

The Civic Space and Politics in an Epochal Crisis: a View from Italy

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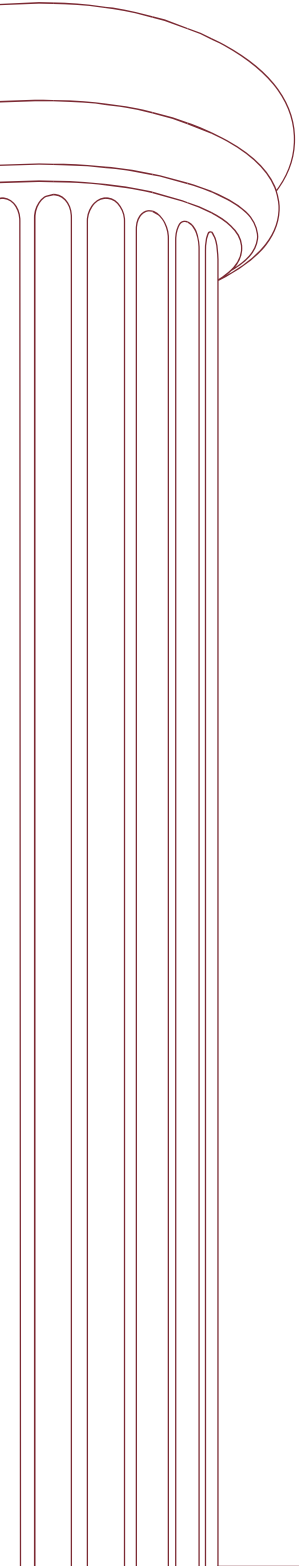
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Rocco D' Ambrosio

**The Civic Space and Politics in an Epochal
Crisis**

A View from Italy

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Translation from Italian to English by Annie Hall.

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(1) Introduction

In the days of the pandemic, an unpublished poem by Mario Luzi¹ was discovered²:

Third Millenium, your door is still closed
is there a word for passing through?
a password of sovereign surety?
There is, you don't know who gives it
nor even who adjudicates. But there is.
The human mind, heavy and dissatisfied,
desires it, the dura against itself:
Breaking through frivolity and vanity to knowledge
Carrying to safety the essential work
of beauty and knowledge, lightening the load
of conceited fatuity....
From this purgatorial burning
Will be released Man, I hope, naked, reaching out,
To better: to constructive effort,
to peace, to fraternity.

The timely coincidence of its discovery and the metaphors used may let it resonate in us, thinking about what is to come, what is the post -pandemic, without forgetting what it was, and again what, at the moment of writing it is. We are all aware that we are experiencing an epochal crisis, dramatic for the number of deaths, for the gravely ill suffering with Covid, and for the serious social and economic consequences. We know the data well, maybe less the meaning of it all; above all perhaps because we are still immersed in it. Therefore the search for meaning – as well as the remote environmental and social causes of the pandemic – escapes us. Luzi, with a fascinating profundity, suggests:

Your door is still closed,
is there a word for passing through?
a password of sovereign surety?

So let us look for a word, a *logos*, a meaning to help us to bear the burden of the moment on a personal and social level, while at the same time we cannot forget the political choices (“sovereign surety” Luzi would say) that define daily life and the meaning of what we live, and that contribute to finding and creating the “word” which drives the crisis and becomes the helm of the “boat” that carries us all; a much-used metaphor. Pope Francis says:

¹ Mario Luzi (* Sesto Fiorentino, Italy 20-VIII-2014, + Florence 28-II-2005), Italian poet and professor of French literature and comparatistics at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Florence, Member of the Italian parliament as Senator-for-Life (2004-5)

² Published in *Avvenire* 28-II-2021.

Like the disciples in the Gospel, we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realised that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying "We are perishing" (v. 38), so we too have realised that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.³

(2) The meaning of the pandemic

In the midst of the "storm" the pandemic has shown, and continues to show, how the "word" we are looking for cannot come from a generic and frequently rhetorical "afterwards it will no longer be as before", but from a return to one's inner self, which seems to be the most powerful drug against all other viruses such as fear, stupidity, malice, envy, selfishness. It was a state of crisis that determined Socrates' action and thought. His "know yourself" was not a simple invitation, accepted with attention and gratitude. In fact, he paid for it with rejection, suspicion, slander and death. It was the same story with several biblical prophets; for them, in a state of crisis, it was essential to "return to God" (Hebrew verb "shuv" return) and "conversion" ("teshuvàh"), understood as radical change, "reversal of course", a "straightening of paths" (Isaiah 40:3-4). The same story was repeated by Jesus who, beginning His ministry, proclaimed: "The time of fulfilment has arrived, and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). "Metanoia" normally translates as *converts*, loading the term, often moralistically. But the Greek *μετάνοια*, means "change your mind" and "change your mind" comes where "nouse" (informal spoken English) means "intellect, mind, thought".

The pandemic is changing much of our lives: relationships, politics, economics, religious attitudes, European and global scenarios. But it is not absolutely automatic for "us to change our *nouse*", our mentality, that is the way we approach ourselves, others, the good God, and Nature, just as there is no guarantee that the pace of change can be positive or that we can learn from the made in the present or in the past. Three cultural and religious traditions – the Greek, Jewish and Christian worlds - remind us that there are no automatic and fatalistic changes, that history is the teacher only for those who become disciples. Pietro Scoppola wrote:

History, as historians know well, contrary to current opinion does not give lessons, does not dictate behaviours, does not tell anyone what to do; but it only helps a little to understand what we are, leaving us all with the responsibility to choose, after placing us in a slightly more elevated position, to view a possibly wider horizon. The lines of necessity do not coincide with those of real growth in human and civil values⁴.

History, even that of the pandemic, "helps us a little to understand what we are". It is always difficult to ask one who is living in a moment, what the meaning of what he is experiencing is, and how his way of existence is changing. We are too immersed in today, perhaps even thinking, distracted by so many messages, and psychologically discomforted, that it also touches on pathological aspects. As much as we know that the wisest answers will come later when the whole thing is finally over, no one can deny that we also need answers here

³ Pope Francis, Prayers 27.3.2021, available on www.vatican.va.

