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From Cycling Priests to the 'Sportsman's Pope'. Italy, Sport and the Catholic Church

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This article surveys the Catholic Church's exploitation of sport in Liberal (1861–1922), Fascist (1922–1943), and post-war Italy. It examines how and why the Church overcame its initial reticence to embrace sport and turn it into a fundamental pillar of an alternative culture that challenged the monopoly of national sporting federations. Following the rise of Fascism, sport became one of the principal means by which the Church resisted a complete takeover by the regime. Analysis of the devout Catholic cyclist Gino Bartali reveals how the Church maintained its identity and tradition of sporting independence despite the inevitable suppression of Catholic sporting organisations. Culminating in an examination of the 'immortalisation' of Bartali after his win in the 1948 Tour De France – a victory popularly credited with saving Italy from civil war – the article illuminates the processes by which sport became a central feature of Catholicism in national life. It highlights the Church's contribution to the development of Italian sport, assesses the wider impact of sport's role in forming alternative cultures, and argues that sport perfectly positioned the Church to respond to the demands of Reconstruction Italy and provided opportunities to secure a post-war Christian Democratic society.

The Church and Liberal Italy

Italy is a somewhat unusual case in European history, with different accounts of its history viewing it as both Mediterranean and Western European, agricultural yet industrially advanced, socially traditional and modern, united and fragmented – each of which can be perfectly justified. The country's sporting history presents an equally distinct and arguably special case for a variety of reasons, among which the role of

the Catholic Church is one of the most significant. While the Vatican has naturally exerted considerable influence throughout the Catholic world, this independent state's position within the heart of Rome has made it one of Italian society's major opinion-shapers. Indicative has been its consistently strong opinions on the merits of sport through which it has promoted its Catholic agenda while influencing the country's social and political direction.

Following Italian unification in 1861, Rome was finally lost in 1870 and the Pope retreated behind the Vatican walls from where he continued to demand the restoration of his lands that had been sequestered by the new nation state. Although not the first time a Pope had lost his temporal power, on each previous occasion he had returned triumphantly after a period of exile. Having investigated the possibility of political asylum in Great Britain prior to Garibaldi's forces being prevented from reaching Rome in 1861, and having further considered his departure, in 1871, when the city finally became part of Italy, Pius IX's failure to ever emerge from his self-imposed exile inside the Vatican reinforced his image as a hostage. Despite the generosity of the 1871 Law of Guarantees that effectively created a state within a state by giving the Pope full sovereign status and allowing him to maintain armed guards and diplomatic representation, Catholicism's opposition to the Italian nation-state continued to ferment.

With its position of privilege preserved, the Church retained its considerable influence and capacity to intervene in Italian politics, institutions and society. Its great weakness, however, was the limits imposed by its self-exclusion from the political system following the 1868 non-expedit decree's barring of Catholics from participating in national elections. Preventing the development of a strong Catholic party that would almost certainly have commanded significant support, this left the dominant nationalist and secular culture relatively uncontested until the arrival of the even more threatening class-based socialism.

With its capacity to shape politics thus restricted, the Church attempted to root its culture in Italian life via the Society of Catholic Italian Youth, which became the Opera dei Congressi. Established in 1874, it coordinated the various Catholic associations, workers, student circles and societies, banks, publication houses, newspapers, and journals, etc, through which the Church aimed to develop grass-roots support. As socialism's rise attained threatening levels, so the Vatican's opposition to Catholic participation in national politics waned, its protests over the loss of the Papal States quietened and the work of the Opera dei Congressi intensified.

Priests on bicycles

Within this umbrella organisation, sport proved an effective means of 'going to the people' and forming an alternative Catholic-based culture within which the

Church's fundamental spiritual and social values could be conveyed. It did, however, require careful treatment. Only 'good' sports were practised, with boxing and rugby deemed too violent and football frowned upon owing to its Anglo-Saxon and thus Protestant roots. Increasing individual mobility with all of the 'risks' and 'dangers' that involved, cycling's development also caused significant concern. It was, according to the Vatican daily *L'Osservatore Romano*: 'a true global, transport anarchy … as anarchy is fast moving in global society. … The cyclist isn't a pedestrian, a coachman, a train driver, he isn't an animal to be hunted or a pack animal: he is like a hermaphrodite, indefinable, unclassifiable, who escapes every law of the road.'[1]

