Chapter 7
Religion and Civil Society in Italy and in Other Latin Countries

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For some time, Italy has been a 'modern' country under observation, which has caused the observers to wonder about the secret of a system which manages to maintain its dynamism despite the many imbalances which permeate it. It is an atypical Western country, which – in spite of its mix of rich and poor areas, advanced and backward, post-industrial and archaic – is still today among the six or seven greatest economic powers in the world. Hence, arises the idea of a particular case of study, defined in international comparative studies as 'The Italian Case'. The specificity of the Italian case stands out also in comparison with other Southern European countries, with which Italy shares some common features of the interlink between religion and civil society.

7.1 Basic Dynamism and Weak System

This distinctiveness can be observed on various levels. From the economic point of view, Italy's weaknesses are well known – its energy dependence, the gradual decrease in the number of major companies, its public debt and tax evasion which has reached unacceptable levels. Nevertheless, these restrictions concern a country which still enjoys good productivity rates, whose driving forces are small Northern companies, tourism and avant-garde sectors such as fashion and design. But parallel with these economic areas, which are capable of competing with the most advanced zones in Europe, there is another – slower – Italy which pays a high price for its social and territorial imbalances.

Political instability is another characteristic of the Italian situation, as is evidenced by the fact that in the last 65 years – since the end of the World War II and the

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foundation of the Italian Republic – the country has had no fewer than 60 governments. It is true that in the most recent decade, they have lasted longer, but that has not been enough to strengthen institutions, activate essential reforms and create a 'normal' political system. Now, the political crisis affects all wings, from the right, which is more populist than laissez-faire, and to the left, which is handicapped by its internal fragmentation. Thus, there is a high degree of estrangement of citizens from the *res publica*, and pride in local culture and traditions takes precedence over a sense of national belonging.

Further ambivalence and contradictions can be identified in a population which is more inclined to get involved in voluntary activities expressing social compassion than in defining more clearly public and institutional roles; in the Italian spirit tending more, in certain circumstances, towards flexibility and improvisation – the art of getting by – than to value correctly organisation and planning; and in a country characterised by many ideological divisions and cultural streams, so that conflict and adopting rigid positions often win out over a search for the common good.

At this point, it seems natural to wonder about the stabilising element in Italy with so many different facets, the factor which prevents the country from disintegrating in periods of great upheaval and tensions. Various authorities have found the answer in a civil society which is so rich and dynamic that is capable of giving stability to such an institutionally precarious country (Garelli and Simone 2001: 494).

7.2 Not Only Voluntarism and the Third Sector: The Role of Religion

When we talk about civil society, we mean the totality of groups and associations, characterised by their own ability to formulate and to plan and by a position of relative autonomy from the political system as traditionally understood (the state, its agencies, political parties) and from the economic system (the market). Besides being organised in political and economic terms, every society is composed of a basic cultural and associative dynamism, scene of ferments and tensions, reactions and forecasts, and of confrontation and solidarity, able to contribute significantly to set up and nurture both social relations and collective ethos of a society.

In this sphere of free association, there is no lack of conflicts and contradictions in relation to different interests and ideas of the world of the various groups. But this is also the level on which the various groups are bound to find common ground, expressing their own vitality within a framework of personal and collective responsibility, adopting 'civilised' modes of behaviour, granting to others the same dignity and rights as they demand for themselves, identifying and experimenting with common rules of coexistence. So, it a diffuse idea of civil society, which goes beyond voluntary associations and the non-profit world, including, for example, values and civicness that are improved and nurtured in this framework of associations and social relations.

This definition seems well suited to the Italian situation where liveliness of civil society is clearly thriving. That said, it is clear that one has to move cautiously when dealing with such topics as not all grassroot activities are 'civil' and also because there is a tendency to idealise anything not under the government's umbrella and/or belonging to the institutional sphere. As Peter Berger observed (Berger 2005: 11–22),[1] there are in-between realities (i.e. groups and associations) which can be described neither as state (government) nor market and which have nothing to do with civil life, the Mafia being a case in point. Furthermore, a number of groups adopt the label 'civil' without having any of the features this definition implies. This said, in Italy, there clearly is an arena in which there are various actors which operate in a socially constructive manner making up for the many imbalances in the country.

Speaking about the actors of civil society in Italy, many observers stress primarily the role of family, as an institution able to set up basic social relations and to play an important role as a social buffer or a safety valve coping with youth unemployment and the lack of public care services for children and the elderly (Diamanti 2010). This positive evaluation of the family confirms the idea – widespread in the country – that both basic groups and institutions are the good part of the society in spite of other social areas (public institutions, market, etc.), that are evaluated in a more ambivalent and controversy way. However, it is important to point out that the family's pivotal role in civil society has drawbacks too, e.g. *familism* and lack of social mobility[2]; these features question the idea that family contributes to develop civil values, but notwithstanding, families remain the 'real wealth of the country', as it has been defined (Alesina and Ichino 2009).

Beyond the family, the arena of civil society in Italy enjoys a wealth of basic spontaneous and voluntary associationism, which can be seen in the most varied areas and forms, from promoting cultures and local traditions to professional or trade groupings, from sports groups and those based on hobbies or specific cultural or artistic interests, from associations formed by what one might call 'peer groups', conscripts, people from the same village, alumni to the more socially or politically committed ones. The close-knit fabric of social voluntary associations[3] operates achieving a purpose rather than generating profit and developing the values of peace, of solidarity, of social justice, of environment respect, of international cooperation and of development of poor countries fall within this framework. In Italy, it is a much widespread phenomenon, which stands out in various organisational forms: among these, someone is a point of reference in its area of activity both at local and national level.

[1] On these issues, see also the debate and the recent studies on the role of civil societies in countries where the democracy process is at the beginning, e.g. the Arab spring: Bozzo and Luizard (2011), Kepel and Luizard (2011) and Kilani (2011).

