



**Guido Formigoni, Massimo De Giuseppe.** *Primo Mazzolari: Scritti sulla Pace e sulla Guerra.* Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 2009. 750 S. ISBN 978-88-10-10844-4.



**Paolo Trionfini.** *Tu non uccidere: Mazzolari e il pacifismo del Novecento.* Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana Spa, 2009. 212 S. ISBN 978-88-372-2357-1.



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## Sammelrez: Don Primo Mazzolari

Unlike the Vatican hierarchy, Italian Catholicism as such remains largely a terra incognita for historians on the other side of the Alps. This is a most unfortunate circumstance, for not only has Italian Catholicism signed responsible for a long line of Popes but, more importantly, Italy has been a laboratory for all sorts of experimentations in Catholic social movements and cultural expressions, giving rise to a vibrant manifestation of religious diversity. This relative neglect of Italian Catholicism extends to the realm of Catholic theology just as much as to Catholic social activism. The triumvirate of

radical non-conformist Catholic thinkers (and sometime activists) Giuseppe Dossetti, Giuseppe Lazzati and Giorgio La Pira à active from the 1930s to the 1970s à remains largely unknown outside of Italy until today. Had they been operating in neighboring France, there is no doubt that they would have become household names for historians of Catholicism outside of their native country, just as much as for Catholics in their home state.

Don Primo Mazzolari, however, is not very well-known even in Italy, and he may safely be categorized

as a second-tier theologian in terms of his recognition by fellow Italians during his lifetime (1890-1959). Yet, in terms of his radiance as a theologian, writer and public speaker within the non-conformist spectrum of Italian Catholicism, Don Primo's impact was probably second-to-none. Based in Bozzolo, half-way between Cremona and Modena, in the plains of the Po Valley, the pugnacious parish priest never shied away from controversy, repeatedly suffering recriminations and punishments from his church superiors for his actions and words. Public debates with leading local anarchists and other left-wing figureheads in front of thousands of on-lookers, particularly in the half-dozen years after Liberation, gave Mazzolari a certain reputation; and it is an open secret that Giovanni Guareschi modeled his Don Camillo in part after Don Primo, who agitated not far from Guareschi's home base.

At the same time Don Primo penned no less than twenty-some books, which showcased his wide-ranging knowledge of contemporary Italian and European society, theology and culture. Always in tune with the latest publications by leading non-conformist French theologians, Don Primo became an early advocate of an ecumenical approach and a greatly enhanced role for the laity. An early opponent of Mussolini's regime, he was in close touch with resistance figures, though guarding a certain distance from both its military and political wings.

Mazzolari is most famous, however, for his contribution to pacifism and pacifist thought; and Don Primo's 1955 *Tu Non Uccidere* (Thou Shalt Not Kill) is rightly regarded as a landmark text in the genesis of Italy's pacifist writing and activism. The first volume under review, edited by Paolo Trionfini, zeroes in on the genesis and radiance of this slim volume and the evolution of Mazzolari's thoughts on the issue of war and peace in general. The second volume, edited by Guido Formigone and Massimo De Giuseppe, serves primarily as a sourcebook and document collection of Mazzolari's copious writings on the same topic. Both publications deserve to find an echo far beyond the narrow confines of the Italian boot.

If anyone had any doubts, the texts and studies composing these two volumes make eminently clear that Don Primo's confident rejection of war in any and all circumstances, launched anonymously in *Tu Non Uccidere*, was by no means the fruit of a straight line of development. Quite the contrary! It was the ultimate outcome of a long and tortuous route from open advocacy of Italian patriotism and two tours of (voluntary) duty as military chap-

lain. The first one, an engagement as spiritual advisor to Italian army recruits, took place behind the frontlines in World War I France, the second one in Upper Silesia during the preparatory stage leading to the plebiscite on the future of that region in early 1921. But already in 1911, during Italy's Libyan campaign, Mazzolari enthusiastically supported the Italian troops, adding that "after victory it would be incumbent to ask God for peace" (Scritti, p. 7). His military superiors testified to Mazzolari's "very patriotic and most lofty sentiments" in an official logbook entry of January 1919.

