

Danilo Dolci's Sicily

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, December 1967, 2, 6.

Summary: While in Rome she takes a side trip to see the work of Danilo Dolci. She admires his techniques of organizing and energizing the poor to rebuild Sicily using experts, holding meetings and nonviolence, especially when resisting the mafia. Sees similarities to Peter Maurin's approach. (DDLW #859).

While I was in Rome I assisted at a dialogue Mass at the Jesuit headquarters on the Via Santo Spirito in Rome just down the street from the Hospital of the Holy Spirit, where one can still see the turnstile into which destitute mothers used to place their new-born infants to be succored by the nuns. After the kiss of peace and communion we went out into the cobbled streets to find a place to have dinner – Eileen Egan, Dorothy Coddington, Gary McEoin, Tom Cornell, Fabrizio Fabbrini and I. The only trouble with such an interesting group was that there were too many things to talk about, too many avenues to be explored.

Fabbrini, a professor at the university in Rome, had lost his position and had been imprisoned for six months in a damp cold cell beneath the level of the street. He was in the same cell with nine others, not conscientious objectors but sentenced on various charges. There was neither work nor exercise nor recreation for him, and one wonders how he stood it.

Gary could have told me something about Vatican finances, since he has written a book on the subject, but Dorothy Coddington began talking about the work of Danilo Dolci, and her talk was so interesting that I resolved to visit Sicily before proceeding to London. Eileen was going on to Isreal and had already been to Trieste.

My idea of a good dinner party would be one at which everyone took turns to talk about his latest interests. Peter Maurin used to say, “You give me a piece of your mind and I’ll give you a piece of mine and then we will be closer to one mind.” Or something like that.

Dorothy and I made our plans to go, and we started out the following Tuesday, taking a crowded train to Naples, then a bus to the small ship which went to Sicily, then from Palermo to Tunis. It was an overnight trip and the cabin was so cramped that it was almost impossible to get in and out of the bunks. There were three classes on the boat, and we chose second. (Third, or steerage, would have meant our bringing our own food and sitting up all night.) We left Rome

on Tuesday and were back on Friday, a great experience crammed into four days. Of course I can give only a glimpse of all that Dolci is doing, but I hope that glimpse will lead our readers to look up his books and go to their public libraries and do some real studying of this nonviolent and most active movement.

We were met at the pier in Palermo by one of Dolci's aides who drove us in a very small Fiat through the narrow streets, through traffic jams, and over the climbing, spiraling roads, through arid scenery to Partinico, a trip of a little over an hour. There we drove along the main street, and then through narrow cobbled lanes with children playing in the gutters and women in doorways staring at us to a stone building of perhaps eight offices, spotlessly clean and modern, where many young Italians were working, and were ushered into an office to see Dolci.

He is a big man, a northern Italian, born in Trieste. His father was half German, half Italian, and his mother Slovenian. His Slovenian grandfather was beaten by the Fascists and given the castor-oil treatment; he retreated to what is known now as Yugoslavia, never to return.

What impresses one at once about Dolci is his size – he is so much bigger than the Italians around him – and then his gentle calm, his confidence. It was ten in the morning when we arrived, but Dolci had already been up since four, his usual rising hour, which gave him time to read and study and to write his books: **To Feed the Hungry; The Outlaws of Partinico; Waste; A New World in the Making**. Not all of his books are printed in the United States but they can be ordered from England.

Dolci speaks a little English but prefers to use an interpreter if he has one at hand. The young driver, who actually knew very little English, was a very halting interpreter.

I was happy to meet Dolci's wife Vincenzina, a dark-haired, strong and quiet woman, who, one felt, had done much of the hard work of their early years at Trappeto, the village by the sea where the work had started among the fishermen and where there had been a school – settlement – house – hospice and refuge during the first years of Dolci's work.

Vincenzina's first husband had been a farm laborer. He was so badly beaten by the Mafia for his refusal to blackmail his employer that he died of his injuries within a few months. (I obtained this information not by direct questioning, but from a book by James McNeish, **Fire Under the Ashes**, which was published last year.) When Dolci arrived in Trappeto, she was a widow with five small children. Those first children have now become young adults, working in the north of Italy, and there are five more children by the second marriage. I met the two older ones, doing their homework in one of the offices, the girl Maria Liberte, and the boy Cielo.