[2] On this issue, a recent research was carried out by Sciolla (2004).

[3] On the characteristics and relevance of the third sector in Italy and on its role in the civil society; see: Zamagni (2011), Silvano (2011), Donati and Colozzi (2002) and Cesareo (2003).

Recently, various ethnic associations have sprung up in the country. As well as being places of welcome and mutual assistance for foreign immigrants, they perform a bridging role between their original culture and insertion in the host country. The activities of educational institutions have developed alongside a number of civil society organisations involved with youth centres and not just with the lower-income segment of the young. As for publishing, communication channels and information tools are widespread although they are unable to compete with the more powerful national broadcasting corporations. However, they voice regional and local issues, mirroring what is known as the 'Italy of the Thousand Communes', which is historically one of the country's hallmarks. The last example concerns civil society's potential contribution to the world of work: most microenterprises, which have been essential for what little growth Italy's GDP has registered over the past few years, develop from civil societies and then shift to a market setting and rationale.

Religion plays a major role against this backdrop: especially Catholicism, to which – despite the growth of other faiths and religious traditions in Italy – 80 % of the population still says it belongs.[4] Even if Italy is the nation which hosts the Vatican, it too has also become more secularised and churches are not as packed as they were. Both the decline in new vocations and the ageing of the clergy have become all too apparent; hierarchy guidelines on sexual and family *morality* mostly going unheeded. In spite of this, most people still identify with the Catholicism for cultural reasons or because of their education rather than for religious or spiritual reasons. The Catholic Church still plays a pre-eminent role in the country, which express itself on various levels: about 1 in 4 Italians attend Catholic rites once a week (and numbers are higher if one considers a month or a year); over 12 % (with a large percentage of young people) are members of Catholic associations. Religious involvement in social activities continues unabated, ecclesiastical institutions never fail to voice their opinion on controversial points in the public debate. The Catholic vote is the most courted by all sides, left, right and centre, as it is thought to be decisive in winning any electoral race. This is also the result of a church, which has maintained a widespread presence throughout the country, with 224 dioceses (twice as many as the provincial governments), 25,000 parishes and more than 140,000 religious as well as a large number of lay people who aid the clergy with catechism, educational activities and organisational tasks. Such a widespread presence is a hallmark of Catholic in Italy unlike other European countries where Catholic culture is prevalent: for instance, Poland's 45 dioceses, Spain's 98, Germany's 29 hardly compare to Italy's 224. On average, in Italy, there is for one diocese every 250,000 baptised Catholics, where France and Spain have one for every 500,000 and Poland and Germany one for every 900,000 (Garelli 2007: 75).

These hints show how strongly intertwined the Catholic Church is in the development of the country's social relations. They also highlight how part of the

[4]This and other data refer to a survey on the religiosity carried out in 2007 on a sample of the Italian population (3,160 cases) aged 16–74 (Garelli 2011). The last survey of the 'European Value Survey' carried out in Italy in 2008 (forthcoming) reaches the same conclusions.

above-mentioned dynamism of Italian civil society is the product of the Catholic world (associations, parishes, parish centres; cultural, training and leisure centres, as well as magazines, papers, etc.).[5] But apart from this presence, the Church in Italy has another link with the country's civil society, as it is considered the main receiver of its message and appeal: the Church often addresses its thoughts to the fundamental forces of civil society, reminding them of the duty of solidarity, public and private spiritual and moral values and a sense of responsibility. All this is especially relevant in a country with such a widespread Catholic following. The focus on civil society is also stressed within the Catholic magisterium by the subsidiarity principle, according to which the state apparatus should not necessarily intervene at every level of social organisation but the social bodies and organisations closest to the problem (should deal with it).

7.3 Historical Roots

According to the above description, civil society in Italy has always been a major player, because of historical and cultural factors: it has made up for the lack of sense of the state and of institutions mostly seen as not having to do with communal living, but it has also come to express Italian vitality par excellence, and in particular the bottom up organisational ability citizens have, thus highlighting micro-identities (belonging) and primary social relations.

Catholicism has repeatedly supported and gone along with this dynamism, being interested in strengthening a form of civil society independent of government and major economic powers.

Historically this happened at times when the Church strongly contrasted the liberal state and in the decades that followed the unification of Italy which took place 150 years ago, when the Popes' temporal power came to an end, church properties were confiscated, and Catholics were marginalised from the political arena. Those were the years of the *Non expedit* ('It is not expedient'), a decree forbidding Italian Catholics to take part in the political life of the country, either as voters or as candidates, to avoid what might be seen as official recognition of an enemy state. But they were also the years of the *Opera dei Congressi,* the Catholic Committees, of Rerum Novarum (Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical, on Labour and Capital), all initiatives to prevent the Catholic worlds losing influence in the country, in fact pushing it to rise to the challenges of the time: on the one hand the lay and separatist (between church and state) politics of the newly unified country, on the other the laissez-faire and socialistic tendencies (both considered irreconcilable with Catholic doctrine) which were gaining ground and colliding in the emerging industrial development (Traniello and Campanili 1981; Guerriero 1996). This is what triggered activism that in turn

[5] Further information about the role of socialisation and promoting public participation played by religious environments are available in Wuthnow (1996).

led to the establishment of Catholic agricultural and industrial unions, the creation of Catholic banks and rural and workers' saving banks and credit unions. These were the first steps of a cooperative movement which was to grow in time the setting up of publishing houses with Catholic leanings whose aim was to produce good Christians, the constitution of professional categories and arts and crafts associations capable of representing Catholic values and interests in various fields and finally various forms of charity and rehabilitation of 'poor, abandoned youth'.

