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Letter of the Cardinal Secretary of State to the Archbishop of Milan for the Conference for the Centenary of the death of Blessed Giuseppe Toniolo

Today, at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, a conference is being held to mark the centenary of the death of Blessed Giuseppe Toniolo, entitled: *Economics and society for the common good. The lesson of Giuseppe Toniolo (1918-2018)*.

The following is the letter sent by Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin to the president of the G. Toniolo Institute of Higher Studies, the archbishop of Milan, H.E. Msgr. Mario Delpini, on the occasion of the conference:

Letter of the Cardinal Secretary of State

To His Excellency the Reverend
Msgr. Mario DELPINI
Archbishop of Milan
President of the G. Toniolo Institute of Higher Studies

Your Most Reverend Excellency,

The Holy Father Francis has learned that on the occasion of the centenary of the death of Blessed Giuseppe Toniolo, a conference is being held to honour the figure of this exemplary father and spouse, professor of economics and economics, and model of lay sanctity, at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. The initiative is worthy to highlight not only the historical merits, but also the current relevance of the Blessed Toniolo, drawing from his testimony and his thought new inspiration for the social and political commitment which Catholics cannot ignore if they wish to be faithful to the Gospel. Indeed the professor, of Venetian origin but Pisan by adoption, remains in this regard a “teacher” and, in a certain sense, a “prophet”. Although many aspects are inevitably dated, he also has much to say for our time.

The years in which he lived, between 1845 and 1918, were marked by great changes. In particular, the process of industrialization gave a new face to society, producing the phenomenon of the proletariat, in which, as Leo XIII wrote, “so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself” (Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*, 2). The great pontiff invited the faithful to take on the social question, suggesting an effort that would be configured as a programmatic answer to the “*res novae*”, a wide-ranging response, able to reach the root of the problems. Thus it would also be possible to avert the danger that the workers’ world, abandoned to its unhappy fate, would become hostage to ideologies that, far from solving their problems, would aggravate them.

Blessed Toniolo made this mission the mission of his life. Italian Catholicism, which had organized itself in the *Opera dei Congressi* particularly in support of the Pope in the difficult situation of the “Roman question”, brought an opening of horizons, an enlightened outlook on social, cultural and economic processes. His rigour as a scholar, capable of loving truth and going against the current, helped him to grasp the crux of the “social question”, identifying it in an economy unfettered by ethics and which had developed on the wave of the pure law of profit, in a void, or in the weakness of “intermediate bodies” and of the necessary provisions for the benefit of the weakest members of society.

Toniolo was a tireless agent of social commitment, but also a theorist of a plan for global renewal. At the heart of his project was the awareness that only an encounter between faith and culture could subtract contemporary society from the recalcitrant materialism of the reasons of the spirit and the supernatural, tending, on the one hand, towards individualism and a freedom without limits and scruples, and, secondly, the false remedy of a levelling statalism, a harbinger of arbitrariness and tyranny. Strengthened by this idea, he dedicated himself to raising the social culture of Catholics, with associations, publications and conferences. He thus created a climate conducive to initiatives of solidarity, from cooperatives to popular banks, to rural banks. The Social Weeks, promoted by Toniolo in Italy in 1907, still continue, stimulating reflection and concrete commitment. In this way Toniolo’s work prepared for Catholics the time for a more specifically political commitment, which was still premature. To this end, the Pisan professor did not cease to reiterate the two complementary principles of the primacy of civil society and the non negligible role of the State, according to the criteria of subsidiarity and solidarity, pillars of the social doctrine of the Church.

He thus cultivated the ideal of a truly democratic society, in which the lodestar was the common good to be achieved in the convergence of all social forces, for the benefit of the poorest. A democracy that, in order to be such, even in openness to everyone and with the collaboration of all, in the eyes of Blessed Giuseppe Toniolo could never be adequately realized without drawing on the lifeblood of Gospel values.

This vision, from the economic and sociological sphere, was based on the highest principles of science and culture. For this reason he conceived of the Italian Catholic Society for scientific studies, a distant ancestor of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. His vision gradually assumed an increasingly global character, especially when, from the ruins of the First World War, Toniolo posed the problem of how to guarantee peace for the future. He therefore asked the Holy See to become the promoter of an Institute that was a laboratory of well-founded and widely shared international law. Who cannot see today, faced with the scenarios of regional wars that often cause fear of a global escalation, how urgent this need is, to reconcile the rights of nations with the needs of the universal human family? How can we not share Toniolo’s view that the prospect of a stable and true peace must be built by integrating respect for the rights of the human person with the overcoming of individualism, by reinterpreting the relationships in which the human person expands, on the basis of the sacred value of life and the value of the family?

A vision so bright was in Toniolo not only the fruit of an acute mind, but above all the expression of a heart inhabited by prayer and in love with the Eucharist. Rooted in this spiritual humus, he formulated the purpose of becoming a saint, and expressed the conviction that the salvation of society itself was linked to holiness. It was necessary to aim – he said – at a “society of saints”. A perspective that responds well to what the Vatican Council II said about the universal vocation to holiness, recently reaffirmed also by the Holy Father Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*.

At a distance of a hundred years from his death, the situation in Europe and in the world, marked by new problems such as the escalation of the environmental issue and the new encounter of peoples and cultures in the pressing phenomenon of immigration, Toniolo's vision still appears capable of offering ideas for discernment and commitment. The Holy Father hopes that Italian Catholics will learn from him, their unsurpassed "teacher", to question themselves on the urgency of a new season of their social and political commitment that, without annulling legitimate differences, is channelled into unitary paths of orientations and purposes, subtracting the Catholic presence in society from the temptation of indifference and the risk of irrelevance. May Italian Catholics be able to imitate the zeal of Blessed Giuseppe Toniolo. May they place themselves in the fold of his "prophecy". And also in this, may there be in the front line the young who in the recent Synod had the attention of all the Church, and to whom the Pisan professor dedicated himself with particular care as a university professor, and in his closeness to the young of the FUCI. With such thoughts, Pope Francis imparts to those who organized the conference and those who participate in it his Apostolic Blessing.

I add my personal wishes for a good outcome of the study day.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin

Secretary of State