⁴ Pietro Scoppola, *La "nuova cristianità" perduta*, Studium, Roma 1986, p. 53.

and now. Otherwise, we miss the whole sense of time. St. Augustine can help us to find it: time is “a memory of the past, attention to the present and expectation of the future”⁵.

The memory of the past, which is imposed on us today, is above all a physical memory. We miss the physical presence, especially of loved ones missing as a result of the virus, (often not permitted to greet us); we miss kisses and hugs with friends and relatives; we miss the meeting places, from school and university, from parish to voluntary work, from dinner to group sport, from cinema to theatre and concert. The memory of the past, now more than ever, is strongly emotive and visibly corporeal. “The body”, says William Davies, “has become one of the principal areas of dispute among experts and their moral, emotional, and political perspectives.”⁶ Whom to blame, if the virus attacks the body, takes breath away, amplifies fears? How can we apportion blame if most of today’s political conflicts are over food, health, work and wellbeing? The memory of this period has elected to be primarily physical, corporeal, emotional. It may be deemed intellectual, but with great difficulty⁷.

But time, as St. Augustine says, is also attention to the present. The term used in Latin is *contuitus*⁸ i.e. vision, attention, gaze. According to some scholars, the prefix *con-* suggests holding together different elements of the intuitive act. In a complex world there is certainly no lack of the many elements to be held together; indeed, there are too many. It is no coincidence that we are easily distracted; it is no coincidence that a vision of synthesis is lacking, it is no coincidence that those with educational and cultural roles are often lost in analysis, lacking synthesis – not to mention the political classes, in government and in opposition, who are hostages to consensus, be it electoral and media-based, and therefore have short term visions or no vision⁹, and solely concerned with self- interest and power. This fixation today is seen as a deleterious myth: to be able to be aware of everyone and everything, to know a lot, almost everything, and so on. Those whose research is about memory remind us how selective memory is, and love to guard or to discard it according to emotional or chemical responses which as yet we do not fully understand. But this is what it is. We must help to make it better. Attention *to the present* therefore, means selecting who and what must be seen, met, cherished, loved.

There is, you don’t know who gives it
nor even who adjudicates. But there is.
The human mind, heavy and dissatisfied,
desires it, the dura against itself:
Breaking through frivolity and vanity to knowledge
Carrying to safety the essential work
of beauty and knowledge, lightening the load
of conceited fatuity...¹⁰

⁵ Augustine, *Confessionum Libri XIII*, XI.

⁶ William Davies, *Nervous States*. How feeling took over the world, 2018; Italian edition: Einaudi, Torino 2019, p. 161.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Augustine *loc. cit.*, XI 20, 26.

⁹ Former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (+ 2015) famously quipped: “If you have a vision, you should see a doctor!”

¹⁰ Luzi *loc. cit.*

(3) The impact on civil society

According to the World Bank, the Covid-19 emergency represents “the worst global recession since World War II”¹¹. First and foremost, it is a health crisis, but with damaging repercussions on the economy, on employment and on society as a whole, so much so that we are told by Y. N. Harari that the decisions taken today in the public and private sectors “could change our lives for years to come”¹². Yet, it remains extraordinarily difficult to assess the impact of the pandemic on civil society¹³. However, the following may be said:

(a) In general, the concept of society brings with it different semantic, interpretative and theoretical difficulties. Based on historical heritage, whether accepted or not, and following Norberto Bobbio, it can be said that civil society comes to represent the sphere of relations among individuals, groups, social classes which take place outside the power conflicts that characterise state institutions. In other words, civil society is primarily the place for the self-empowerment and self-organisation of citizens in order to act for the public good. Civil society may however become the sphere where, in areas of economic, ideological, social and religious conflicts, the State has the task of resolving conflicts through mediation and regulation; civil society is also a base which calls for a response to questions from the political system, and the field for various forms of mobilization, association and organization of social forces moving towards, but never actually attaining the conquest of political power¹⁴. The pandemic situation has exacerbated economic, ideological, social and religious conflicts - or else revealed new ones - as well as those within civil society. In addition the forces of the interior have had to adapt to the emergency, with all that is entailed, in a very short period of time.

(b) Prior to the period of Covid-19 the situation within civil society presented problems. In the course of the pandemic, in particular, at certain stages, the relationship with public institutions reached very high levels of conflict (especially in the time of the centre-right government). In general I share the views of Giovanni Moro and Ilaria Vannini: “At present the power of the parties is linked more to the control of the resources of State and the management of public institutions from local to national level, rather than to their active presence in the dynamics of civil society and to a strong bond of trust with the citizens”¹⁵. From this brief analysis it can be deduced that the crux of the conflict essentially is to be found in these three factors:

- the provision of resources for civil society;
- the competition of some politicians with civil society activists;
- the lack of clear public policies concerning the management of financial and associated resources.

(c) The pandemic is an ongoing phenomenon, and to be wise, any judgement should be weighed carefully. It can never be exhaustive, and always remains a line of interpretation in our current experience.

It should also not be forgotten that the legal framework for the “Third Sector” (or Non-profit Sector) has recently undergone a reform process (Third Sector Code: first decree law DL 117/2017, and thereafter law in

¹¹ See the reports in <https://www.worldbank.org/en/who-we-are/news/coronavirus-covid19>

¹² Y.N.Harari, The world after Coronavirus; in Financial Times 20-III-2020 (<http://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3e9-1fe6fedcca75>)

¹³ For the drafting of this paragraph I received valuable suggestions from colleagues and researchers in the field: Alda Salomone (www.istat.it); Emma Amiconi (www.fondaca.org); Pasqua Demetrio (www.cseramo.eu); Giuseppe Ferrara (www.cercaiunfine.it); Nicola Perrone (www.cipsi.it).

