". *Chiesa e religiosità in Italia*, Vol. 2. (Milan: 1971) Reato and Mantese note that in the period after unification, the average number of parishioners in parishes outside of the larger cities of Vicenza was roughly four hundred per priest. This relatively modest ratio would become more difficult in the 1880s for three reasons: a considerable increase in the population of Vicenza, a marked decrease in seminary graduates, and an aging clergy who were dying amidst fewer ordinations every year. They argue that one of the precipitating factors in the decrease in clerical training had followed new policies enacted by the liberal state, including the establishment of secular education, military service required of the clergy, opposition to the Italian state's ecclesiastical appointments, and the ceased civil recognition of ecclesiastical marriage. This weakening of the clergy in a myriad of affairs had effectively, according to Reato and Mantese, thoroughly slowed to ordination of new Italian priests in the period.

The limitations of smaller parishes aside, there was a remarkable increase in the formation of parish committees in the 1890s, and a subsequent increase in the adoption of newer Catholic associations. Over the decade, the diocese of Vicenza saw the institution of twelve Catholic insurance companies, twenty-one Catholic agricultural worker's societies and thirty-three Catholic rural banks.⁷¹ How had the Church's more traditional authorities adjusted to these developments? There was evidence that apostolic authorities viewed the development of these new *associazioni* as distinct from older Catholic cooperative charity efforts. In his visitation of Vicentine parishes, Antonio Feruglio labeled lay organizations like the *Società de San Vincenzo di Paulo* as *opera pie* and grouped associations that had been more recently promoted by the Opera dei Congressi in a separate category. Furthermore, Feruglio's visitation revealed that parish committees and Catholic social welfare associations were becoming more common in smaller towns and villages. The small town of Cassola, where Pietro Bonvicini had provoked scandal by smoking before morning mass, with just over a thousand parishioners had organized a parish committee. According to Feruglio's account, there were forty-three parish committees in the diocese of Vicenza, with thirty-one of those parishes reporting less than two thousand parishioners. Of all the parish committees noted by Feruglio, only one was reported to have been founded in the period before the 1890s, the village of Montorso who had initially founded a parochial committee in 1880, but it had at some point been dissolved and was reconstituted in 1896.⁷² Why the committee had been allowed to dissolve is not divulged, but it does suggest that

⁷¹ Reato, Ermenegildo. *Pensiero e azione sociale dei Cattolici Vicentini e Veneti dalla Rerum Novarum al Fascismo*. Taken from a series of tables listing the development of Catholic associations in Vicenza. 167-74.

⁷² *La Visita Pastorale di Antonio Feruglio nella Vicenza (1895-1905)*. The smallest Vicentine communities with parish committees were as small as a few hundred, such as in Lumignano, Quargnenta, Casale, and Vivaro. Beyond the parochial committees, Feruglio noted five rural banks in the diocese of Vicenza, three Catholic associations for cattle and fire insurance and seventeen Catholic worker's societies. 70-1. 45-6. 121-2. 151-2. 155-6. 185-7. 189-91. 206-8. 215-6. 219-20. 221-3. 235-7. 239-41. 255-7. 270-5. 287-9. 291-3. 293-5. 306-8. 327-9. 331-3. 340-1. 383-6. 430-1. 459-63. 466-7. 474-5. 487-9. 490. 530-2. 558-9. 578-80.

even the initial local organization of the early Catholic movement had struggled to maintain momentum over the subsequent decade.

Feruglio's visitation also reveals an expansion of Catholic workers' societies connected to parish committees in Vicenza. Some of these workers' societies had predated the larger Catholic movement, but in the first Congress were instructed to organize themselves under the local authority of a parish committee.⁷³ These organizations rarely had much more than a hundred members, but nearly half of the reported parish committees had a connected Catholic worker's society in Feruglio's pastoral visitation of Vicenza. As such, the proliferation of Catholic banks and rural banks should be placed in the broader context of Catholic organized worker efforts that extended, in the case of Vicenza, as far back as 1873.⁷⁴ Though its members were likely not workers, the village of Sabbion had even formed a Catholic agricultural association with 195 members, though its exact aims are not specified.⁷⁵ Given the quick organization and development of these institutions, Feruglio's visitation reveal that the parish committees that connected isolated parishes to the larger world of Catholic activism were not universal in the diocese of Vicenza, but they were not uncommon.