The Church addressed the challenges of those years which had overturned the balance of the past not just by contrasting institutionally a state which had stripped her of ancient privileges, not just denouncing the spread of ideologies contrary to doctrine: the Church also actively promoted a Catholic social movement able to address emerging needs and build a civil society with a Christian orientation where Catholics could fully express their role in the public sphere.

What happened in those hard times is a constant in the history of the Church in Italy which has always been careful to nurture a social fabric close to itself, thanks to an organisational network permeating every area of civil life although formally aimed at spiritual action. The organisational strength of the Catholic movement and the ability of the religious institution to communicate with the masses was one of the factors leading Fascism to resolve the conflict between church and state with the 1929 Concordat, a fact which marked the life of the nation for several decades.

7.4 Three Recent Phases of the Relationship Between Religion and Civil Society in Italy

In the past decades – since World War II – the Catholic religion and civil society have undergone three phases which mirror the country's main changes of landscape.

7.4.1 Catholic Social Block Immediately After WW2

Phase one concerns reconstruction and post-war development, when Catholic had a majority in fact a near national hegemony, thanks to the large number of vocations and faithful and also to the catholic party (the Christian Democrats) which had a large following and had managed to stabilise the system and favour industrial development. A third ingredient needs to be added, the dynamism of intermediate Christian-inspired bodies acting in the most diversified sectors of society.

At that time, the role of the Church was to motivate and support the Catholic civil society which found many ways of partaking in public life. Hence, some of the old organisations resurfaced and new, more modern ones were established, such as *Coltivatori diretti* (the Catholic Farmers' union)*, Cisl* (the Catholic Trade Union Confederation) and *Acli* (Young Catholic Workers). Specific and professional organisations were also promoted – at university, in the schools, in the health

system, in the craft sector and so on – or aimed at encouraging sports and youth. There was also a large growth of religious associations, where *Azione Cattolica* was the major player although it was diversifying internally – Catholic university students, Catholic graduates and the Italian Women's Centre (*Centro Italiano Femminile – CIF*). All the above drew inspiration from the Church's social doctrine: they embodied the subjectivity of various components of Italian Catholicism, developing projects, rules of cohabitation, forms of representation not just to address their members' needs but also to generate a constructive social environment. Many associations favoured the role of the catholic party, while maintaining their own judgement and activity.

Basically, the Church nurtured (and controlled), then as now, the moral and religious fabric of the nation, encouraging active believers to operate in society. Catholic associations had to bear witness to their faith in the various historical contexts: the Christian Democrats governed the country, interpreting the feelings of large sections of the population, benefiting from the resources – ideas and human resources – which the active and committed Catholic base provided them with. It was a relatively well-integrated social dynamic, a sort of 'social block' consisting of connected forces each involved with its own task and which were to leave their mark in the Italian society of the time.

The strength of the Catholic world in that period was such that it was able to stem the strongest Communist Party and movement in the West, which was rooted in Italy. Operating in the country, Catholic culture came in conflict with the Communist culture when it became active in the country in the same years, especially as the Communists were involved in very much identical and similar operations in civil society, circulating the values and principles of Communism. However, in spite of the strong juxtaposition, the two cultures appear to have shared a common set of values – a strong sense of the family, valuing industriousness, respect for authority, moral rigour, recognition of local traditions, the primacy of popular social institutions compared to the government's, solidarity and so on – all of which helped keep the system together. Many of the aforementioned values are enshrined in the Italian Constitution signed immediately after World War II and still in force today: it was the result of the contribution of, and compromise among, very diverse political and cultural forces that shared the intention of acting for the common good of the nation.

7.4.2 Secularisation and Social Voluntary Organisations

Phase two in the relationship between Catholicism and civil society in Italy began with the cultural changes that questioned the system of traditional values: it was by then the late 1960s and early 1970s of the past century when the explosion of workers' struggles and the student revolt overturned the existing social and political order based on Catholic culture, which had already been threatened by a higher standard of living and consumer society values fuelled by economic growth. The new social climate (determined by the revolt against institutions,

the denial of all principles of authority, the drive to experiment with different ways of living) disoriented the associationism of Catholic origin and weakened the civil society close to the Church, introducing trends and aspirations extraneous to its nature. It is well known that in that period, political alternatives were never implemented, although there was a profound lifestyle change which enhanced the country's process of secularisation. The outcomes of the referenda to repeal the laws on divorce and abortion were the most evident sign of change, and those in favour of the abrogation (the 'yes' voters) turned out to be a minority of the population.

This was the situation when the Church realised that the Catholic culture and its various organisations in the society were in crisis, hence the new strategy, with the intention of having a more distinctive and qualified presence among Italy's believers. The church asked a bewildered Catholic associationism – split and reduced (even in its membership) by the social and political tensions of the time – to return to its original vocation represented by the civil and religious education of its members and involvement in youth training. At the same time, the Catholic groups and communities were encouraged to address the evils of society, to deal with old and new forms of poverty, identifying a specific – through solidarity and charity – role for Catholic organisations in the public sphere. In a nutshell, 'evangelization and promoting the development of human beings' was the slogan which the Church used as it tried to renew the civil society of that time.

It was then, in 1971, that Italian Caritas was established: it is an ecclesiastical organism whose aim is to 'bear witness to charity', 'in forms that are appropriate considering the time and needs, for a complete development of man, social justice and peace, with particular attention to the poor and with a mainly pedagogical function'.[6] The pedagogical function it refers to does not merely mean offering the services to help people fully integrate in society but also cultivates the idea that 'good samaritan policies' (taking care of problems of material and human poverty) were a credit card opening people up to a religious and spiritual perspective. Thus in every diocese, in the main parishes, arose listening and welcoming centres, services dealing with all kinds of social marginality, sites for training volunteers and collecting resources. The institutional activity followed the pioneering activity of various Catholic 'rank and file' groups, the real vanguard in dealing with the types of poverty found in a developed modern society – such as drug addiction, juvenile delinquency, usury, sexual exploitation, households in difficulty and so on. The growth of social and welfare-based voluntary work became the icon of the Catholic presence in civil society in those years: clearly, there were non-Catholic groups too in this field, but the former were prevalent. The Catholic commitment continued to grow and to be appreciated as a support for that public or state welfare system which is being downsized due to financial constraints.