Yet the first doubts had begun to creep into Don Primo's understanding of the traditional Catholic notion of "just wars" towards the end of World War I, as Guido Formigone makes clear in his contribution to the volume edited by Paolo Trionfini. Always pained by consideration of the impact of wars on common people, soldiers and civilians, Mazzolari's patriotism had consistently been a patriotism of equality, seeking equal status for weaker nations, not positions of superiority, though his definition of "equality" remained rather murky for some years. His view of Italy as one such disadvantaged state made Mazzolari, for instance, support Italy's side in Mussolini's 1935 Ethiopian campaign. But this was to be the last time that Don Primo openly took sides in an actual hot war. It still took some years before he evolved towards the positions he ultimately espoused in *Tu Non Uccidere*, yet the critical assessment of the realities of war soon began to outweigh his patriotic instincts.

In August 1941 Mazzolari jotted down in a thinkpiece, which was only published later on: "One may begin with justice on one's side and finish up steeped in injustice. How many just wars have been conducted in nefarious ways and were concluded by vindictive peace treaties?" (Scritti, p. 248) As Formigone underscores, Mazzolari's evolving thoughts slowly began to open up "a space for the morality of disobedience" (*Tu Non*, p. 52). When the Cold War broke out into the open, opposition to great power politics became key, though as late as 1949 Don Primo still considered the Western Allies as the "lesser evil". Yet for Mazzolari the point was never to adopt "simplistic positions of neutrality", but instead to engage in "the pursuit of an active road to peace" (Formigone in *Tu Non*, p. 57).

Realising the increasing urgency of a message of peace, Don Primo, in September 1950, launched a fortnightly national publication, *Adesso* [Now], which quickly evolved into a leading journalistic mouthpiece for the non-aligned Catholic peace camp in Italy and

which survived Don Primo for several years beyond the latter's untimely death. The story of Adesso has been the subject of a number of Italian-language monographs and edited volumes; and in 1979 the journal was reprinted in full. A significant percentage of the documents reproduced in Scritti are in fact reproduced from the pages of this pathbreaking journal. The specific contribution of the collection of articles in the volume edited by Trionfini is the analysis and description of what led Don Primo along this particular path, and more specifically the reconstruction of the genesis of *Tu Non Uccidere* itself.

Here Massimo De Giuseppe, a formidable scholar of Italian (and Latin American) progressive Catholicism, makes perhaps the most valuable contribution. De Giuseppe's brilliant comments on the international conjuncture of 1955 explain the publication of *Tu Non Uccidere* — whose text had been in the making for several years — as the product of a particular constellation of circumstances which made the launch of such a text suddenly appear feasible and fruitful. 1955 constitutes, in the eyes of De Giuseppe, a watershed within international politics and within the redefinition of geostrategic equilibria, a crossroads within the Cold War (Tu Non, p. 121) which opened up new perspectives. The first tender shoots of what later became known as "the third way," non-aligned association of independent states gathered in Bandung; the beginnings of a serious and potentially mass-based opposition to the nuclear war-fighting arsenals of destruction in the wake of the hapless "Lucky Dragon" incident; the growing reality of decolonization as an irreversible force — these and other factors made the seemingly inevitable division of the world into two solid and seemingly unmovable blocs appear less iron-clad and permanent compared to the preceding years. The Moscow-oriented and Communist-directed international peace movement, which had appeared to be on a continuous and powerful upswing for some time, began to show first signs of stagnation. And, last but not least of major significance for any pacifist who was devoutly Catholic, Pope Pius XII in late September 1954 for the first time went beyond his habitual denunciations of the pro-Communist peace camp and openly criticized both Cold War camps' mass retaliation strategies. "From now on, in fact, the peace movements as well began to take positions of critical distance from the rigidities and obligations implicit within a firmly bipolar logic and began to construct independent networks." (Tu Non, p. 123) And Massimo De Giuseppe avers that, soon, "subtle channels of dialogue opened themselves up to partially new

themes" (Tu Non, p. 124) within pacifist discourse.