Despite offering priests a means by which they could reach a far greater number of parishioners, serious concerns about the compromising of their dignity and religious authority led to the bicycle being banned by some religious leaders. As Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto of Mantua vowed: 'If, however, somebody might find the yoke of this rule unbearable and thinks about following his whim, he might know that in disobeying the Bishop, in what I retain to be a very serious matter, he risks incurring ecclesiastical punishment to which I will give a hand with displeasure but equal firmness.'[2]

Sarto's declaration was a direct response to *La Bicicletta*'s 1894 supplement, *I Preti in Bicicletta* (Cycling Priests). Written and compiled by two priests in the Milan diocese, it promoted responsible cycling among the clergy: 'The Curia certainly needs to regulate ecclesiastical cycling and we believe that this first stage of general prohibition is a sign of serious regulation rather than a reckless rejection of a potent means of communication that is now accepted by all intelligent people.'[3] While many within the Church maintained a profound objection to the clergy's use of the bicycle, so keen was Catholicism to penetrate Italian society that, encouraged by the type of arguments presented in *La Bicicletta*'s supplement, an accommodation was quickly sought. 'We are cyclists and our aim isn't to be partisan, it is simply directed at bringing into public favour every branch of this miraculous sport that brings many moral and material advantages to all social classes.'[3]

An alternative culture

With suspicion surrounding cycling, gymnastics had long been Catholicism's favoured event. The Valdocco oratory/youth club, in Turin's periphery, was one of the first to encourage the physical and spiritual development of children through running, jumping and physical exercise, in addition to more traditional music and theatrical productions containing strong Catholic messages. These were all encouraged by Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) 'who saw the importance of adapting Church tactics and Church organization to the new times. The *Opera*,

despite the perceived risk of a lay association that might get out of the hierarchy's control, became a central tool in the Church's efforts to retain its influence in Italy.'[4] Within this establishment of a counter society, the oratories expanded their activities to satisfy the various recreational needs and desires of young people, which included excursion groups, choirs, pre-military training and gymnastic sections. Some of the latter then broke away to form independent, sport-specific gymnastic clubs, and by the turn of the century Catholic sport had become a large, institutionalised network of sports clubs. Offering an alternative to Liberal Italy's existing nationalistic and patriotic societies, they came to rival the National Gymnastics Federation (FGN), Italy's first national sporting organisation.

Following a number of conciliatory gestures towards the government in the previous decade, the accession of Pius X, in 1903, saw Catholicism's unofficial re-entry into Italian life gather pace and the non-expedit decree relaxed the year after. In 1905, the Opera dei Congressi was also restructured into the Church's lay, cultural, umbrella organisation Catholic Action (Azione Cattolica), within which sport gained increasing importance as a fundamental means of recruiting and educating young people. As Catholic sport's rivalry with the FGN came to a head, it was boosted in 1905 by the first Italian Catholic Sporting Convention, in Rome. At the conclusion of the four days of running, cycling and gymnastics events, the 1500 athletes were granted an audience with Pope Pius X. Assuring them the Church had no intention of prohibiting their fun, he encouraged them to use their strength to defend and reinforce their faith:

> I don't only approve of your efforts in Catholic Action, but I admire and bless from the heart all of your games and pastimes, gymnastics, cycling, mountaineering, sailing, running, walks, the contests and academies to which you dedicate yourselves; because material exercise of the body wonderfully influences the exercise of the spirit; because these entertainments require effort, they keep you from laziness the father of all vice.[5]

Receiving Catholic sports leaders and athletes along with judges of the First International Catholic Tournament, in 1908, he more or less repeated the same message for the pursuit of religious piety through sport.[6]

After the FGN refused to allow two Catholic societies to join in 1905, on the basis of its apparently apolitical and irreligious nature, Catholic Action formed its own Union of Italian Catholic Sports Associations (Unione delle Associazioni Sportive Cattoliche Italiane) in 1906. Renamed the Italian Federation of Catholic Sporting Associations (Federazione delle Associazioni Sportive Cattoliche Italiane) in 1907, but better known as the FASCI, it organised sport and competitions according to the Church's moral code. With the evident quality of its athletes strengthening its challenge to the FGN, Catholic sport's growth saw a corresponding increase in anti-clerical and socialist opposition that reflected the left's arguably justifiable fear of an anti-working class, Catholic-liberal conspiracy.

