

PERUGIA AND ASSISI

BY CAROL SCHNEIDER

IT may seem foolish to try to add to what has been written about the revival by the Fascists of the old conflict between the Church and the State. But those who call the struggle the *Roman* question and confine their interest to the duel between Mussolini and the Pope over the temporal control of the "eternal city," miss half the scene. However delicate and absorbing this political issue and its outcome may be, the more subtle and perhaps the more fascinating conflict is that between the two worlds of the imagination at stake. For Americans, whose public life since the political collapse of Puritanism has been quite secular, it is especially difficult to understand that in a Catholic country like Italy popular life and tradition have always been dominated by religious rather than by secular and political imaginative realms. Nor can Americans readily appreciate the boldness of the present attempt of the state to usurp the place in the imagination of the people which the Christian church has held since the days of Constantine.

Perhaps it began when the state adopted the policy of suppressing those who ventured to criticize the head of the government, for that was equivalent to claiming also for the state a privilege which had previously belonged exclusively to the church in the person of the Pope, namely the excommunication of heretics and the beatification of saints. To claim for the state this right of setting or recognizing patterns of perfection which can not thereafter be criticized, is one thing, but to establish such patterns in the hearts of the people is quite another.

In 1925-26 the church had the enormous advantage of a Holy Year, and has prolonged the jubilee throughout 1926-27 by the extraordinary attention it has directed to the celebration of the Saint Francis seventh centenary. Never before, I am told, was

any centenary of any saint so celebrated. And Mussolini is the last man to miss taking advantage of such outpourings of the spirit as have characterized the local feasts in honor of so great a national figure. For instance, he himself consented to open the summer session for foreigners at the University of Perugia, while lesser officials performed the same function at greater university centers. The date of the exercises at Perugia coincided with the official opening of the Saint Francis year at Assisi, Perugia's nearest neighbor and rival town. Suspicions that this coincidence was adroitly planned proved to be well grounded when Mussolini chose the fifth of October as the date for this promised lecture at the University of Perugia, for the fourth was the great feast of Saint Francis which drew thousands of pilgrims to the Assisi shrine. To understand how Mussolini could establish by such means a connection in the imagination of the people between himself and Saint Francis, it is necessary to appreciate the similarities of the two festivals.

First of all, however pious in its intentions, a pilgrimage in fact turns out more of a picnic. I began to feel it when I was yet as far away as Ravenna. Three women in new and identical black aprons and veils entered the church to pray, but remained to follow a tourist party around with scarcely suppressed excitement. And I saw them again the next day at the railroad station with ten others exactly like themselves — all headed for Assisi and Perugia. From Gubbio the crowds quite swamped the train, without regard for the class distinctions otherwise so respectfully observed. Even first class overflowed. A Franciscan friar was left in the jumble on the platform of a first class carriage, and soon became the object of jolly banterings across the noisy couplings from third class.

"Look what's here," said one rosy farmer, "a disciple of poverty riding first class. What penitence can he perform for the vice of such a luxury?"

And the friar shouted back, "For us luxury is not a vice, it is a custom, my brother."

Across from me were two old ladies, dressed plainly and alike in all details even to ear-rings. They wore no hats, but I could be sure that somewhere among the food and blankets that they carried, there would be two new black silk or lace scarfs. At home a handkerchief would do to defy the signs in the churches which read:

"Women who enter this church with uncovered heads or bare arms or otherwise adorned not in accordance with Christian modesty, incur the great wrath of God, and will be put out." But a scarf was the proper thing for a pilgrimage. I was to see hundreds of those new black scarfs at Assisi, just as there were hundreds of new black shirts at Perugia. The younger of these two women said when she paid their fare, "See I told you it would be only six lire, and it can't but be worth *that*." I saw their same blissful faces again both at Assisi and at Perugia.

The nearer I came to the feasts the more I felt that we were being unconsciously transplanted into a past that we had made remote only by our indifference to its spiritual meanings. Particularly the matter of miracles, for instance. The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand was spread before my eyes. Of course there was the precedent established by Saint Francis himself, when he called the Congress of the three Orders in much larger numbers than poor Assisi could hope to accommodate. And some of his disciples who were thoughtful and good providers were distressed by the impossibility of feeding the multitudes. But Francis, all indifferent to their demands, went on with his prayers and devotions. And in answer to them, the Lord put it into the hearts of the people to bring in food from all the surrounding country and all were content. That is the way it happened again this year. In the trains coming into Umbria I had stumbled over odd bundles of bread and wine and cheese and salami. On the day of the feast the people sat down all over the hillside and blessed their bread with their sociability and were more than content. I was fortified with one bun which I had not had time to eat at breakfast. But being a little proud and more than a little timid about my foreignness, I tramped the streets for over an hour to find a place in a restaurant when I am almost sure I could have sat down anywhere and multiplied that one bun with a few words.