It was precisely at this moment that Don Primo Mazzolari stepped into the breach with his *Tu Non Uccidere*. The absolute condemnation of wars as a problem solving mechanism under any and all circumstances, and the refutation of the doctrine of supposedly "just wars," made friend and foe listen up. Yet, De Giuseppe continues, it was not solely Mazzolari's consistent pacifism which made an impact. What rendered Don Primo highly unusual even within the camp of staunch pacifists was his equal insistence on the social dimension of the struggle for peace. For Don Primo, peace and social justice were two sides of the identical coin. Already in 1950, for instance, he had written: "Peace will never be secure and stable until such a time when the poor are no longer compelled to believe that they will never obtain justice without spilling blood." (Scritti, p. 446) And, along similar lines, Mazzolari consistently criticized the pro-Moscow peace camp for sidelining the poor, "whose voices never managed to make themselves heard" due to the movement's reliance on petitions headlined by prominent personalities and the organization of high-powered conferences "where intellectuals, politicians and trade union officials predominate." (Scritti, p. 429)

In Massimo De Giuseppe's words, the novelty of Mazzolari's approach consisted in his presentation of "new modes of reading that went against the grain" (Tu Non, p. 125), thereby challenging timeworn modes of behaviour amongst peace activists, the political Left in general, and especially the lifeworld of Catholicism. Thus, Mazzolari was one of the very first observers of Cold War cultures who, as early as 1946, linked consumerism and a growing measure of affluence to the relatively widespread and popular acceptance of the culture of deterrence. Yet, at the same time, Don Primo by no means relied on simplistic versions of "materialism" in his explanation and condemnation of cold war belligerence. A man of the cloth above all else, his prescient and consistent stress on the social question was always, in the last analysis, undergirded by even more powerful ethical concerns.

My focus on the singular utility of De Giuseppe's lengthy sixty-page chapter should not obscure the value of other contributions to the edited volume. Paolo Trionfini, for instance, delivers a fine-tuned and empirically rich survey of the variety of strands of thought amongst Italian Catholicism from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. Guido Formigoni, as mentioned above, paints an evocative picture of the evolution of Mazzolari's thoughts on

war and peace throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Luigi Lorenzetti delves into the theological roots of Mazzolari's pacifist thought. Lorenzo Bedeschi points out that *Tu Non Uccidere* was in part inspired by an unpublished text produced by a group of young Catholics from Brescia, underscoring that *Tu Non Uccidere* was not an isolated stroke of genius, but can best be regarded as a product of an evolving *Zeitgeist*. Alberto Melloni, in characteristic fashion, presents in bold strokes and broad outlines some intriguing aphorisms on twentieth century Catholic pacifism tout court. And the prolific historian of Italian progressive Catholicism, Daniela Saresella, notes the reception of *Tu Non Uccidere* within Italian Catholic published opinion and amongst the "secular Italian Left."

For anyone familiar with this edited volume, the

jointly authored introduction to *Scritti* offers few new insights, and in fact the first half of this introductory text is literally taken over almost verbatim — though, of necessity, in abbreviated fashion — from Formigoni's contribution to the anthology of texts edited by Trionfini. The value of *Scritti* is its comprehensive reproduction of virtually all of Mazzolari's published and unpublished copious writings on the issue of peace, including the original 1955 version of *Tu Non Uccidere*, with subsequent additions and changes by Mazzolari made in the second edition of 1957 placed in italics or referred to in the notes. In fact, it should be mentioned here that the detailed explanatory notes, a labor of love carried out in effect by Massimo De Giuseppe, are a treasure trove of information in their own right and will be of great assistance to any future historian of Don Primo Mazzolari, Italian progressive Catholicism, and Italian pacifism in general.

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