It is worth noting that Catholic cooperative labor efforts did not exist in a vacuum – and while Feruglio's visitation does not speak to the existence of socialist or other workers' societies

⁷³ *Deliberazioni*. 13-4. *Documenti di Opera dei Congressi IX*. In the preparations for the congress in Vicenza, a questionnaire had been sent out to previously reported Catholic worker's societies to gather statistical data on costs to the worker and the offered benefit of the given society. The results were less than ideal, with around a hundred such societies having not written in – for the ones that had, average donation was fifty cents to one lira a month, with a vast difference in how companies paid out sick benefits, some according to need, other according to how much had been paid into the society, either total or monthly. 137-44.

⁷⁴ For more on Vicenza's early Catholic worker's societies see: Reato. *Pensiero e azione sociale dei cattolici vicentini e veneti*. 3-16.

⁷⁵ *La Visista Pastorale di Antonio Feruglio nella Vicenza (1895-1905)*. Sabbion, in Cologna Veneta, one of the southernmost vicariates in Vicenza and in the agricultural heartland of the Po river valley, was reported to have a population just under one thousand, suggesting that the members of this agricultural association likely came from surrounding towns. It is also likely that the members were not workers, but local farmers. 439-440.

in a given parish, they did exist, and Catholics were aware of the competition. Professor Giuseppe Toniolo, economist and prominent Catholic activist, had long fought for a more cooperative-minded solution to the crisis of poverty in Italy, contesting that confessional banks as suggested by Cerutti were paternalistic and limiting to the worker who borrowed from them.⁷⁶ Toniolo preferred the approach of the Catholic movement in Belgium, which was more developed than the efforts in Italy and focused more on cooperation and mutual aid than the development of concrete social welfare institutions that were administered by the clergy. Furthermore, Toniolo felt that Catholic rhetoric, particularly when it came to critiques of capitalism, needed to be particularly precise, so as to not encourage a stronger sense of class consciousness and push worker's *towards* socialism. In Lombardy, there had been:

A split ... between the young and secular element and the older and priestly element. But it seemed afterwards that it had deeper roots, with regard to social doctrines, young people willing to attack owners and capitalists to defend the people, to advocate for job grants, to maintain that it is convenient to push Catholic workers' societies to get in touch with socialist...but then I risk being overwhelmed by them and dictating a program that aerates the so-called Catholic socialism.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Dutton, Robin Anne. *Italian Catholics and the social question: the emergence of a social consciousness and social action amongst conservative Catholics in late 19th century Italy*. PhD diss. Australian National University. 2013. Toniolo was among the more progressive lay activists in the Opera dei Congressi, the *cristiano sociali*, who were predominately more interested in further study to more completely understand economic and social problems in Italy. Given the extreme conservatism of the Congress' president, Giovanni Battista Paganuzzi, in the later congresses, Toniolo's more studious approach was less preferable to the intransigent leadership, who wanted to maintain paternalistic relations with the Italian peasantry through institutions like Catholic rural banks. Toniolo was more sympathetic with Italian laborers and was much more willing to endorse political participation and the formation of simple unions for the defense of Italian labor than the intransigent wing of the Opera dei Congressi. That said, throughout the 1890s, Toniolo and other *cristiano sociali* lacked the backing of the administration that conservatives like Cerutti enjoyed. 157-8.

⁷⁷ Gambasin. *Il movimento sociale*. Quote taken from Gambasin, originally in *Lecture di Giuseppe Toniolo*. Vol. I. Gambasin notes that by 1894, two broad trends emerged amongst Catholic action – those who preferred the practical social programs along the lines of Cerutti's rural initiatives and those who were scholars of social and economic theories. These tensions were ideological lines as well, with the former being more conservative, the latter more progressive. Toniolo was less optimistic about the class collaboration encouraged by *Rerum Novarum* and more open to non-mixed professional unions if there was no chance employers would hear their employees' complaints. It should also be added that Toniolo's *cristiano sociali* were effectively democratic socialists, but resistant to radical socialist politics, thus, his anxiety about Catholic socialists (*socialism cattolico*). 385-9.