¹⁴ Norberto Bobbio, *Società civile*; in N. Bobbio - N. Matteucci - G. Pasquino, *Dizionario di Politica*, TEA, Torino 1990, p. 1065; see Paul Ginsborg, *La società civile in prospettiva storica* (<http://www.libertaegiustizia.it/2019/06/11/la-societa-civile-italiana-in-prospettiva-storica>); R. D'Ambrosio, The catholic community and the civil society in Italy in R. G. Strachwitz (ed), *Religious Communities and Civil Society in Europe: Analyses and Perspectives on a Complex Interplay*, vol. I, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, Berlin 2019, pp. 199-236.

¹⁵ Giovanni Moro / Ilaria Vannini, *La società civile tra eredità e sfide*, Rubbettino, Roma 2008, p. 55.

March 2021) that has re-regulated civil society and social enterprises. To date, legislative intervention has not been completed as not all of the acts provided for in the legislative decrees implementing delegated law 106/2016 have been issued. It will need several ministerial decrees by 2022 to function in practice as planned.

It is well understood that citizens, especially the most vulnerable, undoubtedly are facing times of uncertainty and difficulty. Different organisations within the civil society are directly engaged at the Covid-19 front. Many others are committed to supporting their communities. All these associations, voluntary groups, cooperatives and social enterprises are in some way affected by the measures¹⁶. In addition there is a return to the central State and local administrations after a period of retreat. However the State is late, and often reluctant, to react. The laborious path of the *Third Sector Code* and the failure to provide financial support for the sector are cases in point. The wide-ranging action of social solidarity that is taking place is supported over and above what is strictly the health sector, above all by a myriad of organisations, often informal and small, thus outside the official census. It is they that are offering communities the opportunity to enjoy essential social services despite the limits of social distancing.

Yet, the pandemic crisis has made demands on, and in some ways put in crisis, our Health Services and Services to People. In the recovery it will be essential to consider the most appropriate, effective and efficient welfare model for our country, starting by rethinking the responsibilities of the central State, the autonomy of local, regional and municipal often giving rise to different inefficiencies, as much as those of civil society. And last but not least, State economies are often on *automatic pilot* which is the market and which determines the law with its utilitarian logic¹⁷. Not all choices are inspired by the intention to promote and strengthen “political, economic and social solidarity” as mentioned in the Italian Constitution (Article 2) to which we will return later.

4. Relevant Data

The amount of data on the current pandemic situation is increasing, with the exception of that on health, so that the framework of practice within civil society is based on reliable figures (although not extensive). These refer, for the most part, to 2020, that is to say to the first part of the pandemic wave.

According to the Annual Report of ISTAT, the Italian State Statistics Agency, for 2020, the citizens’ reaction to the *lockdown*, relating to the first phase, was like this:

Strong cohesion was the feeling that most distinguished the country in the *lockdown* phase, a feeling that has above all manifested itself as a convinced confidence in the main institutions engaged in the fight against the spread of the epidemic. In fact, the majority of citizens reported that they fully trust (10 votes) both medical (55.4%) and paramedic (55.8%) and Civil Protection (50.8%) staff¹⁸.

¹⁶ See the rich bibliography of third sector bodies such as CIPSI (www.cipsi.it); Third Sector Forum (www.forumterzosettore.it); National Observatory on Social Policies (www.welforum.it); Service Centre for Volunteering (www.csvnet.it); Caritas (www.caritas.it); Social enterprise (www.rivistaimperesasociale.it)

¹⁷ Felice Scalvini, Building the future of the Third Sector at the time of Covid-19; in Online Social Enterprise Magazine (<https://www.rivistaimperesasociale.it/rivista/articolo/scalvini-costruire-il-futuro-del-terzo-settore>).

¹⁸ ISTAT, Annual Report 2020. The situation of the country, p. 57; (<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/245216>)

An even more general picture is obtained by analysing the data accompanies another ISTAT research¹⁹. The data set out here bear witness to how

Overall, according to ISTAT, the population has shown a high sense of citizenship, having adapted to the behavioural changes imposed. The vast majority of citizens (91.2%) agreed with the usefulness of the rules imposed in order to combat the evolution of the pandemic, and others (89.5%) considered clear the indications given by institutions on how to behave to contain the infection²⁰. The latest available report also states: more than 3 out of 4 citizens chose positive words to describe the mood within the family during the second wave of the pandemic; only 8.4% chose words of negativity. More than a fifth of the population (22.2%) had difficulties in fulfilling economic commitments (paying mortgages, bills, rent, meal expenses, etc.); 50.5% believed that the economic situation of the country will worsen²¹.

Of course, these ISTAT data refer to civic behaviour in general. They should be distinguished from the activities and existence of the “subsidiary” services provided by civic organisations. There is a trend, almost always present in our country, that is strengthened at a civic level precisely because of the mistrust in institutions and public administrations. In other words: As we well know, individual feelings and behaviour are one thing; the organised phenomenon of participation in collective life and public issues are a different story. Regarding the latter, one may generally share the judgement of a study by the *Graduate School Business and Society* of the Catholic University, Milan that affirms:

In response to the health emergency triggered by Covid -19, civil society has rapidly put in place several initiatives aimed at mitigating the health, social, and economic repercussions. The resulting experiences of solidarity and collaboration signify an invaluable resilience and provide the most secure basis for a true restarting of the country²².

The study refers to four sectors of civil society: health, food, manufacturing, and services. Of these it identifies funding, voluntary organizations (Italian and NGO), and solidarity committees that “without wanting to exhaust the breadth and variety of responses to the current emergency, exemplify well the characteristics of responsiveness, resilience and creativity that the productive world and the Italian tertiary sector have shown to be, at this juncture, so critical”. The authors also point out that

the traits that unite the initiatives put in place are the responsibility - that is the ability - promptly to make decisions that respond to the needs *and requests of their shareholders* by - investing in accountability for actions and decisions; and the collaboration, which has led many organizations to surmount sector boundaries and the normal competitive dynamics to pursue a shared goal. These initiatives have developed spontaneously according to a subsidiary logic which sees the worlds of profit and non-profit intervening together to aid a public system that alone struggles to counter such a widespread and unexpected emergency²³.

¹⁹ ISTAT, May 25, 2020 Report: Citizens' Reactions to lockdown (<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/243357>)

²⁰ ISTAT, Annual Report 2020. The situation of the country, p. 58.