Although not a regular occurrence, manifestations of anti-clericalism had a long tradition in the Italian peninsula, which only increased with the Church's refusal to recognise the Italian state. In 1881, a procession carrying the remains of Pius IX from the Vatican to Basilica of San Lorenzo was attacked by anti-clericals who threatened to push the carriage into the river, before the police restored order.[4] A planned procession from the Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore to San Lorenzo, prior to the 1908 international tournament, was disrupted by Catholic opponents.[7] In 1913, a similar incident occurred prior to the Second International Gymnastics Tournament (Concorso Internazionale al Vaticano), which was organised by the FASCI and included 168 societies and over 4000 competitors.[7] With Catholic organisations skilled in choreography and creating spectacle, having organised numerous pilgrimages to the Holy See, the tournament was scheduled to open with a procession from San Giovanni in Laterano to St Peter's, on the other side of the city. Coming only days after the brutal repression of an Italian irredentist demonstration in Trieste, however, the presence of an Austrian team enraged nationalists and anti-clericalists, which often included almost anybody or group deemed non-religious.[8] Although indicative of Catholic sport's trans-national, non class-based identity, such competitions could nonetheless not be separated from the development of international organisations and tournaments, such as the Olympic Games, that saw sport became an essential component of the modern state through which loyalty and bonds of attachment were created around often abstract concepts of national identity.

As the Catholic daily *L'Italia* recorded: 'in the innocent act of the gymnasts, they [the anti-clericalists and nationalists] chose to see a trap or provocation that Austria wanted to inflict upon Italy. The hot nationalist spirit rose and recalled the measures of the governor of Trieste.'[9] The previous day had already witnessed a number of scuffles between police, nationalist and anti-Vatican demonstrations, while at an evening concert of the Rome municipal band, in the Pizza Colonna, anti-clerical protestors had objected to the playing of the Royal March and called, instead, for the Hymns of Garibaldi and Mameli.[10] As *L'Italia* registered: 'Unsatisfied with the way their protest was going, the anti-clericals continued … shouting "Long live Giordano Bruno! Down with the Vatican!" [and] throwing multi-coloured propaganda leaflets into the air.'[11]

An apparent threat to public order, the procession was cancelled. Considered an act of extreme weakness by *Osservatore Romano*, during the small processions of individual societies that replaced the large, single event the authorities, 'covered with anti-clerical prejudices', left 'the pacifist guests … to be roughed-up, abused and threatened with brutal violence.'[12] Eventually on reaching the Vatican, the athletes were rewarded with the Pontiff's blessing: 'Pius X appeared visibly moved and gave thanks with his hand, since the emotion prevented him from uttering a word. After five minutes of growing enthusiasm passed, the Pope

gave a hand signal for silence. His Holiness gave the blessing.'[13] Three days later, a train carrying the Lombard teams home was bombarded by a volley of stones and rocks as it entered Civitavecchia station, north of Rome.[14]

In the face of such opposition, which differed considerably from region to region, the FASCI developed a defensive mentality that deterred its growth in the areas in which liberal societies were strongest. Focusing upon the country's more Catholic central and southern regions, by 1914 it had still become a mass, national organisation, a serious rival to the FGN, and a fundamental part of Christian-democracy's penetration of daily life. While developing its own brand of repetitive, group-style gymnastics, FASCI competitions also replicated those of the FGN that were based upon squad classification, results and prizes. In time, even the Church's opposition to team games weakened after Catholic gymnastic societies' involvement in the First World War forced a reconsideration of their merits.

Fascism

Following Fascism's rise to power in 1922, the FASCI's primary focus became survival, especially after the creation of the regime's youth movement, the Opera Nazionale Ballila, in 1926. Keen to reach a coexistence agreement with the Church, the regime was unable to liquidate the FASCI. Choosing, instead, to erode it slowly and indirectly with its own organisations, Fascism allowed Catholic associations to resist and delay its takeover of sport and physical education. The last remaining centre of independent power in Italy, the Church, was finally tamed by the 1929 Lateran Accords. Readers of the regime's monthly *Lo Sport Fascista* were informed of this alliance in an editorial dedicated to the 'Mountaineering Pope' Pius XI, in which he was quoted as saying: 'It takes two to make an agreement: we have found complete understanding in our aspirations and spiritual necessities and the best will to satisfy them.'[15]

Thereafter, Fascism used the Church's links to the rural masses and middle classes to reinforce its hold over the population, while increasing its international prestige and promoting its apparently moderate image throughout the Catholic world. For the Vatican, the deal settled the 'Roman question' that had existed since Unification, and allowed it to create its own, independent state, while guaranteeing the existence of Catholic schools and the central position of the Church in state elementary and middle school curricula.