[6] Art.1, Statute Caritas Italiana.

7.4.3 The Cultural and Identity Shift of Italian Catholicism

The third and last phase of the relationship between the Church and civil society in Italy dates back to the early 1990s, in the framework of growing cultural and religious pluralism (following among others the immigration flows) and characterised by the involution of the political system in which the Catholic party ceased to exist. The new situation led the Church to question itself: it saw itself bereft of the political point of reference which had defended Catholic values and interests for decades and also perceived the risk of the country's bonds and culture weakening. In fact, in an increasingly open and pluralistic society, the depth of one's roots and memory is reduced; there a loss of civic sense and localism thrives; the most important subcultures of the country, including the Catholic, appear spent. According to the Church, voluntary work, education and religious training are not enough to counter the trend.

Hence, the identity and culture change which the Church hierarchy developed in this phase and which led to it playing a more important role on the public stage: conducting several battles and campaigns to stress the Catholic identity of the nation, defending the presence of crucifixes in public buildings (schools, hospitals and courts); getting the state to recognise the constructive role of Catholic agencies in the country, including financial aid and tax breaks; and preventing the pressing of Italian laws which would penalise the Christian vision of reality – in the name of pluralism – on matters such as couples and the family, sexuality, reproduction, bioethics and the beginning and end of life.

This political activism was based on two pillars or 'certainties':

- The idea of interpreting widespread feeling among Italians which, according to the Church, is not mirrored in the positions of opinion leaders or by a minority nonreligious or lay world
- The idea that advanced modernity lacks basic values and that Christian thought and anthropology offer sense capable of informing an elevated concept of human cohabitation (Garelli 2010: 88)

Clearly, this new – and continuing – cultural commitment of the Church in Italy has triggered a strong reaction among non-believers, people who represent other denominations and faiths, and among those Catholics who are inspired by laic values, desiring a state which is neutral on religious issues and churches respecting freedom of choice and position. There is a new season in the Italian Church which has mobilised many groups and Catholic movements, defending inalienable values, while other sections of the Church – and especially the groups most involved in social activities – have maintained a less prominent position or even dissent, as they are concerned that the new position of the Church might lead it to act in areas outside its remit or that the cultural battle could prevail over charitable engagement and solidarity.

The third phase of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Italian civil society differs from the previous two in three respects:

(a) The focus shifts from social Catholicism – aimed at promoting human and Christian solidarity in civil society – to cultural Catholicism, concentrating on

a Christian identity to be rediscovered and reaffirmed for the good of individuals and the nation.

(b) The ecclesiastical institution passes from a logic of delegating action to the Catholic party to a strategy of lobbying the most important players in the political, economic and societal arenas.

(c) Part of the Catholic world abandons the idea of promoting Christian values through intermediate social bodies and shifts to a policy of defending them in the public sphere.

7.5 The Mark of Religious Organisations on Civil Society

As a result of the above, two basic issues should be addressed: the first concerns the nature of Catholic civil society in Italy (its size, weight, in which fields it is most active, and who makes it up); the second refers to the ability of the Church to influence people on the most important topics being debated in public. By addressing these two issues, some of the key questions raised in the studies on the relationship between religion and present-day societies (see Chap. 1), i.e.: Does religious affiliation favour the social, civil (and political) commitment of citizens? Do people trust the Churches and believe they will intervene on this level? Is the support Churches offer basically limited to its active members or does it expand beyond, outside the fold where faithful and the like are to be found? And again, do people's religious backgrounds show themselves only in private or is this also true of the public sphere? At this level, can the faithful be told apart from those who have no religious faith?

It may prove useful to look at what is happening in organised associations to evaluate the weight and influence of Catholic inspiration on the civil society A recent comprehensive study (Garelli 2011: 101–104) has made it possible to rank the main types of associations which Italians state they are members of. Results suggest that about 10 % of the adult population is involved in religious or parish groups; a comparable number is involved in social and welfare voluntary organisation (5 % in nonreligious groups and 5 % in the ones with a religious orientation), about 7 % are members of organised sports and leisure associations, and a comparable number are members of groups which are for culture and art and of those which promote local culture and traditions. These are at the present the kind of associationism most widespread in the population, while other types of aggregation (with trade union, political, humanitarian and ecological aims, or to look after a category's interests or on behalf of students and education) may have smaller but yet considerable membership.

These preliminary data suggest that in terms of numbers, religious-based associations (formed by groups with a religious aim or the Catholic voluntary sector) seem to be one of the strengths of Italian civil society, even when multiple memberships are discounted. However, there are also associations with a lay or nonreligious face or whose aims are not religious that can become magnets for

religiously oriented people, hence the interest in surveying the Catholic presence to know how widespread it is in the main sectors of Italian associations. The figure can be obtained by analysing the frequency of worship stated on average by the members of the various association groupings. Considering worship as weekly, which, as mentioned above, in Italy applies to 25 % of the population, members of religious or parish groups have an 88 % attendance rate, members of Catholic-based voluntarism associations 78 % and in groups involved in youth groups and education 70 %. In different way, members of sports groups, fan clubs, trade unions, parties and movements or political collectives on average display a much lower rate than the national average. Lastly, the percentage of practising members belonging to nonreligious voluntary associations or to cultural and artistic organisations or humanitarian ones is around 40 %.

