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Report from Italy by Cristina Fiocchi

The shame of the Christian Democracy

Inside the convention of Italy's largest political party, which used to uphold the alliance with America.

When we walked into the auditorium of the Sports Palace in Rome to attend the sessions of the 16th Congress of the Christian Democracy (DC) we were assailed by a sensation of annoyance, almost nausea; the amphitheatre-shaped room had been transformed into a huge, suffocating white, pastel blue, and green basin. The music of Beethoven and the Italian classical composers had been replaced by rock, interspersed with nostalgic 1950s "pop" tunes; on two giant screens at the sides of the room were projected images of singers, DC leaders, and maxims of Alcide De Gasperi, the party's postwar leader; hundreds of hostesses in red and white outfits helped the somewhat stupefied delegates find their places. Party secretary Ciriaco De Mita mounted the speakers' dais with a white carnation in his buttonhole and began his speech, which went on for more than five hours.

In reality the results of this DC congress were already taken for granted. After the electoral defeat of June 26, 1983, De Mita had called for an extraordinary congress a year earlier than usual, and he and his men had run the preparations for it with an iron hand, along with the clever foreign minister, Giulio Andreotti, revealed as the true behind-the-scenes orchestrator.

De Mita, during his interminable speech, proposed a post-industrial policy accompanied by the harshest economic austerity measures: "Our public spending is too high," he said, citing the fight against inflation as the primary aim, to be obtained with an incomes policy and cuts in public spending. He proposed de facto cuts in the system of local health units and free education, and the general use of part-time labor. Speaking of energy needs, which are so serious in Italy, he dismissed the problem with a phrase demanding "the construction of an adequate number of power plants." What kind, he did not specify. He certainly did not wish to take a position on nuclear power.

As for foreign policy, De Mita said he hoped that "the new Kremlin head may strengthen the still-slender thread of resuming the dialogue to reach accords which . . . guarantee new equilibria at ever-lower levels." Former party secretary Benigno Zaccagnini dwelt at greater length on the strategic situation, praising the peace movement as "a great factor of humanism which removes the debate on peace from the control of the powerful." Speaking of the Soviet Union he did a credible imitation of Neville Chamberlain: "I know I may be slipping into Utopia, but is it truly risky to assume a line of moderation in the face of an immoderate adversary?"

The only opposition, Vincenzo Scotti, the minister of Civil Protection who ran against De Mita for party secretary, proposed a solidarist program for the DC recalling the postwar "Dossetti" faction, which advocated a leftist version of corporatism and a foreign-police stance midway between the U.S.S.R. and U.S.A. But there is no substantial discord between Scotti and De Mita except on questions of power and control of the party. Both hope for a deal with the Italian Communist Party, De Mita through a bipolar scheme, Scotti by hashing out differences on "their own turf." In practice, as the Jesuit Father Angelo Macchi explained, the question is how to open to the Communist Party, to involve it in the management of an economic policy of "blood and tears." This is the foreign-policy track of Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti, who felt obliged to defend himself from criticisms directed at him, saying: "Foreign policy is the business of the entire nation and therefore it is wretched to confuse sincere actions of peace and détente with little internal policy maneuvers which are always to be disapproved, but are downright absurd when the interests of the whole Italian people are at stake."

Andreotti was referring to the event which had been so talked about the first day in the corridors of the congress—the arrival of a "Qaddafi" dressed as a Bedouin who came to the congress to offer support to the foreign minister. The Libyan leader had staged a rally in Arabic, translated to the gathered journalists by a distinguished individual dressed up as Andreotti. The skit had been organized by the European Labor Party, which puts itself forward in elections as the "American party" supporting the beam-weapons defense policy of President Reagan, in open polemics with the peace offers Andreotti recently made to the Soviet-allied Libyan terrorist dictator.

The DC convention closed in a Far West climate, with fistfights between delegates venting their cumulative rage over the fact that the only discussion had been on how much power to give the party secretary. The lesson of the congress indicates that the DC is no longer capable of representing the country's interests.

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