Vincenzina gave me a present before I left, an earthenware lamp, of two tiers of little cups which were to be filled with oil, with little wicks floating in it.

Dolci soon turned us over to his right-hand man, Franco Allasio, whom he met

in his boyhood in Milan and who later joined him in Partinico, who has fasted and marched with him and faced all the dangers of fighting the Mafia with him for all these years. Franco spoke French as well as Italian. There was a young British Broadcasting Corporation employee with us who also spoke French but mixed up. But we had a tremendous day of it, driving this time in a slightly larger Fiat, all over the western part of Sicily, from the north to the south coast, which is so near to Africa. We drove over incredibly bad roads most of the time. When there was a good stretch the speedometer showed 80 miles an hour, and we had to hang on to our seats.

What did we not see? The lethargy of villages thousands of years old, of many cultures, Greek, Arabic and Roman. At the close of the day we had a glimpse in the dusk of the ruins of a Greek Temple at Geneste and I was sorry I missed the great amphitheater nearby on a now desolate hillside. The scenery throughout was like that in the moving picture, **The Gospel According to St. Matthew**, Pasolini's masterpiece.

One of Dolci's techniques is to send out experts to make surveys, and then to publish the reports, hold meetings, energize the people locally to get to work on the problem presented. He needed experts and he got them – from all over Europe.

I remember Abbe Pierre when he visited us some years ago telling us, "You work and work and suddenly there is an explosion. Something happens. Public interest is aroused, and the ideas spread. You cannot tell when it will take place, if ever. You just must follow your conscience and do the work you have been called to do."

The beginning of Dolci's fame came when he was arrested for what he termed a "reverse strike." He found unemployment in Trappeto, and men wanting to work, and a road which needed repairing. So he took the men out with their tools to do a job which public authorities had not done, and was arrested with many of the men, all of them so desperately poor that they were indifferent as to whether they were in jail or out. Besides, they had that confidence in Dolci. He knew what he was doing, even if it was obscure to them. Somehow the story caught hold and was flashed around the world. Help began to come.

Dolci stimulated people's interest. "Go and see," he would tell them, and the seeing, combined with Dolci's contagious hope, made the experts get to work. But all congresses, reports and surveys would mean nothing without this expectation, this hope, this infinite patience, this conviction that people can be changed, can be enlightened and inspired.

He wants man to be "master of his own conscience, yet at one with his neighbor, shaping his life in groups, within groups, which will spread in all the most varied forms of community, sometimes overlapping, sometimes separate, from districts to regions, to nations and continents, to every corner of the earth." I thought of Martin Buber's "community of communities" which he speaks of in **Paths in Utopia**. It is the vision of Peter Maurin, the founder of the Catholic Worker,

the vision of Father James Tompkins of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, and of an Irish priest I have just heard of, Father J. McDyer of Glencolumbkille, County Donegal. The vision also of missionary priests the world over who are appalled by totalitarianism, as well as by destitution, and who begin at the bottom to rebuild.

To me, this is the significance of Dolci – not just the three dams envisioned for Sicily, one completed, one under construction and the new Jato Dam, which will mean twenty-five thousand acres reclaimed, one thousand and six hundred acres reforested, the working days and gross yield trebled. Not just the big wine cooperative at Memfi, where men receive honest reckoning of the weight of their grapes and so double the price they receive, where they also receive a knowledge of what they themselves can do. It is not just the things envisioned and already accomplished, but the fact that Dolci carries to all he meets on his extensive trips, these ideas of love and brotherhood, this “little way” of nonviolence.