Toniolo's hesitation to provide better footing for 'Catholic socialism' reveals that cooperative labor organization on the local level was much more complex than the documents of the Opera dei Congressi suggests, with a complex web of cultural, religious and ideological forces driving local labor organization in Italy. As such, the Congress' favor for the regular development of parish committees can be read as an attempt to 'standardize' Catholic activism by placing these efforts under the purview of a parish committee and, thus, of the Opera dei Congressi.⁷⁸

The fact that so many of the parish committees were formed in the 1890s prompts a question. What had prompted this resurgence in local Catholic organization and activism? *Rerum Novarum* no doubt had a hand in the reenergizing of local Catholic activism, but the rapid proliferation of social welfare institutions also required a motivated parochial clergy. The offering of concrete social programs aimed at easing the tensions of agricultural life in areas like Veneto cannot be ignored as a motivating factor for many of the parishes that established parish committees – as the rapid development of both parish committees and social welfare associations in the 1890s seems to suggest. The Congress in Fiesole in 1896, gives some detail as to the growth of these efforts. It was reported that the diocese of Adria had successfully expanded established some ten rural banks and the founding of a cooperative agricultural society. The small diocese of Belluno reported it was able to add five parish committees, with plans to build communal bread ovens. The movement's growth in the diocese of Concordia was reported to be quite immense, with thirty new parish committees being added, bringing Concordia's count of parish committees to forty. Concordia also saw thirteen new rural banks open that year with talk

⁷⁸ De Rosa. *Il movimento cattolico*. De Rosa notes that that intransigents did not understand the greater economic issues of the era and preferred to endorse concrete social programs as opposed to exploring the dense and convoluted particulars of worker organization. The goal was not to provide an ideologically Catholic replacement to socialism, but to provide assistance to the laborer and compel employers to act in better Christian duty towards their workers. 71-2.

of opening up a diocese bank to match those in Vicenza, Padua and Venice. In the larger city of Padua, there were two meetings of the diocese committee attended by presidents of surrounding parish committees representing “sections of the city and suburbia...to deal in common with the moral and economic interests of the vast municipality.” In these meetings a discussion was held for a fire and hail insurance association, of which many on the committee were founding members. This occurred alongside further increases to Catholic rural banks, mutual-aid societies and livestock insurance cooperatives.⁷⁹

In all, the 1890s marked a period of unprecedented expansion of Catholic activism in Veneto and other, predominately northern, regions of Italy. These regions had been struck particularly hard by the agricultural crisis and for many of the clergy, facing the disruption of family life as husbands and children ventured abroad in search of better prospects, was just as much a disruption for the spiritual health of the parish. While reports on emigration in the Feruglio visitation is scattered – an interesting omission – in a particularly revealing case in Castelgomberto, a priest reported that one family had been separated from their husband and father for twelve years.⁸⁰ While the visitations seem to insufficiently catalogue the spiritual cost of poverty or emigration given the scale of emigration from Veneto, it is extremely probable that the reality of thousands of broken families jeopardized the moral and economic foundation of many of these parishes.⁸¹ Add to this the realities of poverty, poor living conditions, and the degrading prospect of Italian agriculture, the development of these institutions at the local level is more likely based on material need than ideological paternalism. That said, the reality

⁷⁹ *Documenti XIV*. 71-3. 77.

⁸⁰ *La visita pastorale di Antonio Feruglio*. 203-4.

⁸¹ De Rosa. *Il movimento cattolico*. While De Rosa places the conservative efforts like Catholic rural banks in the context realities of emigration in perhaps a too forgiving a frame, arguing that intransigents had the best interests and made the best effort for the Italian peasantry that many of the peasantry had, it is not unreasonable to see parochial priests – much more connected to these communities than bishops and notables – as empathetic to the needs of those communities. 71-2.

remained that these institutions were steeped in the extreme conservatism of the Opera dei Congressi, and the adoption of these institutions effectively rendered the parochial clergy as liaisons between the peasantry and the paternalistic conservatives of the Congress.