²¹ ISTAT, Citizens' behaviour and opinions during the second pandemic wave (reference period 15.12.2020 – 15.1.2021; last report available at time of writing)

²² Università Cattolica Del Sacro Cuore – ALTIS, Stories of resilience: how civil society reacted during the Covid-19 emergency, curated by Andrea Sartori and Erika Lisa Panuccio in <https://altis.unicatt.it/altis-2020-resilienza-societa-civile-durante-emergenza-covid19>.

²³ Università Cattolica Del Sacro Cuore– ALTIS, Stories of Resilience: How Civil Society Reacted during the Covid-19 Emergency.

Although lacking statistical data to prove this argument, it nonetheless can be considered reliable for two reasons: the subsidiary action of civil society which represents a constant of Italian reality; and a common feeling - of which there is a trace in the media - which rewards voluntary activity especially in times of crisis²⁴. One of the few statistics – in addition to the general data of the pandemic – in this considerable study reveals the increase in calls to the Public Utility number 1522 – violence against women, and stalking. In the period between March and October 2020, these calls increased considerably compared to the same period the year before from 13,424 to 23,071 (+71.7%). The growth in calls for help on chat lines tripled from 829 to 3,347 messages. Among the reasons for contacting the free Green Number were double the calls for help from victims of violence and the “reports for cases of violence” that together represent 45.8% of valid calls (in total 10,577). Over the period considered, compared to the same period of the previous year, there was a growth by 107%. Calls for information about anti-violence centres are also growing (+65.7%). It is just one proof of the strength of effort the committed civil voluntary organisations have been – and still are – forced to make²⁵.

In fact, the mobilization of forces, resources, time dedicated to direct support, social and psychological support, the organisation of neighbourhood information networks, *advocacy initiatives*, and the representation of rights violated or unconsidered, has been very intense. Think of the activity of Caritas or of what women have done in a thousand ways – from the reopening of schools to the setting up of task forces or technical and scientific committees! Many women’s groups and movements for women by women like *Voice* were born, or else resurfaced during Covid-19. A particular but significant example was the Festival of Participation October 2020 which focused specifically on the Covid crisis and the role that civic organisation can play in terms of public policy proposals and the monitoring of resources made available by Europe²⁶.

However this enormous effort by voluntary organisations is not always matched by the particular intervention by public institutions. Two monitoring studies carried out in June 2020 and February 2021 respectively by Caritas in conjunction with National Asylum Table (TA) and the Immigration and Health Table ((TIS) came to the following conclusions:

- The first findings (June 2020) concluded “the criticality of the absence of institutional intervention (so much so that the structures have organised themselves into a sort of ‘Do it Yourself’ (DIY) has produced an effective protection of guests but reduced the reception capacity. The request for a comparison and for national indications meant that the Ministry of Health implemented an institutional table and the first interim results were issued, to be amended and supplemented at a later date”.
- The second monitoring (February 2021) on the one hand still underlines “the uncertainty on the institutional side at national and, in particular, local level in giving clear, unambiguous indications, and on the other the risk that this could result in delays and omissions in protection and in the Vaccines Plan thus excluding a fragile part of our population”²⁷.

²⁴ S. Gainsforth, Solidarity networks fill the void left by the State in Italy, "International Of 29 March 2021 (<https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/sarah-gainsforth/2021/03/29/reti-solidali-bologna-vuoto-stato?fbclid=IwAR00oU8z9Mbiez5DiKqqtG-moAmSvS5osihR4B0MvC3uDCmcMw9hpJf70BJo>).

²⁵ ISTAT, The utility number 1522 during the pandemic (period March-October 2020) (<https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/250804>; updating it in <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/257704>).

²⁶ http://www.festivaldellapartecipazione.org/wp-content/uploads/FdP2020_Relazione-illustrativa.pdf; <https://www.cittadinanzattiva.it/notizie/attivismo-civico/13943-nasce-l-osservatorio-civico-indipendente-sul-piano-nazionale-di-ripresa-e-resilienza.html>

²⁷ Caritas Italiana, *Monitoring of reception systems in Italy* (https://www.caritas.it/home_page/area_stampa/00009343_2_Monitoraggio_sui_sistemi_di_accoglienza_in_Italia.html)

5. Ethical hold in the pandemic

Pietro Scoppola, as reported above, links the lessons of history to the sense of responsibility by saying: “It helps a little, leaving us all with the responsibility to choose, after placing us in a slightly more elevated position, to view a possibly wider horizon.” In the address of President Sergio Mattarella, Italy’s Head of State, in Bergamo on 28th June, 2020, the reference to memory returns: “While remembering means, therefore, first of all remembering our dead, it also means being fully aware of what happened, resisting the illusory temptation to put these dramatic months in parenthesis to resume as before.” But not only that. The making of memories carries the assumption of responsibility. “Memory charges us with responsibility. Without cultivating it we risk being prisoners of inertia, laziness, of old vices to overcome”²⁸. Those who do not make memories risk minimising or avoiding taking responsibility. Becoming aware of the past inevitably leads to recognizing the precise responsibilities of today, namely the people involved in their different roles and missions. Obviously, touching on the sphere of personal responsibility involves respect for fundamental ethical and legal principles (the assessment of facts and legal responsibilities, especially criminal and property law; validity of evidence; the presumption of innocence until final conviction; the respect for *privacy*; the possibility of prosecuting the guilty without due process). Think, for example, of the victims of old people’s homes and of their closest relatives and friends who have so often felt doubly hurt and humiliated when they have encountered irresponsibility at every institutional level.

What do we mean by “ethical hold”? Sharing the presupposition, the “ethics is our way of existing in the world” (Salvatore Natoli²⁹) by “ethical hold” we mean fidelity to the ethical principles we made our own, not as a form of perfection (assuming it exists), but as a coherence which maintains its standard regardless of the contingent, personal and social situations, and of the opportunities for ethical deviance to which they are prone. In succinct terms we are not speaking about a superman or superwoman but about a person who, despite his limitations and faults (clearly not serious), does not deviate from the “master” ethical path which he has chosen, made his own, and which he constantly follows.