Furthermore, data show that people attached to any organised group or association has a higher than average religious practice rate compared to those who do not belong to any association.

The above indicates that:

(a) The commitment of Catholics in civil society is not only concentrated among those attending religious and parish groups or Church-led social voluntary organisations, but it can also be found in education where this cultural leaning has always heavily invested.
(b) There is a certain presence of Catholics in the nonreligious voluntary sector, humanitarian, culturally and artistically oriented associations: these are areas where Catholics cooperate and mix with subjects displaying other orientations, thus coming to terms with the kind of pluralism a highly developed society has. Faced with a Catholic world which operates in associations promoted by the clergy and Church, there is another which prefers to stay in open and pluralistic social spaces, especially because it identifies with activities and interests considered to have more of a secular than religious value.
(c) However, there appear to be other involved and committed associations in the public arena – such as trade unions, political and environmental groupings – which appear to attract fewer Catholics, just as sport or leisure associations. In brief, in the vast world of Italian associations, Catholics are widely albeit selectively present, which seems to indicate a degree of cultural sensitivity so that some sectors are privileged over others, and the ones where members feel they can have a greater impact are preferred.

As well as people who are currently active, there are some who were members of religious organisations but stopped over the years. About 20 % of the population was a member of some religiously active or educational association movement, about 6 % come from scouts and guides (where the Catholic orientation prevails) and 9 % were involved in social or welfare religiously oriented voluntary groups.

Once again, data cannot be accumulated as there are cases of multiple membership, but they give an idea of how vast religious activism is in Italy: the heading includes both those who describe themselves as active members in religiously oriented groups and at least some of those who were active in these organisations and

still share their values and aims. In other words, findings suggest this is the 'catchment area' for the so-called Catholic subculture whose members experienced periods of intense training and to this day have strong associational bonds or continue to identify with the basic values they once acquired.

Organised Italian Catholicism no longer has a hegemonic associative model as Azione Cattolica was until the Second Vatican Council but a host of associations active in civil society and widely recognised both inside and outside the Church confines. It is like a Catholic 'archipelago' where diverse 'souls' and 'charismas' live side by side, some of which give rise to many manifestations (meetings, conferences, seminars, marches and the like), which attract large audiences.

Currently some of the most vital movements are the ones decisively asserting Catholic identity and distinctiveness in a pluralistic society – such as Comunione e Liberazione, Opus Dei and some of the spirituality movements – or pressure groups and the forums recently established in support of the public battles undertaken by the Catholic hierarchy on the family, human life and bioethics. However, activism is also found in groups and associations which interpret their religious matrix in a lower key – groups such as Caritas, the Comunità di S. Egidio, Acli and the Gruppo Abele – mostly involved in those social and humanitarian activities which look to the lowest, foreign migrants, youngsters without a regular job, fighting the Mafia, getting involved in international cooperation and so forth.

One last remark concerns the overall profile of the Catholics who belong to the various facets of Italian associationism, a profile which suggests that more women than men get involved compared to trends in the population as a whole. There are more graduates and those with primary school education than those with junior high school education, while there do not seem to be any particular differences when the country's macro-areas – north, centre and south – are compared. Age wise, there is a large number of young people in all types of associationism, except for political groups and trade unions (where there are fewer Catholics in any case), and more adults.

7.6 The Church's Public Positions and Civil Society

In dealing with the relationship between religion and civil society in Italy, it is essential to understand what kind of consensus the people offer the Church which plays a major role on the national stage by defending and promoting those values they cherish. The Italian (and Catholic) case seems to confirm the theses José Casanova developed 15 years ago: he believed the process of secularisation did not necessarily lead to the privatisation of religion and that reconquering the public sphere was possible for 'historical' religions too (Casanova 1994).

The negative reactions from the lay or nonreligious world faced with a Catholic Church which acts as a pressure group in society have already been mentioned. However, there are also non-believers, the so-called *atei-devoti* ('devout atheists'), who backed the bishops in contrasting ethical relativism and the loss of

fundamental points of reference. To what extent do people identify with or distance themselves from this new public role of the Church? The answer to this question can be elicited from the many findings in the aforementioned national survey investigating the relationship between state and church, and to the presence of the latter in Italian society.

Most Italians appear not to question the link between the prevailing religion and national identity (Garelli 2011); consistently, they support the presence of the crucifix in public places, are in favour of teaching the Catholic religion in state schools, agree that the 8/1,000 governmental tax[7] should be designed for church's activities and agree that religions should voice their opinions on the most relevant topics of the time. Clearly, consensus is not general. People might appreciate many of the activities of the church but disagree with its tax exemptions; ecclesial social and educational activities might be appreciated, but religious organisations may be accused of having too much power. Above all, a lot of people are irritated by a church which exceeds its specific tasks, gets involved in political events and makes choices not-so innocent.

A number of fine distinctions emerge with reference to the Church's statements: social and public ethics interventions appear the most appreciated, just as when the Church recalls duties of solidarity, reminds politicians of the common good, tries to keep the nation united and strengthens the collective ethos. The voice of the hierarchy is not listened to in the same manner on sexual and family ethics, areas where Italians have expressed their own autonomous judgement for a long time. Feelings are still divided on the Church's thoughts on the beginning and end of life, bioethics, genetic engineering and the boundaries to be set to science that knows no limits, although most would appreciate 'Catholic' caution on these new frontiers.

Beyond the average trends, what social groups identify more closely or are more distant from the public statements of the Church? In this respect, a number of interesting differences can be observed, classifying Italians according to how they define themselves from a religious viewpoint, comparing subjects 'with no religion' (that is to say those who do not profess any religion), to all those who belong to non-Catholic religions or denominations, and then to the main facets of Italian Catholic religiousness. With reference to the latter, there appear to be four prevailing types: 'active and convinced', 'convinced but not always active', Catholics 'by tradition and education' and Catholics 'in their own way' or selectively.