The Accords also signalled the repression of the Church's sporting bodies after which its sportsmen, such as the cyclist Gino Bartali, were the only representatives of Catholicism's independent tradition. Recalling his early career, Bartali noted:

> After my first real victory that I brought back to Florence in 1931, in a race organised by the Young Fascists, my friends wanted to ask the patented secrets of my success.

> What gives me wings, I replied, what eases my moderate body weight and invigorates my muscles that aren't Herculean, is my profound faith …
>
> Thus my secret of victory isn't that desired by the Duce: 'I ride with muscles and with soul.'[16]

Devout and chaste with a martyr-like acceptance of the fatigue and immense demands of his sport, Bartali evoked religious images and embodied Catholic pride in a difficult political atmosphere. Much of this was driven by Luigi Gedda, a leading Catholic who was already preparing his ideas on sport's future role. 'Sport … is more than physical exercise, much more than pre and paramilitary exercise, it's something that is in the air, a way of thinking and, for many, a way of being.'[17] Further indication of Gedda's awareness of the importance of sport in Italy's future, was his later revelation that after the regime's collapse he had suggested, in August 1943, that Catholic Action take over the buildings and the activities of the Fascist organisations.[14] Although rejected by General Badoglio's interim government, Gedda clearly appreciated the importance of positioning Catholicism at the centre of the national sporting structure even if he had been unable to act upon this while the Fascist regime remained in power.

CSI

Determined that post-war Italian life would be based upon its core values, the Church's political strategy was twofold: to counter Communism and support the Christian Democratic Party (DC). Mass culture and sport were powerful means for the Catholic right to connect with its followers and direct their political affiliation and on 5 January 1944 Catholic Action's director-general, Monsignor Evasio Colli, approved the formation of a specialised sporting organisation: the Italian Sporting Centre (Centro Sportivo Italiano – CSI). Uniting ecclesiastical and lay organisations, the CSI established sports groups at parish, local and national levels, with the aim of creating a strong, broad, inclusive, mass Catholic body. Significantly stimulating Italian sport in general, its evident potential to contribute to the formation of an alternative culture was nonetheless restricted by Catholicism's boundaries that prevented it from penetrating the entire nation. Exclusive by nature, Catholic sport alienated those who did not share its devotion to the Church, many of whom joined the Union of Workers Sport (Unione Italiana Sport Popolare – UISP).

Having outlined his thoughts on sport's relationship with religion in a monograph published in the midst of Fascist rule,[17] it was no coincidence that Luigi Gedda became the CSI's first leader. An important part of Catholic social and political propaganda, the organisation was encouraged by many speeches and broadcasts from the 'sportsman's Pope', Pius XII. On 20 May 1945, in front of CSI leaders and 10,000 assembled Catholic sportsmen, an event described by Gedda as the baptism of sport, Pius XII underlined its essential role in the complete and

balanced development of man: '*Sport* is a school of loyalty, courage, endurance, resolution, universal brotherhood, all natural virtues, which provide a solid foundation to supernatural virtue and prepare to support the weight of the most serious responsibilities without weakness.'[18] Citing his predecessor Pius XI's 20-hour ascent of the 4600 metre Monte Rosa, Pius XII outlined sport's importance:

> Healthily tiring the body to rest the mind and prepare it for new efforts, refining the senses to acquire a more intense penetration of intellectual faculties, exercising muscles and accustoming them to effort to strengthen the character and form a will, as strong and flexible as steel: this was the mountaineering priest's idea of 'sport'.[18]

Not an end but a means, giving Catholic militants the energy to oppose false ideas and harmful tendencies: 'sport can and must be at the service of God'.[18]

It was also at the service of the DC, and despite Italy's increasing secularisation, sport made a significant contribution to the Party's almost total control of Italy for the next 50 years. In 1945, one year after the formation of the CSI, the DC launched its own sporting organisation, the Libertas Sporting Centre (Centro Sportivo Libertas – CSL), with their combined membership totalling in the region of 110,000 by the beginning of the 1950s.[14] The DC's sporting figurehead was the young, future prime minister and political super heavyweight, Giulio Andreotti. With no government ministry for sport, Andreotti was the Under-Secretary who represented the DC in all sporting contexts and, most importantly, balanced the influence that the Socialist Party (PSI) exerted over the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) through its head, Giulio Onesti. With Onesti's long-term survival very much dependent upon his relationship with Andreotti, an alliance between the two saw CONI assisting the Catholic sporting lobby in its work. As Luigi Gedda noted in 1954:

> we have had … the continuous and loving support from the government that we sincerely thank, with a special thought for the honourable Andreotti to whom national sport was and is trusted, as we similarly profess our dutiful recognition of Onesti with whom we have had, in these ten years, an uninterrupted tie and collaboration.[19]

Luigi Gedda and the sportsman's Pope

Catholic sport was naturally supported by Gedda and Pope Pius XII who, in May 1945, reaffirmed its reflection of the fundamental teachings of the Church:

> Sport is an efficient antidote against weakness and the easy life, it awakens the sense of order and educates in self-control, disregarding the danger without bragging or cowardice. Thus, you see how it already goes beyond merely physical robustness, leading to great moral strength…
>
> Sport is a school of faithfulness, courage, endurance, determination, universal brotherhood, all natural virtues that give a solid base to the supernatural and prepare to support the weight of the gravest responsibilities without weakness.[20]

Making numerous sport-themed radio broadcasts and statements, Pius XII appreciated the powerful combination of sport and modern mass communication and encouraged journalists to support the Catholic cause during the 1951 Plenary Assembly of the Sport's Press. Discouraging them from providing merely 'information', he implored them to 'form' public opinion about sport's moral values instead. 'Don't think of yourselves … as simple 'reporters' exclusively preoccupied by the announcement of matches, races, points and winners … Think more about the influence that you can have, that you effectively exercise, and it is in this that you feel committed to your duty.'[21]

Despite his previous appropriation by the Fascist regime, the unquestionable figurehead of the Catholic 'squad' was Gino Bartali, whose immortalisation was duly driven by the Catholic press. Bartolo Paschetta, a disciple of Gedda, was effectively Bartali's press officer, advising him during interviews, arranging his meetings with Young Catholics and preparing him and other cyclists for their various audiences with the Pope. With the Holy See giving special consideration to cycling in the six years after 1946, Pius XII granted the *Giro d'Italia* three audiences. On 26 June 1946, Bartali was naturally among the select group of riders and sporting dignitaries blessed by the Pope prior to the Rome–Perugia stage:

> You struggle in the race of life towards the eternal glory, not to earn a prize that is corruptible or that you can pass to others, but with the hope of an imperishable crown that doesn't expose any of you to the delusion of not winning, so long as you faithfully follow the laws of this sublime contest of spirit and never give in to tiredness or any obstacle before reaching the goal …
>
> Go, brave riders of the earthly and eternal race. Our wishes and prayers are with you while, with great affection, we give you and all that follow you our Papal blessing.[22]

Two years later, on lighting the votive lamp offered by the riders to the Madonna del Ghisallo, their patron and a famous *Giro d'Italia* climb, the Pope celebrated cycling's moral and spiritual virtues as a means of reaching Christ:

> The example of your champions practising sport according to the enlightening and salvational Catholic idea, is already … a fruitful missionary in itself; but you certainly want to make this … even more fertile and direct. Like the ancient riders, you pass the ardent lamp hand by hand and for the entire length of your journey you light other flames of faith and love that will bring the same light and warmth to many different places while you continue your race; you will not stop other than at the feet of the Mother of God and our Mother, who will guide you to the heart of Jesus.[23]

In recognition of the Holy Year, the 1950 *Giro d'Italia* concluded in Rome rather than Milan. With all hopes pinned on Bartali arriving in the leader's pink jersey, he came in second place, five minutes behind the Swiss Calvinist, Hugo Koblet.[24] It was a blip, the unexpected result that sport sometimes produces at

the most inappropriate moment. Where politics was concerned however, the Church's campaign was more strictly controlled.

1948: The Cold War election

The 1948 general election was the most divisive and important in Italy's post-war history. Contested against the backdrop of the nascent Cold War, the American influence was huge, arguably decisive. The arrival of Marshall Plan aid was celebrated at almost every opportunity, with the US Ambassador James Dunn attending the opening of schools, hospitals and roads built with American money while, at the same time, Italians were warned that the supply would be immediately turned off should they vote Communist. The Church and Catholic Action also made a huge contribution to the DC's victory, running a propaganda campaign that included priests urging parishioners to 'vote for the Cross' and 36 Madonnas weeping in Naples at the prospect of a Communist victory.