Emanuel Mounier wrote in 1935: “It is not the institutions that make the new man but rather the personal and irreplaceable work of a man on himself. The new institutions can make his work, but they cannot take the place of his own efforts. The same facilities they provide him with, unless he is not sustained by a spiritual and inner force, can lead him with indifference to a renewal of apathy”³⁰.

In general it can be said that Covid – obviously - is not making our behaviour better; that is to say what is wrong on a personal and social level survives even the worst viruses. Crises reveal the best in a national community. Think today of the sacrifice of doctors and nurses, health workers, members of public institutions, law enforcement, civil protection, workers, ordinary citizens, volunteers – those who help as and where they can. But crises also reveal the worst in ourselves and in society. Think of reprehensible matters and attitudes such as the politicians who exploit the misery to bully on TV in order to gain acclaim. They promise collaboration and ten minutes later they say otherwise, or else they are constantly complaining, instead of doing their duty; the media operators who defend idiocy and falsehoods; the workers in the economy who increase their businesses on the backs of the citizens (from masks to sanitising equipment) or those who speculate on the Stock Exchange; the citizens who “diseducate” with their reprehensible manners, the religious fanatics who preach

²⁸ Sergio Mattarella, Address commemorating the victims of the Covid, 20, Bergamo 28.6.2020, www.quirinale.it.

²⁹ Salvatore Natoli, *Stare al mondo*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2002.

³⁰ Emanuel Mounier, *Révolution personaliste et communautaire*, Montaigne, Paris 1935; Italian edition: Ecumenica, Bari 1984, p. 301.

heresies and nonsense about alleged divine punishment and apocalypse at the gates, or who spread injurious devotion (especially on social media). The listing could go on.

These days some statements by doctors and nurses are worth attention. “Before I enter the ward my legs tremble but then once I enter everything passes – I often think I can’t make it but then I manage to finish my shift – even if we are dog-tired, we help each another by substituting for one another if needed, by meeting a colleague half way” and so on. The symbolic badge of a nurse falling asleep on the computer keyboard says many things. It tells us that there is not only a physical dimension (of the sick, health personnel, people suffering restrictive measures) or a social one of the politics of institutions, leaders and ordinary people: there exists also an “ethical dimension”. The first step to understanding it is to banish the word “hero” from our vocabulary. Heroes and heroines are “generally either gods who have fallen to the human condition, conquered by other divinities, or humans who have ascended to the divine state by virtue of exceptional merits”³¹. Their less than human characteristics and their work with exceptional characters lead us, unwillingly, to consider them as being outside and beyond normal standards, as “the exception that proves the rule”, not as a daily example but as a “one off”.

We also remember Galileo’s famous dialogue for Bertolt Brecht’s pen: “Unhappy is the land that produces no heroes”, Andrea exclaims. And Galileo replies, “No. Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes”³². Antonio Gramsci would say that heroes come into the field when organisations are “debilitated” and armies “weakened”³³; while Max Weber called for the word “hero” to be used very moderately³⁴. In fact, the interviewees themselves often reject it, and talk about their work as “duty”, “service”, “dedication” etc. If we free ourselves from the traps that the term contains, we can open up a current and necessary discussion on the ethical hold in the Covid-19 crisis, and that post-Covid. In general, crises indeed bring out the best in us, or, in other cases, the worst; this is because crises reveal who we truly are, the fabric from which our relationships- familial, friendly, social, religious, political, economic, global - are made. It is no coincidence that we are witnessing, in this period, crimes which are tragically increasing, like domestic violence, embezzlement, fraud, corruption, usury, extortion etc. But at the same time, we are appreciating how many decent people there are in our country and how they do good for others. Of course we still lack statistical and sociological research which could enlighten us on this subject, so the basis of my observations is not extensive.

In recent months we have often asked, or at least hoped, that everything to come will not be as it was before. Avoiding the obvious rhetorical risk of this statement, it cannot be denied that, in various cases, future actions cannot be delegated to the institutions or to a new electoral term, or, for those who believe, to extraordinary divine intervention. Mounier is very clear on this matter: Even if the institutions were to do their utmost to make the new task easier, without the “personal work” there is a risk of falling into personal and social apathy. In fact, all those resigned and negative comments are apathetic - “nothing will change – everything will be the same as before or worse – there is no crisis that can change human nature” and so it goes on³⁵.

Whoever is apathetic has no pity, that is to say passion: I refer to the passion for what is just and true, supportive and welcoming, correct and noble, good and constructive. Does this passion exist? Do you care about the crisis? I think that the question should be asked of all those who, because of their irreplaceable and valuable roles, are promoters of culture. If we think back to the social and political renewal that took place during the

³¹ Entry Hero in Online Treccani Encyclopedia.

³² Bertolt Brecht, *Leben des Galilei*, 1955, scene 13°.

³³ Antonio Gramsci, *Note sul Macchiavelli sulla politica e sullo Stato moderno*, Einaudi, Torino 1974, p. 63.

³⁴ Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1919; Italian: Donzelli, Roma 1998, p. 230.

³⁵ Mounier loc. cit.

period following the Second World War, to the ethical hold of so many during the nefarious darkness of Fascism and of war, how could we deny the invaluable, painstaking, serious work of all those cultural workers (teachers, educators, pastors in religious faith communities) who prepared so many for the future through listening, discussing, and teaching? Ethical hold is not invented, transmitted, by teaching and example. Aristotle would say that every virtue is the fruit of both knowledge and experience.³⁶ Crises change only to the extent to which there is this educative work, and above all the self-educative in the case of adults, because, Romani Guardini would say the true strength of Man is “not in the fist but in the character”³⁷.