To offer an example, one can limit the analysis to some of the cultural battles or ethical choices of the Church – including appeals to the unity of the nation, the defence of families based on marriage, the condemnation of abortion, the ban on heterologous in vitro fertilisation and the stand against euthanasia (Table 7.1).

[7] A system whereby eight thousandths of the income tax a citizen must pay can be directed, according to individual choice, to a selection of religious bodies in order to help sustain them financially.

Table 7.1 Attitude of the Italian population to a series of public pronouncements or choices of the Catholic Church in the social and ethical field (%)

		Religious belonging						
		Catholic						
	Total	Active and convinced	Convinced but not always active	By tradition/ education	'In my own way'	Catholic total	Other religion	No religion
Agreement with the following public pronouncements of the Church								
Importance of the family based on matrimony	77	97	88	72	73	83	71	26
Necessity to keep Italy united, resisting local tendencies	69	89	77	64	66	74	45	32
Constant condemnation of abortion because a human being must be respected from the moment of conception	57	85	64	47	48	61	67	16
Necessity to set limits to biomedical scientific research	53	73	60	48	41	57	49	16
Position on the following choices								
Heterologous fecundation (a couple using external donor sperm in order to have children)[a]								
Forbid	37	59	36	32	32	39	44	13
Limit	32	27	37	33	30	33	26	26
Allow	23	9	18	27	31	21	17	54
Euthanasia (helping an incurably ill person to die)								
In favour	37	18	30	48	42	35	22	68
Against	33	58	36	22	26	35	50	7
Not sure	30	24	34	30	32	30	28	25
N	3,160	607	873	954	287	2.721	151	288

Source: Religione all'italiana, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2011

[a]7.4 % of respondents answered 'Don't know'

The following results can be observed:

(a) The group which defines itself as having 'no religion' is the only one whose opinions are markedly different from those expressed by the Catholic hierarchy, as most do not share such positions. However, even in the culturally more secular or nonreligious group, there is still a minority of people (numbers vary) which appreciates the Church's support for national unity (32 %), for the family–marriage dyad (26 %), against abortion (16 %) and to set boundaries in the biomedical field (16 %). There are also people who are against (7 %) or uncertain (25 %) about euthanasia.
(b) The people who belong to 'religious faiths' other than Catholic mostly share similar orientations to the ones expressed by the Catholics: over two-thirds of this mixed group share the 'Catholic view' on the central role of the family based on marriage and are against abortion. Just over one-fifth say they are in favour of euthanasia, compared to 35 % of all Catholics and 37 % of all Italians.
(c) As for the public statements of the church leadership, a marked difference among the various types of Catholic religiousness was observed.

The group of the 'active and convinced' Catholics is the one which is most aligned with the positions and the choices of the church in the areas investigated, while the other kinds of Catholic religiousness – those 'by tradition and education', or the 'in their own way' – display a large percentage that do not follow the hierarchy's appeals or guidelines on a number of issues. In fact, selective adherence to the statements and to the social and ethical battles of the Church can also be observed in a section of the religiously more involved Catholics, although it is more common among groups on the outskirts of the religious institution.

For instance, the constant condemnation of abortion by the Church is shared by 85 % of the 'active and convinced' or practising Catholics and by 64 % of the 'convinced but not always active', but by less than half of those who adhere through tradition or education or interpret it 'in their own way'. Likewise, over 40 % of the members of the two latter groups are in favour of euthanasia – compared to 18 % in the 'active and convinced' or practising one, in spite of the firm and repeated ban of the Church against offering it to terminal or incurable patients. However, Catholics as a whole focus on some cultural and ethical battles of the Church rather than others: for instance, they identify more with the pronouncements on the importance of the family and marriage (or the unity of the Italian nation) than with setting boundaries to scientific research in the biomedical field, thus displaying a range of positions on the demanding questions on the beginning and end of life, an issue which the Catholic hierarchy holds well-defined positions.

To sum up, the public positions of the Church seem to command a wide consensus among the Catholics closest to it and also among part of those less religiously committed or involved Catholics or those more independent of the religious institution. The most curious fact is that some of the statements by the Catholic hierarchy interpret the feelings of large groups of people who belong to religious minorities in Italy and who are especially sensitive to topics concerning the family and human life. Furthermore, they are appreciated also by a minor but not insignificant share of the non-believers or

those do not belong to any religious denomination. In all cases, Catholic doctrine forms a corpus of guidelines and positions or orientations with which not just normal people but also opinion leaders, the lay world and political forces are called to address.

7.7 Latin Countries Are Not All the Same: Comparing/Contrasting Italy, Spain and Portugal

Observers of religious phenomena often tend to lump together Latin countries with Catholic roots – Italy, Spain and Portugal – excepting France, usually considered a separate case, a model of the secular state and of the society which characterises it. Perhaps this is because there was in their past an epoch in which Catholicism exercised a hegemonic role in society, based on a quite normative ecclesiastical magisterium, over a widespread national network of parishes and a population totally exposed to clerical influence, after the pattern of militant commitment capable of getting a grip on the most dynamic and vital social sectors. Indeed, the most exhaustive studies[8] emphasise that these countries – in which Catholic culture is still prevalent – follow different paths through advanced modernity, and these can be seen in the forms assumed by the relationship between religion and civil society.[9] In Italy, as we have seen, that relationship has in recent decades undergone three key moments which have paradoxically restored the Catholic Church and its world to the centre of the public stage. This development was by no means inevitable, as is evidenced by the examples of Spain and Portugal who – although sharing analogous dynamics – have reached outcomes different from those of Italy.