Italy was a key Western European nation bordering Communist Yugoslavia, and the Cold War plus the country's sharp political division shaped its sport, with Pius XII's numerous speeches on the subject reinforcing the Church's anti-Communism. In September 1947, as the election campaign began, he cited Bartali to inspire the crowd in St. Peter's Square:

> The time for reflection and plans has passed: now is the time of action. Are you ready?
>
> The tough contest that St. Paul spoke of is underway; it is the hour of intense effort. Even a few moments can decide the victory. Look at your Gino Bartali, member of Catholic Action; he has won the longed-for 'jersey' the most. Now you run … so that you can win an even nobler palm of victory.[25]

The first official speech in which a Pope had used a sportsman as a behavioural model, this oration indicated the pontiff's astute appreciation of sport's capacity to mobilise. While Pius X and Pius XI had both supported sport as a means rather than an end, Pius XII took this one step further by recognising the merits of competition, so long as it wasn't excessive. With the creation of rivals and adversaries a direct result of increased competition, Catholics united around their athletes, who became foci of the Church's socio-political campaign.

Thus, as important as Bartali's immortalisation by the press was, it was the demonisation of his supposedly Communist rival Fausto Coppi that had arguably the greatest impact. As the Cold War in Italy intensified, so the gulf grew between each cyclist's supporters and the politics that their heroes supposedly represented. In this atmosphere, prior to the most crucial general election in Italy's history, Bartali was repackaged as cycling's Alcide De Gasperi (Christian Democratic Party prime minister, 1945–53) and his saintly reputation exploited to intensify the unjustifiable Communist image of his rival Fausto Coppi. Among

the cyclists that attended the various Papal audiences and thereby legitimised the Church's relationship with the sport, Coppi had also been a cover star on the CSI's fortnightly publication *Stadium* before later co-signing a manifesto with Bartali, encouraging citizens to vote for the Christian Democratic Party against Bolshevism.

> FAUSTO COPPI, 'the champion of all', completely shares the ideals of the Centro Sportivo Italiano. Without speculation and without particular interests … he freely adheres to our movement and is happy to send … his warm greeting to all CSI members. And we return the greeting with even greater strength.[25]

Containing Luigi Gedda, Giulio Onesti and Bruno Roghi, the vitriolic editor of *La Gazzetta dello Sport* under Fascism, *Stadium*'s editorial board was a further example of Catholicism's capacity to insert itself within Italy's sporting infrastructure.

Fascism deliberately exaggerated sporting rivalries to stimulate interest and allow the freedom to argue about unthreatening topics, and in Republican Italy Coppi's rise as Bartali's career began to wane was also politically expedient for their respective supporters. Portrayed as going beyond sport, their rivalry was founded in their different characteristics and apparently contrasting identities. An intelligent, complex and tortured individual who emerged in the immediate post-war period, Coppi was billed as representing modernity, progress and even anticonformism, whereas Bartali, the upright Catholic whose achievements were celebrated by Fascism, was branded with old-fashioned, traditional sentiments. The basis of support for either cyclist was equally irrational, with cities, regions and different social classes often split for no apparent reason. While it is too simple to separate their fan bases into Catholics and Communists, religion and politics were still sources of division that shed light upon the moral climate of Italy and the changes it was undergoing.

Besides the Catholic press' role in creating the myth of 'Coppi the communist', the left was also responsible for appropriating him within Italy's Cold War conflict, to the extent that support for one or the other was tantamount to a declaration of political faith. Faced by such a formidable rival as Bartali, whose successes increased his national popularity and underlined his religious faith, it was almost inevitable that the left adopted Coppi in its desperation to find an athlete capable of challenging Bartali and redressing the balance.

Gino Bartali: Saviour of Italy

The myth of Bartali's eternal Christian youth, which grew with every year of his long career, was cemented by his 1948 Tour de France victory. Declared as 'perhaps the greatest sporting event of all time'[26] by the journalist and novelist Emilio De Martino, the importance of his victory transcended the race and the sport to cross into Italian political life. Having expected to win the 1948 election,

the Popular Front's defeat to the Christian Democratic Party was still raw when, on 14 July 1948, an assassination attempt was made against the Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti. The left's response to what was widely considered an attempt to end its threat once and for all was the proclamation of a general strike. With violence between protestors and police, in which 16 people died and over 200 were injured, Italy appeared on the brink of civil war. Only two weeks after the Soviet blockade of Berlin had begun and with Yugoslavia just expelled from the Communist International, there were fears that the apparently imminent insurrection might encourage a Soviet incursion into Western Europe.