6. The political dimension of the pandemic

Many question the ethical aspects of the choices made by the rulers of our country in managing the pandemic. Let's start by making the obvious but necessary observations: the pandemic has taken everyone by surprise, citizens and politicians alike; it is a complex and often complicated phenomenon: however much as there exists in some countries, especially NATO and the EU, contingency plans for probable biological terrorism attacks³⁸, the reality has exceeded any analytical expectations. No-one with a modicum of awareness would want to be in the situation of those in charge: human choices, especially in politics, are never perfect and always debatable and a matter of opinion. In addition, the relationship between science and power has a long history of light and shadow, as in this pandemic; in moments of crisis, from the human and political point of view, as the scientific and the collective, that which you sow you reap, as also is brought out the best or the worst in individuals and in institutions. These elements are common to all countries and the daily cross carried by those in power who must also make choices between life and death or at least everywhere to safeguard health. The participants in this drama are different in quality and experience; there are competent men and women, responsible, prepared, conscientious, experienced, sensitive, but there are also those who are ignorant, irresponsible, pedlars of lies, disseminators of *fake news*, wolves in sheep's clothing, the corrupt and the corruptors, approval hunters, jackals, chameleons and so on.

In the face of this complexity and variety ethical judgement is complex. Even though our questions are succinctly expressed in the classic “Is it right . . . or this or that not right?”, the answer can never be concise because the reality is complex and often complicated too. Not only for students but for everyone. It is difficult to learn to identify subjects and responsibilities, means used, intended purposes, results achieved, effectiveness and veracity of communications - as if to say - the problem itself is compounded by difficulties of interpretations and evaluation.

One thing is certain: ethics (in this case political) do not mean a futile chat. We are talking about people who have died and who could have been saved, of public health destroyed by the various liberalism of the Right or the Left; of those who govern seeming to build but not building for the public good: even of the irresponsible deniers. “Responsibility” - as we said - is the word of the moment. It has been just over a century since Max

³⁶ The reference to the cognitive and practical elements of education are highlighted by Aristotle with the words: *máthesis* ed *epiméleia* in *Nicomachea Ethics*, 1099b 28-32; *mantháno*, *akoúo* and *ethízo* in *politics*, 1332b11.

³⁷ Romano Guardini, *Briefe über Selbstbildung*, Grünewald, Mainz 1985; Italian: *Morcelliana*, Brescia 1994, p. 97.

³⁸ M. Geri, Safety and emergencies epidemics: New transformation for the Atlantic Alliance? in *Online defense* 24.3.2020, (<https://www.difesaonline.it/mondo-militare/sicurezza-ed-emergenze-epidemiche-nuova-trasformazione-lalleanza-atlantica>)

Weber brought back attention to the classic theme of *responsibility* for moral action. So the German thinker's fragment, dated 1919:

Here is the decisive point. We must realise that any ethically orientated action can be controlled by two radically opposed maxims fundamentally different from each other; it can be orientated, that is to say, according to the "ethic of conviction" or the "ethic of responsibility" ... according to which, one must be held accountable for the (foreseeable) *consequences* of one's actions (...). The man of the "ethic of responsibility" does not feel *authorised* to pass on to others the consequences of his work to the extent that he could foresee them³⁹.

There have been (and still are) reactions to this profound reflection. More than the contrast between the two "ethics", Weber intends to recall to mind, especially to the men of power, the mandatory obligation not "to make pacts with the Devil" but to preserve, defend and realise their convictions, principles and projects with "passion and foresight" conscious of having accomplished "a hard and difficult work". All this, in fact through using the force of responsibility.

But it is precisely this term which gives us an ethical direction. There is in this a rigid sequence: who? - to whom? - in what? - for what purpose? A superficial cultural approach – the classic Platonic *doxa* (Ancient Greek: δόξα *doxos*), or in popular speech "It's raining, bad government!"- is not entitled to make assessments because it accuses an abstract entity of everything. In *doxa* or in superficial chat, this entity "is" Draghi (and, earlier, Conte)⁴⁰ and in general all blame is his, nothing excepted. He is even blamed for the fact that citizens do not wear masks. This approach – and it doesn't take much to understand it – leads to an exponential increase in the irresponsibility in quite a few citizens and politicians as well as in the spread of the virus.

Those charged with making the choices can be judged, not because they have solved the problem of the virus but because, in the real situation and under precise conditions, they have done what is possible, we hope the best, guided by science and conscience, but they certainly have not done everything possible, and something has gone wrong. In this pandemic all those who govern have made mistakes but not in all or in the same ways. So, an ethical judgement, unless it is weighed, does not deserve to be heard.

Those who collaborate with those who govern have an extremely difficult task: ethically they are there to reinforce the work of achieving good by containing errors and offering alternative or better solutions. I am thinking, in particular, of three different categories of people all with very high levels of collaboration: ministers, regional governors, and scientists. They certainly do not have the time at home to be *tweeting or* appearing on television revealing heaven knows what deity inspired them during the night to find the best solution. The best solution is always the fruit of collaboration, debate, dialogue, verification, confidentiality and assiduous work. The history of schools (open or closed) and the problem of the means of transport not reinforced says a lot.

Criticism, it is often said, must be constructive. Well, apart from a few notable and rare exceptions, several politicians, in majority and in opposition, generally criticise to look important or to elicit support and inflate themselves" like hot air balloons"⁴¹. Before constructive criticism we must speak of responsible criticism: We speak with knowledge of the facts, remembering our own roles (we have arrived at the absurdity of politicians in government who criticise it as if it were a third rate in comparison to them!) and that we are not in the bar

³⁹ Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf*. Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1919; Italian: Donzelli, Roma 1998, p. 230.

⁴⁰ Mario Draghi, Prime Minister (*Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri*) of Italy; Giuseppe Conte, former Prime Minister

⁴¹ Remo Bodei, *Destini personali. L'età della colonizzazione delle coscienze*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2002, p. 258.

or the stadium but in the courts, national and regional where good is decided as well as the life and death of people.

Finally, communication. Today it is crucial to speak of “infodemy” namely of the increased speed in the spread of falsehoods, especially on social media.