7.7.1 The Common Itinerary in Processes of Laicisation and Secularisation

Like all countries, heirs to a Christian condition, Spain (Pérez-Agote 2010) and Portugal too passed through a phase – during the 1970s and 1980s of the last century – of rapid erosion of the social model which rotated around Catholicism.

[8] Interesting descriptions on various Catholic European countries have been drawn in recent research promoted by the Groupe Européen de Recherche Interdisciplinaire sur le Changement Religieux, directed and coordinated by Alfonso Pérez-Agote (University of Madrid), with the participation of Liliane Voyé and Karel Dobbelaere (Belgium); Alfonso Pérez-Agote, Jose Santiago, Antonio Ariño, Ana Aliende and Ana Núñez (Spain); Céline Béraud, Denis Pelletier and Philippe Portier (France); Franco Garelli, Enzo Pace and Annalisa Frisina (Italy); and Helena Vilaça and Maria João Oliveira (Portugal). See Pérez-Agote (2012) for the three case studies presented in this chapter.

[9] As well as in other national contexts, also in Southern European countries, national cultures and geographical areas differ deeply in both the role and the social relevance of religion. See Halman et al. (2005) and Norris and Inglehart (2004).

Nevertheless, at the end of this process in Latin countries, we do not find that the traditional religion has been marginalised but that Catholicism actively seeks out new motives and forms of public presence in advanced modernity. In the dynamics of recent decades, certain factors have been common to, and recurrent in, all countries in South Europe.

(a) Like all Western European countries, also those of the South characterised by strong Catholic roots have seen their religious landscape modified in recent decades, both as to the growth of religious minorities (as a result of foreign migratory flows) and even more by the declining influence of the prevailing religion and a growing process of laicisation of the society. Still today in the Iberian Peninsula, around 80 % of the native population is bound to Catholicism – although not more than 20 % regularly practice religious rites – while others attend irregularly or limit their participation to rites of passage or the practice of popular devotions. Large swathes of people interpret subjectively their belonging to the Catholic Church, in particular not fully agreeing with the church's teachings on the family and sexual morality. This happens in places where the church, despite the sharp reduction in the national scene, is already a relevant presence, even exercising more influence in traditional than emerging areas, in mixed-economy zones rather in the metropolis (as, e.g. in 'greater Lisbon'). Yet in this composite scenario, Catholic feeling – as is true also in Italy – is still widespread in Spain and Portugal, which contain – in Santiago de Compostela and Fatima, respectively – two sanctuaries which are symbols of religious identity intertwined with national vicissitudes (Esteves 1986).

(b) What unites the three countries under consideration here on the political level is the progressive pluralism of Catholics' choices.

In Spain and Italy, this pluralism increased in inverse proportion to the decline of parties with Christian Democratic orientations, and where the parties formally remained on the scene, it was at the cost of a strong internal laicisation process which led them to lose their links with the tradition of social Catholicism from which they had sprung. In Spain, in truth, the Popular Party is by now to all intents and purposes a lay party which no longer reflects its origins as a mass Christian Democrat party.[10] In Portugal, on the other hand, which has not had a political tradition of this kind, the dissemination of Catholics as a whole (including those most religiously committed) throughout all political groupings is a process which accompanied the arrival and development of democracy in the country. However, Catholics are present in large numbers in the Socialist Party. In addition, it is true that there is a right-wing party (the Social Democratic Centre) which claims to be Christian, but it has never received official recognition from the Portuguese Church as such. The

[10]Pérez-Agote et al. (2012: 92) write on this issue: 'on doit d'abord noter le manque d'enracinement d'un parti démocrate-chrétien en Espagne, qui aurait pu assurer la présence des catholiques dans la vie politique.'

same occurs in the case of another party born recently which, although it does not explicitly define itself as Christian, is de facto inspired by the church's social doctrine (supporting, for instance, among other things, the principle of subsidiarity in the governance of society). The Portuguese Church is careful – at last formally – to adopt a neutral position with regard to various forces and to keep a certain distance from political power.

Thus, from different points of view, in all Southern European countries, there has been a process of adaptation of Catholics to new political scenarios, including Catholic unions which, in order to survive the crisis, have diluted or lost sight of their original purpose.

(c) The crisis, or lack of political leadership, pushed the Catholics of these countries to step up their efforts in the area of social-assistance voluntary work.

In Portugal, after the advent of democracy (which coincides with an acceleration in the secularisation process), it was the church itself which took the initiative in encouraging new forms of social engagement for the faithful, thereby compensating at least in part for the weakening of its pastoral activity in the country. Although the church did not have a monopoly of the *agire solidale* (social intervention) in Portugal, it played a decisive part in this field, as is evidenced by the fact that 37 % of the bodies and institutions looking after the most marginalised social groups, welcoming immigrants and dealing with new and old forms of poverty depend on the church (Vilaça and Oliveira 2012). Similar stimulus to act in this field came from the Spanish Church, which together with other Latin countries redirected the engagement of that part of civil society which is still guided by the church. This does not mean, however, that the Catholic world in Spain and Portugal has abandoned other social sectors. In both contexts, ecclesiastical authorities exhort the faithful closest to them to remain active in the field of youth education, in ethical committees at various levels, in defending the values of human life and the family, in participating in the world of culture and in the public debate on the relevant themes of the day.

