

## **ABSTRACT**

### **ROMOLO MURRI AND GIOVANNI SEMERIA: TWO MODERNISTS IN COMPARISON (1897 – 1907)**

#### **1. Introduction: The Christian theological Modernism in Italy**

Today, who say “modernists” calls to mind “a current, varied and complex, with essentially critical-religious ideas that, at the beginning of the Twentieth century, tries to separate the immutable kernel of faith from the iridescent husk of his philosophical facing”.

This term, therefore, it is used to indicate that movement of internal renewal of Catholicism promoted by some members of the Catholic culture (especially priests) that spreads in Europe in the late Nineteenth century and early Twentieth century.

The Italian modernism developed in the first decade of the Twentieth century. The historical context is marked by the season of the Giolittians governments and the clerical-moderate alliance with the indirect support of the Catholic bourgeoisie, who fears the advance of socialism. Pio X will follow Leone XIII to the papacy: cautious but favourable to the modernist debate the second one, conservative and unfavourable to that kind of reform the firsts.

Initially, in Italy, the new word “modernist” is used in an ironic way by Catholic traditionalists to blame, indiscriminately, those who show “reformist ambitions”, recalling a developmental conception of the history and institutions, including the Catholic Church. Under this brand are passed theories most diverse and sometimes conflicting with each other, that have in common the desire to renew the Christian thought in the light of new social forces in the early years of the century.

Italian innovators and reformers, in fact, are oriented in the Church to seek more independence and openness towards progress and more respect for the freedoms and democratic demands and policies, opposing a too absolutist kind of relationship with the Roman Curia but without having opposing force (at least in intention) to the direct dependency on the Church. But the Italian church hierarchy lives in the past and refuses to accept the "signs of the times": it rejects national unity, democracy, freedom of conscience and civil liberty.

In this atmosphere of conflict between renewal and conservatism, that crosses the Italian Catholic world, move the figures of Giovanni Semeria and Romolo Murri, both destined to become, although for different reasons and merits, some of the most prominent public men of Italian Catholicism beginning of the Twentieth century.

## 2. Murri and Semeria: the comparison

Almost the same age, both have studied in seminar, they are children of the unification process that led Italy to be a civilized nation and free. That is why they commit themselves to give to their country even a Christian conscience, bearer of those changes - whether social, cultural or political, but constructive - they would like to see carried out before in the clergy and then among the Catholic laity.

Sharing this view, the two priests work together, side by side, from their first meeting in Rome to "La Sapienza University" – where to put them together, as well as the lessons of Labriola, is the desire for social and cultural renewal that is going through the Catholic youth – to the publication of the "Pascendi" that forces them to take two different ways: exile and loyalty to the Church for Semeria, excommunication and radical turning point for Murri.

A relationship of mutual respect, points of view in common, but also some differences. The span of time taken into account for this "confrontation" are the years between the end of the Nineteenth century (that is, the university period) and the 1907.

### 3. The concept of democracy

To be nearing of the end of the Nineteenth century, Christian associations change their unit of aims and means, due in the past years to the work of control and guide carried out by the “Opera of Congressi”: modern generations change addresses, making use of renewed tools and promoting new ideals and systems. Their target is the entire Italian population – barely touched by the former Catholic organizations and the parties’ canvass – which they want and they have to understand, shake, consolidate in the Christian faith, conquer in order to reach a true social and civil justice. It is in this frame that develops the first ideas of Murri and Semeria about democracy.

#### 3.1 In Murri’s thought

The Murri’s action begins about twenty years after the appearance of the “Opera of Congressi”. The diehards had fought, between spread indifference and hatred, for the creation of a national association, but it is rooted well only in some regions. An organization that, at first, saw as her opponents the new Italian State and the liberal government.

When the priest appears on the scene, the general atmosphere in the Opera is no longer the same of the early times after 1870. Catholics who are part of it are now working with the moderates in various activities and environments: almost all of them support the monarchy and judge the unification of Italy one inescapable truth; they continue with dedication the confrontation with the State, not to demolish it, but to change public life and to fully integrate into it.

Murri, however, rejects the heritage and the experience of the powerful Catholic organization’s old leaders. He's not going to join existing parties, but create a new movement which gets together all Catholic personalities. He contrasts, afterwards, the veterans of the Opera, both for purposes he set, and for the way he acts. The young priest attacks everything and everyone, trying to excite the same ecclesiastical hierarchy to the political action and to line up with the population. It is necessary to make Christian the democracy and to be on the side of the mass.

From 1902 to 1906, Murri is interested in the similarity between the “spirit of democracy” and the “spirit of Christianity”.

He begins saying that Christianity should be restored to its originality, and so released from secular historical or occasional traditions, obsolete theories and old structures that hardly help people to understand his real teaching and prevent the necessary renewal of religious knowledge.