With the improvement of Togliatti's condition 24 hours later, the strike was suspended and workers encouraged to return to the factories by the trade union and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) leaderships. The same day, Bartali won the Cannes-Briançon stage of the *Tour de France*. The first of three consecutive mountain-stage victories that cancelled his 21 minute deficit and effectively won him that year's race, it appeared miraculous. As the situation calmed in Italy, the legend that Bartali had saved Italy from civil war grew and was strengthened by the rumour of a telephone conversation between Prime Minister De Gasperi and the cyclist, on the evening of 14 July: 'Try to do it if you can. You know it would be important for us all. There's a lot of confusion here.'[27] Four years later, Carlo Doglio recalled the situation in Milan:

> where after two days of silence and brooding, deserted streets, you found a flood of people in front of *La Gazzetta*, in Viale Galilei … 'Bartali has left them all behind', the small groups of people grew and the abuse and deviant cries of joy merged, inexorably veering towards the Bartali-Coppi, Coppi-Bartali argument.[28]

As the first major, post-war Italian international sporting success, Bartali's victory was of unquestionable national importance, with even Togliatti apparently asking about his progress. But the victory as a national pacifier is a myth that 'corresponds, in reality, to one of the first mass-media campaigns in post-war Italy.'[29] Unquestionably, the PCI and trade union leadership's management of the crisis discouraged its escalation, and the police were unusually effective.[30] In reality, the myth of Bartali saving Italy from civil war or revolution was propagated by the Catholic media machine.

As its youth publication *Gioventù* recorded, Bartali 'play[ed] down the danger of a revolution by just pressing on the pedals'.[31] Writing in the daily *L'Avvenire d'Italia*, Raimondo Manzini further commented:

> We are grateful to Bartali. In the gloom of one of the country's darkest periods, he represents a small light … That of the fresh and victorious Tuscan cyclist is a moral example; and it remains the only happy event on which Italy has finally found some agreement. Not even the Communist papers have negated it.[32]

The development of the myth even extended to children's literature, with Giordano Goggioli's 1951 account neither referring to the assassin Pallante, nor to Togliatti,

the PCI or CGIL. The myth was nonetheless enduring, as Lucio Villari noted almost 60 years later:

> Bartali's victory seemed almost a sign from above in favour of Christian Democracy and its government. Gino transformed into an icon of emergency. Moreover, the Tour victory contributed to giving a religious and conservative dimension to the myth of the champion that matched his character: thus a new contradictory aspect between Bartali and Coppi was born. On the one part the Catholic believer who was close to the DC, on the other the layman, hostile to that world. For Coppi, in reality, it wasn't so, but it worked journalistically.[33]

As the Cold War in Italy intensified, the gulf between Coppi and Bartali's supporters widened, with the most memorable, contentious and revealing incident occurring on 6 July 1952, when the two cyclists exchanged a water bottle, during the *Tour de France* climb over the *Col du Galibier*. So strong were the real and imagined rivalries between the two and their supporters that this apparently innocuous and innocent act stimulated one of the most long-lasting arguments in Italian sport. After *Lo Sport Illustrato* published a photo of the exact moment in which both riders had one hand on the bottle, fans demanded to know just who had passed it to whom? The fact that there were numerous other examples of their mutual assistance failed to pacify the clamour to know just who was the 'weakling' of Italy's cycling giants?

The split-second incident that became an iconic and deeply-discussed image exposed just what little it took to ignite the inherent division within Italian society.[34] An alternative view, however, was its positive representation of two rivals uniting to reach a shared goal. While the political campaigns of the DC, supported by the Church, and the Popular Front had pushed Italian society apart in 1948, this sporting moment provided a clear message for all Italians, irrespective of where they stood across the political divide. The reality was, however, that both sides were already too entrenched in their political and ideological battles for this sporting act of mutual cooperation and assistance to contribute to any rapprochement.

Conclusion

Since the formation of Italy and the loss of the Vatican's lands, the Church's authority over society has waned, not least under the impact of modernisation and society's growing secularisation. As Franco Garelli has recently suggested, regularly 'practising Catholics are now a minority, even in Italy … Prevailing over the entire scenario, however, is a diffuse Catholic sensibility that seems to withstand the test of time and the challenges of religious pluralism.'[35] Sport has unquestionably made a significant contribution to this and were this analysis to have continued chronologically, its consistent presence could have been

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further revealed. The Centro Sportivo Italiano has continued to thrive in local communities and schools while producing international athletes such as the footballers Gianni Rivera, Marco Tardelli, Demetrio Albertini and Pierluigi Casiraghi, the cyclist Felice Gimondi and Olympic marathon winner Stefano Baldini.