And then there is Dolci’s campaign against the Mafia. Dolci is preaching nonviolent resistance to the evil of local violence: murder, torture and extortion. If you are calling attention to nonviolent action as a way to oppose oppression and injustice, you cannot ignore the violence in your midst. Dolci expects of his companions utter honesty and the bravery of unarmed men facing the banditry and ambush in their home territory with only the weapons of the spirit. It perhaps could be considered a transformation or a sublimation or a redirection of man’s aggressive instincts, his love of a strong conflict. Vinoba Bhave some years ago was carrying on a similar nonviolent contest with outlaws in India. It is also a confrontation with corruption in high places, and Dolci has not been afraid to accuse high government and church officials so openly that he has been condemned as a defamer of his country and his government – he has been tried and convicted, and an appeal is pending.

I will not discuss Dolci’s theology. He no longer considers himself a Catholic, and that fact saddened me. But he has priest friends and he sent me the next day to have dinner with one of them, an old priest who fasted and picketed with him, and picketed the court while his trial was going on.

The old priest of Castellamare reminded me of Peter Maurin, his rugged calm, his occasional sallies. We were eating lunch together in a little seashore residence and Franco and the priest’s companion, a handsome Sicilian who was the first to sign the accusation made by 250 Sicilians against the Mafia and the government minister who was native to that town.

“They need to be brainwashed,” he said, his face lighting up.

We sat outside that day, though it was cool, and the wind made little white caps on the water. Up and down the beach there were men and donkey carts, some of which were beautifully decorated, and maybe they were harvesting clams or driftwood. We had pasta with clam sauce and fish, and the men drank their wine and we had coffee with milk. Strange not ever to see any drunkenness in Italy among the people!

We kept thinking of Peter, both Dorothy and I, because both priest and peasant were alike in many ways. (Dorothy was the first one to come join me those first years of the **Catholic Worker** and she edited pamphlet No. 1 which was filled with Peter's essays.) All the men I met, aside from the priest, who was in his cassock, wore shirts and ties and even the pictures of the men on the march at the demonstrations by which they forced the government to go on with the building of the dams showed them in collar and tie. Peter Maurin too always wore a white shirt, though it might be frayed and stained in the collar, and black tie and black felt hat.

We thought of Peter as we rode over those rocky roads too. Whenever he came to the farm at Easton, Pennsylvania, our first farm, he chose the job of mending roads, breaking the rock to do it and cutting channels and gutters to drain off the heavy rains which washed out the road. Peter came from land like this, high and barren. In his village in Languedoc there was one shepherd for all the sheep of the commune, and here on this trip I had seen many a flock of sheep, the wool the color of the bare mountainside, and one shepherd herding them. Sometimes there was a flock of goats.

On the way back to Partinico, Franco drove us along the Via della Madonna, and on the side of a mountain we stopped at a large church, which had been restored, Franco said, by members of the Mafia in the United States. A caretaker, a slatternly, ragged woman, lived there, but the place was far from any parish, from any other habitation. It was a shrine, however, and a place of prayer, and we stopped not only to see, but to pray for Danilo Dolci, for Franco, and all their fellow workers.

There was a meeting with the group at Partinico at the study and work center, all of us gathered around a conference table, but as to how much they understood of what I had to say about our own work, I do not know. They felt our solidarity, I know. It is good just to sit with people sometimes, just to know them. I thought even while I was speaking, of a moving scene in one of Ignazio Silone's works of an encounter between Pietro Spina and the deaf-mute peasant, with the former pouring out his heart to the other, not knowing his affliction, and of the warmth and understanding there was between them. (In the next issue of the **Catholic Worker**, I will write of my meeting with Silone in Rome.)

Danilo would not be content with our visit unless we saw the slums of Palermo itself, and on our way back to the ship we were taken through noisome alleys where children played in the refuse and the way was so narrow that it was like threading a needle to get through. Such sights made even the worst villages seem a paradise of sun and air in comparison.

And now as I write, I see in the **New York Times** a picture of Dolci in Rome, demonstrating with a mass of his followers, against the war in Vietnam, at the conclusion of marches from Naples to Rome and Milan to Rome. And as we go to press it is the third day of great protest at Whitehall Street induction center and thousands are continuing to gather. Thank God these voices are

being raised against this most cruel war, and God forgive us all our guilt, as Americans.