CHAPTER 4: CATHOLIC CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE SPIRIT OF ASSOCIATION

The endorsement and development of these new associations had seemingly given the Catholic movement new life. In the 1899 meeting of the Opera dei Congressi in Ferrara, a proposal for similar lending institutions aimed at Catholic workers was made. This was part of a larger effort to expand practices of insurance and lending, capitalizing on the successes of rural banks by providing similar social welfare programs for urban workers. The Catholic movement was effectively turning its attention, again, to the moral and political concerns of Italian cities, hoping, no doubt, to establish similar relations with urban factory and commercial workers that it had seemingly done with the rural working class. To carry out this task, the Congress called on administrators of successful rural banks to develop a program for worker's banks, drawing on the experience of successful Catholic activism to carry out this new effort. Intransigent leaders imagined that these institutions were necessarily aimed at keeping Italian workers out of radical politics. By offering relief from some of the sharpest pains of the evident economic problems in Italy, the Catholic movement both acknowledged the reality of social disparity and simultaneously denied any proposed solution beyond the preservation of the status quo. In a speech addressing the challenges of political agitators, doubtlessly socialists and anarchists, bishop Federico Foschi noted that these political agitators "do not know how to tend the Catholic Laity" and how that laity "can live true and fruitful public life without also rushing into the high seas of politics."⁸²

⁸² *Documenti di Opera dei Congressi XVII*. Ferrara: 1899. 142-5.

But what did a “fruitful public life” without politics mean for Catholic activists in Italy? While *Rerum Novarum* had provided a narrow window for Catholic intransigents to acknowledge the structural challenges faced by the Italian working class, both in the urban and rural contexts, the political goals of the leadership of the Opera dei Congressi had not changed at all. The larger program of Catholic action, rooted fundamentally in extreme conservatism, was, for all of its apolitical rhetoric, willing to practice a certain degree of political pragmatism. As early as the Congress in 1876, calls to coordinate local Catholics to vote in municipal elections – a category not covered by the *non expedit* that had discouraged Italian Catholics from voting in national elections invoked by Pius IX – had been supported to secure Catholic-approved candidates for positions in local governance.⁸³ Furthermore, by the turn of the century Catholic support for moderate liberals to combat the election of socialist candidates, as in the 1903 supplemental election in Vicenza where Catholic electoral support helped liberal-moderate Antonio Teso secure victory over socialist Domenico Peccoli, speaks to some degree the hollowness of the claim of political agnosticism on the part of Catholic activism.⁸⁴

What is clear is that Catholic action had constructed a new superstructure of associations onto the existing structure of the traditional, ecclesiastical authority of the Church – resulting in new practices of worship, journalism, and social welfare programs to augment Catholic notions of charity. The majority of these adaptations to challenges from the Italian state and in response to greater crises of emigration and agricultural depression, had resulted in the entrance of clerical authority in many of the spaces Italian liberals had hoped to keep the Church out: elections, publication, civic display, and associational life. The reality was that anticlerical sentiment of

⁸³ *Deliberazioni*. 23-4. The early Congresses had called for local Catholic press efforts to highlight and ‘inform’ readers on pro-Catholic candidates.

⁸⁴ Reato. *Pensiero e azione sociale dei cattolici vicentini e veneti*. 84-5.

the predominately urban liberal elite was not sufficient to dislodge the existing structure of the Church from many of the communities in Italy, proving that, in spite of Catholic rhetoric of ‘persecution’ there were limits to liberal anticlericalism beyond urban footholds. Furthermore, the Catholic movement, unwilling to see the Church be outmoded by the changing ‘revolutions’ in politics and industry, was able to use existing ecclesiastical structures in the Church in concert with a highly motivated clergy and laity to meet that challenge. Following *Rerum Novarum*, the Catholic movement was able to proliferate a program of social welfare institutions and workers’ organizations that claimed to address critical needs of the Italian working class that was, by virtue of the unanimity of the parish, in many cases more accessible than liberal welfare. This is not to say that Catholic lending, charity, and even association were not paternalistic in character – they undoubtedly were – but unlike liberals like Luzzatti and Wollemborg, the Church had a millennia-old parish structure that allowed for there to be a potential Catholic activist and figure for ‘guidance’ in every village in Italy.