Murri, therefore, takes as a reference Christianity and its moral precepts to guide political, social and economic decisions and behaviours. Democracy, for the priest, is justice, solidarity, charity, education's process to autonomy, its social issues are freedom, the development of civilization and culture, active participation and involvement for the total improvement of the human being.

### 3.2 In Semeria's thought

Semeria has never hidden his sympathy for the liberal Catholicism and his tie to the State born by the movements of the Risorgimento. Nevertheless, at the end of the Nineteenth century, as for many of those who adhere to the great alignment of liberal Catholics, even for the priest the propensity for the unitary State and the Italian constitutional system does not mean comply with the policy and social line of moderate liberals, as it will happen in the elections of 1904.

At the beginning of the Twentieth century, Semeria is inflamed with enthusiasm, being in agreement with those associations of Christians that, supporting the work of Leone XIII, agree with the Papal design, expressed in "Rerum Novarum", of a worldwide democracy. But the concept of popular sovereignty proposed by the Pope is still too forced, reductive, simplified to an action that someone has to make from the top.

The early years of the XX century seem, however, to be hopeful: the arrival of a democracy supported by Christianity, not limited to one political party, rather than open to the entire community, which, attracted by its plurality, would spread it throughout the Earth. But to make all this happen, it is necessary that Christians do not think elite and turned only to themselves their cooperation.

This is the perception that Semeria has of democracy: it is an achievement, a partnership, an opportunity for independence manifested in the popular choice, so that everybody, without political and social distinction, if they make themselves useful to

society, participate therefore actively in public life. On closer inspection, one can recognize all the cultural requirements of what the Catholic liberal and democratic tradition is.

#### 4. The concept of party

##### 4.1 In Murri's view

The Murri's idea is to start from a union of Catholic groups to go as far as to set up a national association that manages to become a real alternative to the two main alignments: liberals and socialists.

The real possibility, that this happens, appears in 1904, the day after the tacit ecclesiastical choice to support the alliance between clerical conservatives and liberals, when Murri convinces himself that the time has come to get over "the difficult experiment of a religious and socio-political union" that has guided his choices in previous years.

The priest wants to build a national party of Christian inspiration, non-denominational, independent and responsible to the citizens and to the Church. He considers essential a social participation, protection and assistance to the working classes, to guarantee them equality and justice.

##### 4.2 In Semeria's view

Semeria comes into collision with Murri when this one decides to change the Christian Democratic Movement into a party (1904).

Semeria considers all organizations, in which society is divided, necessary and he respects them all, from the most popular associations to the most bourgeois ones, as "good and bad people are everywhere". The parties, because of their nature, are based on a choice of field sufficiently clear and almost always in opposition to another one. And Christianity, despite having to renew, can't mean division and competition. So Semeria does not have much trust in political parties: "I very much hope in a large infusion, a sincere renewal of the Christian spirit in each and every one: the names seem more and more a label that can cover a lot of different things".

## 5. After the encyclical letter “Pascendi”

Pope Pio X, on the September 8th, 1907, discloses the Encyclical Letter “Pascendi Dominici Gregis”, aimed to condemn what the church hierarchy indicate as “the heresy of all heresies”: modernism and its (presumed) followers. The fact that the Pope mistakes for a single heterodoxy what is a multifaceted phenomenon, does not change that the “Pascendi” has a hard impact on the Catholic world, especially related to the current of the Italian young progressives.

In particular, Murri decides to continue on his way for the autonomy of the Christian laity, the formation of a non-denominational party and the debate against the ecclesiastical authorities for the active participation of Catholics in politics. All this will lead him to the suspension and the prohibition, imposed by the Church, to conduct any political activity, prohibition that the priest won’t listen to, until the point of incurring in excommunication. Left the tunic, he will be elected deputy among the ranks of the extreme left wing in the Parliament, promoting social radicalism.

Different is the fate of Semeria: always faithful to the Church and its directives, for which he endures the years of exile and the prohibition to do speeches and sermons in public or to continue the historical-critical studies which he so loves. Therefore he remains a priest, but by the “charity of thought” goes to the “charity of the facts”, at the service of the young soldiers at front, before, and carrying out the project for a relief work in the South of Italy, then.

## 6. Conclusion

Romolo Murri and Giovanni Semeria, two figures and two different personalities, united by the Christian spirit with which they share, at least for a short period of their lives, the same cultural and social objectives. They are the arm and the mind of that reform’s catholic wind that blows on the clergy and the laity in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century, but which is intended to change the whole Italy: Murri insistes on the necessity of a “political engagement”, Semeria on the need for a Christian culture that supports and guides the clerical and secular education, even at the expense of immediate practical action.