The same miracle would have happened again at Perugia, except that Perugia is proud, and sent all the pilgrims home on special trains immediately after the ceremony.

I was in another miracle on the way to Assisi that helped to explain how they are made. The crowded bus was flapping along behind a huge truck, a combination tar-sprinkler and road-roller, when the latter without warning started to back into us. The bus

swung out as much as was possible with its unwieldy shape and weight, and the shouts and horns of the crowd and chauffeur did get the attention of the truck driver in time to prevent any accident. But we stopped to talk it over anyway. The Italian woman next to me said with a laugh, "Well, this will be another miracle of Saint Francis, if we don't look out." And I thought her attitude frightfully sophisticated for a pilgrim, until we started to go again, and she was the first to make the sign of the cross and mumble a prayer. Later on we were stopped at a railroad crossing, and another woman feared we would miss the procession and the mass, but was silenced thus, "If the blessed Saint has just saved our lives hasn't he a right to hold us up a little?"

Mussolini makes use of this tendency of a crowd when intent on one common subject, to expect and receive supernatural dispensations. But he knows that being yet living, he is in the early stage where miracles happen to him and not through him. Hence the persistently encouraged rumor that he enjoys a miraculous protection against the attempts made on his life.

There were differences, of course, between the feasts of Assisi and of Perugia, but they were more incidental and more unimportant than the similarities in the two feasts. For the religious feelings of the Italian people are not distinct from their other emotions. Religion has always been the raw material on which their imagination was fed and their art thrived. And the feasts and fasts of the church have been the occasions and outlets of all sorts of pagan emotions. Hence it has not been difficult for Fascism to take unto itself some of the interest in costumes and parades and rituals which have been expended on the church. They have also been able to establish secular associations, with certain church slogans. For instance, posters announcing the church program of the day or year at Assisi were invariably addressed to *the faithful*. The Fascisti bulletin board carried one of these notices beside another also addressed to the faithful, and saying:

"The feast of the Church is the feast of the State." And the banner across the gate into Perugia read:

"Duce: The Faithful of Umbria salute you."

In the process of establishing and using as sanctions such associations between the great figures of the church and the one great figure of the present state, Fascism, being young and over-eager,

has not always been willing to go slowly enough to avoid being crude, and even ridiculous. There is a recent pamphlet entitled *MUSSOLINI E SAN FRANCESCO*. It begins with a reproduction of Giotto's fresco of Saint Francis over against a photograph of Mussolini at his desk. It continues through many neatly paralleled paragraphs to expound the similarity both in life and character of the two saints, and reaches its climax in their common love of animals. Here there is another two-page cut—on the left, Francis preaching to the birds, and on the right, Mussolini behind the bars with a gloved hand on the head of a lioness. And to take this issue out of the realm of the imagination and the vaguer of universal emotions, and to make it explicit in detail, is to make it ridiculous.

It would also be ridiculous to try to estimate the possible influence of this general policy on the specific adjustments hoped for between the church and the state in Rome. That the Pope is conscious of this policy and its force if successful, might easily be inferred from his recent counter move in the same field—his establishing the feast of Christ the King. But the Pope is not the aggressor, and can never be said to have started this war of the imaginations, unless one wishes to go back to the first Popes and observe in them Christianity attempting and doing to paganism what Fascism now does and attempts to the church.

It is not difficult to see a parallel to the present situation in the manner in which the early church sought to compensate for the imaginative poverty which the abolition of paganism threatened. The Pomp and splendor in church ceremonies grew up as a substitute for the display formerly connected with the pagan games and festivals and "Roman holidays." And in the matter of symbols, by making the Christian lamb look as much like the Roman wolf as possible, the church appropriated the prestige of loyalty already established. Doubtless such association had as much success in establishing Christianity in the imagination of the people as, for instance, the depositions of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius from their respective columns in favor of Peter and Paul; certainly without this background mere imperial edicts would have had little effect. And so in the present conflict, the state hopes to give permanence to its diplomatic and political victories by its conquest of the spirit of the people, which, after all, lives so much in the language and the natural spontaneity of customs, in the symbols of human relationships, in memories as well as in hopes and expectations.

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