(d) Another common element is the differentiation process of Catholic associationism which was triggered off by the spreading throughout society of cultural and religious pluralism. In Spain and Portugal, as well as in Italy, the end of Catholic hegemony in society produced an increasing differentiation in Christian-inspired movements and associations which are more concerned with expressing their charisma or their particular social and religious sensitivity than with being in tune with other realities which make up the world of organised Catholic associationism. Here, we can detect a constant of the militant Catholic presence in the age of pluralism: there is no longer a hegemonic associative model, and many groups and movements cohabit in the Catholic space without being necessarily connected among themselves; while sometimes, there may be links of affinity and common interests, the overall desire for autonomy and distinction remains predominant. Of course, they all share in a common culture to which they bear witness in civil society (a religious and spiritual sense of existence; the values of family, human life and education; involved and essential lifestyles;

the idea of a community, etc.) but which admits several different interpretations of the church–world relationship, faith and social commitment. Sometimes – especially in Italy and Spain – these topics give rise to serious tensions and opposition in ecclesiastical circles. This diversity can also be seen in relations with the church: while some associations live on the periphery of the church (either critical of or detached from it), most groups and movements seem to have a special relationship with institutional religion and consider that they represent it legitimately in the light of their own charisma and their own background. Some have their own bishop to answer to, some even their own clergy. Within this 'archipelago', some movements stand out because of their dynamism and their ability to operate in contemporary society's visibility mechanisms – one example is Opus Dei in Spain.

7.7.2 Civil Society and Delayed Democratic Development

The fact of having shared for some time the exit path from Christianity with other Southern European countries like Italy and France has not brought Spain and Portugal the same results, at least on the level of civil society.

If on one hand widespread commitment to voluntarism and social work in general is a common trait, on the other, it is a matter of fact that in the two countries under consideration there are fewer religious militants than in Italy. At least quantitatively, the Catholic presence in civil society is less prominent in Spain and Portugal, with all which that implies in terms of their influence on public dynamics and inferior ability to compensate for state welfare which is suffering from a structural crisis of resources.[11] Naturally, there remain in these contexts considerable traces of social Catholicism, from hospitals and means of communication with Catholic roots, from family and life-support centres to Catholic schools, etc. Nevertheless, the abiding impression is that this action is carried out much more by church bodies and structures than by Catholic associationism and that Catholic ferment in civil society is less pervasive than in Italy. Having said that, we should recognise that in the Iberian Peninsula, the public reputation of Catholic schools – especially those run by Jesuits – is much higher than in Italy at present, and this renown (even among non-believers) of providing a first-class education has created a situation where supply cannot satisfy demand. Furthermore, Portugal reports a special Catholic presence in the world of culture, whose style is partly different from that in Italy, giving more weight to dialogue with society than to emphasising in all situations its Christian distinction. Side by side with centres defending

[11] Focussing on a recent survey, Pérez-Agote et al. (2012: 95) state 'que la participation citoyenne des catholiques dans des associations religieuses est plutôt faible: en 2002, 6.9 % seulement des Espagnols font partie d'une association à caractère religieux (…) Ajoutons que, selon le même sondage, il existe un faible degré de confiance de la part de la société espagnole envers ce genre d'associations à caractère religieux.'

Catholic values (questions of human life, family, bioethics, education) can be found interesting initiatives aimed at creating 'cultural bridges' in civil society, instituting dialogue between theology and the arts, believers and the lay world, mystics with those responsible for earthly realities, those inside and outside the church and so on.

This more open presence of the church and Catholics in Portuguese civil society reflects a national context marked – with the arrival of democracy after the 1974 Carnation Revolution – by secularisation of the state and freedom of religious expression. These choices were mostly accepted by the hierarchy, partly because they did not call into question the public role of the church and the identification with the Catholicism of the majority of the population. The situation is different, however, in Spain, which in recent decades has experienced a more intense secularisation process whose political echoes can be discerned in the libertarian choices of socialist governments in the last few years. Thus, the ecclesiastical hierarchy has vehemently opposed the new political direction, calling on Catholics to defend Christian values, the public role of the church and the presence of religious symbols in public buildings. Although this phenomenon promotes initiatives capable of mobilising the masses, it seems rather the result of a delayed modernisation process than a real identity reawakening or a project to federate or coordinate the various spirits of the Catholic world within civil society – which is what is happening in Italy. In addition, particularly in Spain, only a part of the militant Catholic laity agrees with the church's antisocialist political activism.

This relatively weak Catholic presence in civil society in the Iberian Peninsula is connected with the particular passage of the two countries from the clerical fascist regimes of Franco and Salazar to democratic life. In that configuration, ecclesiastical institutions enjoyed a kind of legal hegemony, thanks to a concordat with the state, which guaranteed them ample resources and favourable treatment compared to non-Catholic religious denominations, against the background of authoritarian affirmation of the nation's Catholic identity. All of this lasted until the end of the 1970s of the last century. The passage to democracy came about as a result of pressure born within civil society which was primarily secular and antithetical to ecclesiastical hierarchies and Catholicism as a whole: it was perceived by large sections of the population to be clearly aligned with right-wing political forces. Moreover, the processes of modernisation and democratisation were not directed by Christian Democrat-inspired political and social forces, as they were in Italy. These dynamics weakened the role played by groups and associations in the development of Spanish and Portuguese civil society, because they had to find elsewhere the set of shared common values which would be capable of leading both countries towards modernity.

To sum up, in all the countries of the Southern Europe, the Catholic Church plays a more prominent role – more than in North-Central European nations where Catholic culture is still important – in the public sphere, which is revealed by renewed involvement of lay believers in various sectors of civil society. Everywhere, Catholic groups and movements are in the forefront of social–assistential voluntarism, on the educational level, concerning the social and ethical themes which are today most in the public consciousness, with regard to rules of cohabitation in a pluralistic society (family, human life, bioethics, the intervention of science at the

cutting edge, multiculturalism, religious pluralism and so on). In some countries, such as Italy and Spain, the church's presence seems more aggressive and tenacious, while in Portugal, it appears to favour a more open presence and dialogue with society. These are different strategies for the prevailing religion to husband its heritage of symbolic resources and sense, in countries which are experiencing the processes of secularisation and laicisation typical of advanced modernity.

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