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## **Sturzo and De Gasperi: two points of view on the political participation of the Catholics**

### **ABSTRACT**

The presence in the political arena of parties inspired by Christian ideology has always constituted a controversial aspect of Italian history. The several debates which animated the political dialectic since the first decade of the 19th century are focused on various issues: the importance of religion in the development of ideology, the relationship with the Catholic Church, the approach to the institutions of the Modern State and to the emerging «mass society» after two decades of Fascism, the different interpretations of social pluralism and, finally, the role of the party in the creation of a civic consciousness among the people.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the political thought and the actions of the two historical characters who reflect the vitality, the peculiarities, the contradictions and the turning points of the Italian Catholic movement the most: don Luigi Sturzo e Alcide De Gasperi, leaders and founders respectively of *Partito popolare italiano* and *Democrazia Cristiana*. This work is based on the comparison between Sturzo and De Gasperi, which highlights the similarities and the differences which emerge from the different approach to the crucial themes of their century.

Firstly, the paper deals with the relationship of the Ppi and Dc with the Church, after having analyzed the issue of the possible existence of a continuity between these two parties. As the foundation of the Ppi dates back to the years after WWI and the Dc was created during and after the fall of the Fascist regime, they turn out to be the result of totally different historical dynamics and social transformations. In this context, the first chapter highlights the stages of the genesis of the two parties, emphasizing all the different needs that they attempted to satisfy through their policy proposals. The chapter is also focused on analyzing one of the core issues of the evolution of the Catholic thought, the idea of “non-denominationalism”, which inevitably collides with the prominent role played by the Church in influencing the electorate. In particular, the paper points out some of the most excellent positions in the historical debate, which aim to determine whether Ppi and Dc should be considered independent parties inspired by Christian values or a political movement directly controlled and exploited by the Church, in order to contrast the widespread secularism affecting Italian society.

In the second chapter, the paper examines the consequences of the rising of the Fascist regime, which determined a deep *cleavage* among the Catholic world. Moreover, the paper describes the different features of Sturzo’s and De Gasperi’s anti-fascism. Finally, it analyzes the positions of the two politicians in regard to the «institutional issue» and the danger of running into the establishment of a party state during the anomalous transition from the Monarchy to the Republic in Italy.

The third chapter is, among all the others, the one that better underlines the features of Ppi and Dc in their political complexion, by analyzing their adaptability to different historical periods, such as the so-called «Red Biennium», during which the trade union movements enhanced, and the Constituent phase. In particular, the paper focuses on the differences between the Catholic trade unions and the socialist ones. Moreover, it describes the development and the evolution of the concept of «mass democracy» between the two World Wars and the importance of the programmatic aspect of the two parties. Finally, it explains Sturzo’s and De Gasperi’s different notions of «centrism» and the pedagogical role of the political party.

The criticalities which emerged from the research have pointed out the difficulty in elaborating an objective judgment on the choices and the political actions of the two leaders, because of the peculiar heterogeneity of the Italian Catholic movement and the

difference between the institutional roles played by Sturzo and De Gasperi. Nevertheless, it was possible to find a common ground in the opinions of the historians about the definition of the political thought of the two leaders.

Firstly, a consistent part of the historians agree upon the fact that the intervention of the Church on the political affairs was decisive both for Ppi's and Dc's genesis. In fact, Pope Benedict XV's policy of openness towards the instances of the liberal state prepared the ground for the foundation of Ppi, but, at the same time, it was the Church itself to cause the dissolution of Sturzo's party, due to its alliance with the Fascist regime in order to defend its own interests. For what concerns *Democrazia Cristiana*, despite his refusal towards Church's compromise with the dictatorship, De Gasperi made Dc the only party which could be capable of representing the Catholic world. On the one hand, some of the historians claim that the Church exploited Dc to contrast the rise of communism and that the Dc used the influence of the Church to gain political consensus. On the other hand, some argue that both Ppi and Dc were autonomous and strongly progressive parties.

The analysis of Sturzo's and De Gasperi's thought showed a consistent difference between the features of their anti-fascism. In fact, while Sturzo's anti-fascism was very intransigent, De Gasperi's was slightly moderate, at least at the beginning, before Fascism had shown its violent nature.

In conclusion, from the analysis emerged that Sturzo could be defined as the *homo politicus* par excellence, animated by strong ideals, despite being moderate and despising every kind of extremism. De Gasperi, instead, embodies the qualities of a perfect statesman, as he was able to conciliate the strength and the spontaneity of his political ideas with the ability of mediating different positions in a very fragmented political arena. The differences between the two politicians might be explained with the fact that De Gasperi governed in Italy from 1946 to 1953, in the crucial period of the Italian transition from Monarchy to Republic. Sturzo, on the contrary, had a limited possibility to intervene in the political affairs, due to the fact the Fascism tear his party apart in 1926, after only seven years from its foundation.

If the comparison between Sturzo and De Gasperi highlighted many differences, it is also possible to pinpoint several similarities. Firstly, the sincere respect for the liberal institutions and the faith in the Republican system, the refusal of the

“partitocracy”, the idea of a cross-class collaboration, of a pedagogical and anti-ideological party and, finally, of the compatibility between Christian values and the political ones. In this regard, it emerged a very deep personal relationship between Sturzo and De Gasperi, witnessed by their assiduous correspondence which never stopped, even during Sturzo’s long exile in London, Paris and New York. Their relationship was characterized by warnings and reproaches, but also by a profound mutual admiration, which is the proof of the fact that *Democrazia Cristiana* always attempted to follow the steps, despite running into many difficulties, of *Partito popolare italiano*, which was prematurely dissolved by the severe repression of the Fascist regime.