Reading Pope Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, I found it most illuminating from an ethical point of view, both religious and secular:

We are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person’s problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together. As I said earlier, “the storm has exposed our vulnerability and uncovered those false and superfluous certainties around which we constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities... Amid this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about appearances, has fallen away, revealing once more the ineluctable and blessed awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another.⁴²

The awareness of being in the same boat brings with it the commitment to plan, with the help of all the others, the course of action. In 1945 Giorgio La Pira published a book entitled ‘Premises of the Politics and Architecture of a Democratic State’⁴³. The text was scholar’s contribution to a community in the process of reconstruction after the Second World War, and in need of indications, political as much as legal, philosophical as much as practical. I was always struck by the fact that three quarters of the book – the first part on the *Premises* – are dedicated to illustrating the most important visions of the world (*Weltanschauung*), and only the last part, a mere 50 pages, on the architecture of the democratic State., that is to say the legal aspects of the Republic that was built. One of the clear examples insofar as it speaks of the index and distribution of materials: a plan of State cannot be designed unless inspiration is drawn from a world vision. And it was a lawyer who wrote it!

The text could be a reference for politicians and citizens at a time when we are planning a relaunch after the Covid emergency. The first element that stares us in the face is the problem of dialogue. Are the political forces prepared to talk? And what does it mean to talk when you want to “redesign” a country? We cannot forget here the lesson of the Italian Constituent Assembly. Three cultural and political traditions – social-communist, liberal and Christian – met to define the founding principles of our national community and to derive from them an architecture of state, both personalistic and pluralist, as La Pira points out. It is not always the political exponents, both in the majority and in opposition, who give proof of wanting a calm and constructive dialogue. There is no dialogue for those who are set against one another or who believe they are the holders of the absolute truths; even worse are those who have dual electoral and power aims.

La Pira would say that, in the case of democracies born after the Second World War, they were able to incorporate movements of ideas and people into the political structure, and to mould the same political, legal, economic and cultural structure as the States. In this work it is normal and desirable to reconfirm a difference in philosophical and cultural traditions. It does not automatically mean, at the decision-making and political level, the irreconcilability of various positions. Dialogue serves to overcome the distance of positions. It serves to confirm what is fundamental and constitutive in our country and to refute what destroys it.

⁴² Pope Francis: *Fratelli Tutti*, Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship. 3 October, 2020, par. 32 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)

⁴³ Giorgio La Pira, *Premesse della Politica e Architettura di uno Stato democratico*, LEF, Firenze 1945.

However, in some respects, today's work is *easier* than that of the Constituents. Governments, in the process of health and socioeconomic recovery, must not write a Constitution, nor incorporate or mould people, movements and ethical references. Everything is already incorporated, shaped and mediated: it is called the Constitution. The new political plans, then, have meaning and significance from an ethical point of view, if they are a force for strengthening and implementing better these constitutional principles; certainly not if they are made to upset them. And among the founding principles emerges the drama of increasingly implementing "political, economic and social solidarity"⁴⁴.

But here another problem arises: that of the cultural preparation and ethical maturity of the ruling classes, not only political but also social, union, entrepreneurial, and cultural. It is undeniable that Western democracies have been attacked by different pests in recent decades: unbridled liberalism, destruction of welfare, populism, nationalism, corruption, organised crime. La Pira himself would ask: "the ultimate roots of this crisis are roots of thought; the crisis, before being a political and economic crisis, is a crisis of ideas"⁴⁵, which affects everyone, citizens and leaders. The latter are not always up to the size of the task. Unfortunately, the world stage offers several examples- mediocre leaders facing complexity and unprecedented urgency.

We hope that recovery is on the horizon, not only that of individual and public health, but also of ethical quality. There are three pressing needs that cannot be avoided if we do not want to hand Italy over to populists and sovereigntists:

- a) The reform of electoral law: the Country needs lifelong stability. In my humble opinion, adopting the German proportional model, without distorting it (as we usually do), could stabilise the country's Government in a healthy relationship with other countries.
- b) Tax reform: those who have more must pay more: it is not only an evangelical principle but also a constitutional one, and betraying it destroys community ties and increases poverty, anger and rebellion.
- c) The reform of public administration: it is essential and indispensable. Weber said that "power, first and foremost, in everyday life, is administration."⁴⁶ For this reason it not only needs essential technological renewal but also training and strong motivation to make workers feel even more involved in service to the Country.

7. Ethical considerations on political choices for the economy

It is not just a problem of leadership issues or of groups which sustain or support leaders. Among these, *in primis*, must be stakeholders and economic groups. In January 2021 Oxfam published a dossier entitled 'The Inequality Virus'⁴⁷ which portrays a world situation where "the 1,000 richest people in the world have recuperated in just nine months all the losses they had accumulated through the Covid-19 emergency, whereas the poorest will pay for the catastrophic economic consequences of the pandemic for more than ten years". While, for Italy, the Inequality Report, also by Oxfam, reports that "in mid- 2019 - according to the latest available data – the top 10% (in terms of assets) of the population in Italy owned more than 6 times the wealth of the poorest half. At the outbreak of the health emergency the degree of *economic* resilience in Italian families was

⁴⁴ Constitution of the Italian Republic, article 2

⁴⁵ La Pira, loc. cit. p. 15.

⁴⁶ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Mohr-Siebeck, Tübingen 1922 (Italian: Comunità, Milano 1998, vol. I, p. 214)

⁴⁷ See: https://www.oxfamitalia.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/Sintesi_report_-_Il_Virus-della-Disuguaglianza-FINAL.pdf

extremely diversified with a little over 40% of Italians in a state of financial poverty (in other words without sufficient savings) to live, in the absence of income or other earnings, above the poverty threshold for over three months. Around 10 Million of our poorest fellow citizens, with an average savings value of no more than 400 euros, had no financial cushion to absorb the shock of the pandemic”.

Behind the figures are the faces of people, family dramas, professional and economic; those we know from first-hand experience, and those remaining few with serious information to give. It takes a certain effort to understand these figures, to meet those who can actively go no further, in the field of voluntary work, or in our neighbourhood, or in relationships, and then to sit down in armchairs to follow the government crisis. It strikes a strident chord, provoking a revolt (hopefully peaceful) in those with the minimum of conscience or responsibility. Most of our politicians, in government and in opposition, with a few notable exceptions, are far from grasping, touching and caring for this human, health and labour crisis. Parliament is further and further away from the country. We are well aware of how dangerous this can be because it can reinvigorate forms of populism and anti-politics; but unfortunately, it is so. In order not to lapse into populist and antipolitical forms, it would be good to focus, to begin with, on two elements: information and integrity.