But the hope of the leadership of the Opera dei Congressi was that new institutions would reshape how Italian Catholics interacted with public life and political economy altogether. For the leading clergy of the Opera dei Congressi, the development of these new associations was helpful in creating a new “spirit of association” for Catholics. Giacomo Radini-Tedeschi, Bishop of Bergamo – the seat of the permanent committee for Christian Social Economy – remarked that the benefits of Catholic associations included:

spirit of association, religious practice, removal of so many dangers and problems; reduction of displaced persons; habits of sobriety and saving; love for the family, to the fields and escape from the city, true freedom, civic conscience, union of clergy and laity, opposition to socialism and stigma of classes.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Cited in: De Rosa. *Il movimento cattolico*. 84-6.

Tedeschi's comment indicates that this new Catholic civil society was intended to help reform not only the material conditions of the Italian public but also give that public a 'morally upright' alternative to the public and political life offered by liberals and socialists.

Surely Catholic 'civic consciousness' was not absent political or ideological tendencies, with express intent to follow ecclesiastical authority altogether. Similar sentiments had been expressed by Leo XIII by the turn of the century, noting that the institutions founded by the Congress were intended to "[form] the minds of mechanics and laborers to thrift and foresight, so that in course of time they may be able, in part at least, to look out for themselves."⁸⁶ But the 'spirit of association' could not of itself 'form the mind', that responsibility fell to the administrators of these associations – the clergy. Indeed, the remarks from the bishop of Bergamo and Leo XIII speak to how some of the clerical elite viewed the development of these Catholic institutions, and the role of the clergy who administered them. It was their job to promote Catholic morality and religiosity to members of Catholic rural banks, youth circles, press efforts, and other associations. As such, had the parish priest effectively become an elite in these communities in Veneto? No. It's unlikely that position as president of a rural bank turned priests into local magnates – but surrogates for other Catholic and conservative authorities, perhaps. Nevertheless, the formation of parish committees and attached associations did augment the existing jurisdiction of the parochial clergy and effectively extended the influence of conservative Catholicism in Veneto.

The question of Catholic paternalism, this syncretism between modern public instruction of 'the masses' by novel Catholic associational efforts and the traditional instruction on spiritual matters, is a question of perhaps greater interest to the scholars of the Catholic movement than

⁸⁶ Leo XIII. *Gravis de communi*. 1901. Vatican.va. 17.

on the activists who developed it. While little doubt can be placed on Cerutti's interest in providing material aid for small farmers and sharecroppers with his program of Catholic rural banks, the larger ideological purpose was plainly stated in his address to the Congress in Genoa (1892). When discussing the potentials of reformist institutions aimed at Italian agriculture, he concluded that these efforts were to frankly demonstrate that "only religion can make people happy, even materially."⁸⁷ These programs were clearly stated by Catholic activists to help direct Italians to the authority of the Church and clergy, who by use of these innovative institutions claimed to address modern concerns such as agricultural poverty – but Cerutti never claimed that addressing these material concerns could bring happiness, only religion could. While the larger historical debate about the benefit of these institutions towards the Italian agricultural working class remains, based on the rhetoric of the most passionate activists of the Catholic movement, the intention of those activists remains undeniably paternalistic. As such, the expansion of clerical authority into these new arenas can be understood, to some degree, as adaptations to modern challenges not only in defense of the Catholic Church in Italy, but in defense of its hierarchical authority over the larger Italian laity as well. These associations were meant to operate along Catholic conceptions of social hierarchy and moralism and were thus imagined as a spur intended to direct the larger laity to the authority of God. This meant, more immediately, direction to the intermediary authorities in the Catholic Church in all new questions of public life, political economy, and social justice.

⁸⁷ *Documenti X*. Genoa: 1892. 162.

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