Given his huge number of sporting messages and speeches,[35] it was no surprise that among the many memories and commemorations of the life of Pope John Paul II, following his death in April 2005, his goalkeeping and general sporting prowess drew significant attention. Two years later also saw the formation of the Clericus Cup, an 11-a-side football tournament primarily for trainee Catholic priests in Roman colleges and seminaries. Run by the CSI, it was conceived by the football fan and Cardinal Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone. His intention to reinvigorate sport was successful, with the tournament drawing significant international media coverage, often for the vigorous nature of matches, the banishment to the touchline for the most minor of curses, and the novelty of a blue card that allowed referees to send players to a sin-bin.

For all of its successes however, Catholic sport has been undermined by its fundamental weakness, i.e. its ideological, exclusive rather than inclusive basis. Even when the FASCI was in full cry in the early twentieth century, Catholic gymnastics clubs did not necessarily always join the flock, even in Italy. Outside of the Church's heartland, the situation was arguably worse, as Jan Tolleneer pointed out with respect to the Catholic Gymnastics Federation of Belgium in the 1930s, which launched a youth recruitment campaign

> that included … more active participation in religious services and the sending of delegations to the local sections of the Catholic Action Movement. The tendency of the gymnasts to collaborate, however, went hand in hand with a remarkable closing of their own ranks. The traditional Catholic gymnastic world felt itself to be threatened by the flood of new youth organisations.[38]

Consequently, Belgian Catholic gymnastic groups appeared to demonstrate a lack of enthusiasm for Catholic Action or, perhaps more accurately, sought to defend the gymnastic movement to which they had greater affiliation. Furthermore, by clearly distinguishing themselves from the umbrella body of Catholic Action, these early Belgian groups retained their primary status and identities as youth organisations. Open to non-Catholic members, they indicated their fundamental difference and modus operandi of training and educating in physical education rather than proselytising.

The formation of the International Catholic Federation was also a great source of collective and individual strength for each of the founder nations of France, Belgium and Italy. Rising above Europe's diplomatic division into the Triple Alliance and Triple Entente, the suggestion that the Catholic priority was unity around the Vatican rather than national borders, is convincing.[7] The Belgian case also makes an interesting comparison with Italy, and verifies the long-term

impact of Catholic sporting structures, as Tolleneer explains. In Belgium, 'Catholic gymnastics survived even if it did not prosper in the 1930s. Nevertheless, by struggling so actively with their problems, the foundations were laid for the impressive growth of the CGFB [Catholic Gymnastic Federation of Belgium] after the war.'[38]

Thus, in Belgium the Catholic sporting infrastructure was fundamental in not only maintaining the Church's identity during the intensely difficult interwar period but also in laying the foundations for its rebirth in post-war democracy. This more or less reflects the situation in Italy where the enclave of the Vatican City and the Church's fight to maintain its leadership of Italian society intensified sport's role as a significant and enduring means of mobilising the Catholic masses. As Pius XII said to 50,000 Catholic sportsmen gathered in St Peter's Square, in 1955, to celebrate the CSI's tenth anniversary:

> The Catholic Sporting Centre … placing itself at the centre of the practice of Christian sport, wants to be an external model, in a land where it is easy to overlook the supreme values of the spirit, exalting more than just those of the body, and forgetting the essential obligations to God and the family.
>
> So, you will be the stimulus of Christianity in the stadiums, on the streets, in the mountains, on the sea, wherever your flag raises with honour.[39]

While wider comparison of the Church's role in European sport would shed further light on the extent to which the Italian case is particular, there can be little doubt about sport's importance, role and effectiveness in promoting the Church's social and political agenda. Encouraged to overcome its early misgivings and fears by sport's unrivalled capacity to reach all sectors of Italian society, the Catholic Church was arguably the first identifiable group to appropriate it. Despite the Fascist interregnum in which Catholic sporting organisations were eventually liquidated, the Church's embrace of sport contributed to its resilience and rapid reappearance in the post-war period, where it became as politicised as under Fascism, if not more so, within the conservative right's US-backed campaign to ensure a Christian Democratic society as a bulwark within the wider Cold War conflict.

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