Information on the pandemic, with very few exceptions, is superficial and hostage to the chasing for the *scoop*, whether it is the phone call about a parliamentary vote or the background of who irresponsibly caused it (certainly not alone but with several hidden supporters). Why is it that the information system is still struggling to explain to us 209 million euros and who will administer it and how? Is there a free press in our country? There are owners everywhere, even in information: the same perhaps who want to participate in dividing the cake? Obviously, we are referring to legitimate businesses that operate in respect of constitutional principles and laws in force in matters of the supply of public resources, health contracts, or otherwise in major works. And, above all, what vision of the country do we want to realise with all these resources? For example, what weight do culture, school and university carry? Or how important is the development of poor regions (*in primis* some areas of the South), and for the poor a growth in dignity and the possibility of real work opportunities, without being dependent on subsidies and emergency earnings?

But not everything is glowing and the virus has not eradicated the scourge of corruption (with joint partnerships or alliances with criminal organisations); moreover many fear the danger of a rise in corrupt practices. And whatever we put in our perhaps corrupt pocket - Pope Francis reminds us - is first of all detrimental to the poor⁴⁸. Those who have to administer this river of money must be upright, which is something more than simply being honest. Integrity is honesty, but it is also moral rectitude, adherence to one's own mandate and commitments; it is service with “discipline and honour”⁴⁹, dedication to the public good, to fulfilling “the mandatory duties of political, economic and social solidarity”⁵⁰.

Unfortunately, the production and distribution of vaccines has shown how the liberal mentality has got the better of some decision-making processes. From an official report on a debate on the vaccines question held on 10th February 2021 in the European Parliament, the following emerges:

MEPs recognised that the EU underestimated the challenges relating to the mass production of vaccines, and that concrete measures to increase production must be taken as a matter of the highest priority. Many members States in their vaccination programmes. Some members

⁴⁸ Pope Francis *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical Letter On Care for our Common Home, 24 May, 2015, par. 197. (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

⁴⁹ Constitution of the Italian Republic, art. 54

⁵⁰ Constitution of the Italian Republic, art. 2

believe that, in order to build public confidence in vaccination efforts and to avoid disinformation, the EU must tell the truth. Regarding this, many members have mentioned the necessity for transparency in contracts, as well as complete and clear data on the distribution of vaccines at a national level. Taking into account the large amounts of money invested, several MEPs called for greater parliamentary control over the implementation of the vaccines programme⁵¹.

As in every economic and political choice, that of the production and distribution of vaccines has recent and more distant causes, mostly cultural and political. Since the 1980s we have witnessed the spread of a capitalist culture, not always regulated by ethical and legal principles and, hand in hand (thanks to new technologies and particular socio-political situations) also a movement in which companies have “globalised” production, trade, consumption, stock market activities and even Western socio-cultural models. At a dizzying speed the large companies, not only the law. The Member States, unfortunately, are powerless to help, suffering from the rationale of the institutions.

It is a matter of real “capitalist dogma” that the pandemic has seen most in the sensitive area of health (from pharmacies to hospitals, from masks to the funding of new projects). Christian tradition refers to the necessary passage from economics to politics and it is done by way of a political recovery as place and instrument with which the good of individuals as well as groups is harmonised and realised. Only the return to politics that govern the economic processes can guarantee the conditions that allow everyone to grow fully as individuals and as groups⁵². Think of what caused Italy’s excessive and reckless privatisation of the health sector and its consequences in combating the pandemic!

8. Conclusion

Will the pandemic help us to understand that power always depends on the common good and never with a view to increasing usefulness? After all even when profit is legitimate, that is to say within the correct financial, productive and commercial practices, it can never be a gain at all costs (in this case on the backs of citizens) but must respect a precise hierarchy: 1. worker, 2. work, 3. profit. The modern approach, however, is based on a very different order: 1. profit, 2. work, 3. worker⁵³. In it economic activity has a single engine, the “maximisation of utility” where the structure of needs is flattened to the structure of a single need, that of utility. The economic system is no longer designed to meet the various human needs, but fundamentally to enrich itself, and this mentality pervades, corrupts and distorts several sectors of the political community. Think of what has happened in large sectors of the European Left, often flattened on the dogma of profit, always and either way.

Reviewing and reforming political choices in the production and distribution of vaccines and hypothesising on a national production with precise State control (subject to licences) is not a return to Communism. Those who often conjure up the spectre of Communism are, in many cases, only defending the hidden interests of

⁵¹ Text available on www.europarl.europa.eu/news. See, for its clarity and incisiveness, the intervention of Manon Aubry, 31, French, MP, available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZWcyV-aSHU>.

⁵² Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, capp. III-IV; PAUL VI, *Octogesima adveniens*, 1971, n. 46.

⁵³ Pope John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, 1981, nn. 6-7; *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, n. 35; Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 2009, nn. 21.36; Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 2013, n. 53.

the multinationals. What is urgent and inescapable is the strengthening of politics to which, between the Italian puppets and the controlling global interests, above all, it can succumb. It does not need religious faith to subscribe to the plea of Pope Francis, but only authentic interest for the good of all, of every group and background, on the right as on the left and as on the centre:

I cannot place myself ahead of others, letting the law of the marketplace and patents take precedence over the law of love and the health of humanity. I ask everyone – government leaders, businesses, international organizations – to foster cooperation and not competition, and to seek a solution for everyone: vaccines for all, especially for the most vulnerable and needy of all regions of the planet. Before all others: the most vulnerable and needy⁵⁴.

The final wish is taken from Mario Luzi's poetic text with which this reflection began:

From this purgatorial burning
Will be released Man, I hope, naked, reaching out,
To better: to constructive effort, to peace, to fraternity.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Pope Francis, Blessing *Urbi et Orbi* Christmas 2020.

⁵⁵ Luzi, loc. cit.

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