

A Meeting with Ignazio Silone

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The Catholic Worker, January 1968, 1, 6.

Summary: Interviews novelist Ignazio Silone and appreciates his central message of man's dignity and capacity for greatness, to the point of laying down one's life. Recounts Silone's characters who portray the message of redemption. Is grateful for the interview of "a moral hero of our time." (DDLW #860).

In wrestling with the problem of how to present the teachings of nonviolence in an age of mass violence, it seems to me that the writings of Ignazio Silone are of immense importance. When I first read **Bread and Wine** in the forties, I was deeply impressed, not only with the story of the revolutionary returning secretly from his exile in Switzerland, but with the call to a personalist approach which must precede any communitarian effort.

I had heard from Father Jack English, a former CW editor, of Silone's visit to the Trappist monastery of the Holy Spirit at Conyers, Georgia. Silone spent the day at the Abbey within the enclosure, and it was left to Father English to be guest master and converse with his wife, a beautiful Irishwoman whom he met during his exile in Switzerland. They had come to Atlanta to discuss the problems of the South and had been brought to the monastery by the editor of the **Atlanta Constitution** because there was an international meeting of the Trappist order going on there.

On another occasion Silone and his wife had visited New York and New England and had called the office of **The Catholic Worker**, but I did not receive the message until they were well on their way back to Italy.

So I was delighted when I was invited to dine with them in Rome in late October. We went to a restaurant on the Piazza Carlo Goldoni that was usually very quiet, they said. There was a large area outside for dining; but it was a cool night, so we went into one of the small rooms, which, unfortunately, was very crowded and noisy that night. There were two tables full of noisy young Americans, one large party of uproarious Italians and still another family with small babies. So I did not get as complete an interview as I would have liked.

Silone wanted to learn more about Peter Maurin (our founder) and his peasant background. He knew of Marc Sangnier's movement and his journal, **Le Sillon**, which was suppressed in France at the time that Peter Maurin lived there. He also wanted to know whether I was a practicing Catholic, and expressed surprise

at the opposition **The Catholic Worker** met with from some of the hierarchy. He spoke of Danilo Dolci, whom I was to meet later, and of whom I wrote in the last issue of **The Catholic Worker**. I knew from others that he had provided Dolci with generous financial help and had appeared in court during his many trials. He did not particularly like his campaign against the Mafia, though he said that it showed great courage. Perhaps he felt that the time consumed was time lost from his work of regional alleviation of destitution, through study groups, building up of cooperatives and the work toward irrigation and reforestation.

Silone himself was born in Pescina, an ancient town on the slopes of the Mariella mountains, in the Abruzzi. His father died when he was ten years old. There were three sons, and the oldest was injured when he fell from a roof where he was playing and broke his back. He was terribly crippled, but his mind was keener than ever. He died at fourteen. The other brother was tortured to death by the Fascists. His mother lost her life in a terrible earthquake when he was fifteen. He went to school first in the village and then later in a seminary, where he received a classical education. Don Orlione was a priest who had the greatest influence on his life and I imagine the wonderful priest portrayed in **Bread and Wine** was like him. He continued his education under the Jesuits in Rome. On one occasion he left school and wandered around Rome for three days; that and his Socialist leanings led to his expulsion. Later on, in the Mussolini era, he became a Communist and had to flee Italy and take refuge in Switzerland.

Fontamara was written in 1930 when Silone was in exile, and he said that writing was his only defense against despair. He was ill with tuberculosis, "Since it did not appear that I had long to live," he writes in the introduction, "I wrote with unspeakable affliction and anxiety, to set up as best I could that village into which I put the quintessence of myself and my native *health*, so that I could at least die among my own people."

But he recovered his health and writing became the "secret dwelling place for the rest of a long exile." He writes that there is no definite break between the stories of Solitary Stranger****in **Fontamara**, Pietro Spina in **Bread and Wine**, Rocco in **A Handful of Blackberries**, and Andrea in **The Secret of Luca**. The hero in **The Seed Beneath the Snow**, is still Pietro Spina.

"If it were in my power to change the mercantile laws of literary society," he writes, "I could easily spin out my existence writing and rewriting the same story in the hope that I might end up understanding it and making it clear to others, just as in the middle ages there were monks whose entire lives were devoted to painting the face of Christ over and over again."

When he returned after his exile and reread that text of those first two books for Italian publication, he began rewriting them both, because of the continued development in himself "during all those years in which I had continued to live in them."

For one thing, the emphasis was no longer on urging peasant uprising – he had long since lost his faith in Communism or in any other revolution directed by a

bunch of bureaucrats. The emphasis is now on the individual, who conveys the message, one man to another, of man's dignity and capacity for greatness. And greatness means the overcoming of temptation and laying down of one's life for one's fellows, in other words, the victory of love over hatred and mistrust.

Fontamara is the name of a south Italian village where the villagers are constantly being deceived by the Trader, who came like an ordinary travelling salesman and began by buying up the apples on the trees when the peasants needed cash, and went on to buy up everything: onions, beans, lentils, pigs, hens, rabbits, bees, animal skins, road construction, land, and so on. The story begins with his diverting a small stream which takes all the water from the peasants' small fields. He gains control of the old-time landowners and works with a bank, which gives him all the money he needs. He finally becomes mayor of the nearby town. With the priest on the side of the Trader, the peasant in despair, each one looks to his own welfare at the expense of the others, each tries to get the best of what little water is left. The bits of land the peasants had are tied up in mortgages and debts, so they have to hire themselves out as day laborers. Each day they have to walk ten miles to their work and, in the evening when they return home they feel as "exhausted and degraded as beasts."

Berardo Viola has lost his land because of the treachery of the local lawyer and at the end goes away to Rome in search for work in order to marry Elvira, who has accepted him, penniless and landless though he is. So far he has been the one in the village to preach revolt, but now he thinks only of himself, and refuses to join the other peasants in any of their plans, which they had begun to make under his inspiration. He has converted them all and now he himself had changed. He has to take care of his own affairs, he says, and will not stay with the others or work with them any longer. Elvira pledges herself to go on a pilgrimage to save his soul. She has fallen in love with him as he was before, a landless peasant and a leader of the others who had kept some spark of hope and faith in themselves alive.

It is in Rome that after hunger and thirst in his attempt to cut through the bureaucracy and find work, he meets the Solitary Stranger. When they are arrested for vagrancy and share a cell together, he is brought back to his former way of thinking. He has gone through what can only be called a conversion. Elvira has on her pilgrimage begged the Virgin for his salvation, ****offering God her own life for him, and her offering had been accepted. During his absence she returns home to die of fever. Inspired by the Solitary Stranger, Berardo himself offers his life for the others and is killed by the Fascists.

The entire story, told by one or another of the peasants themselves, is not primarily a story of incipient violent revolution, though the peasants do plan to burn up the Trader's holdings. It is rather a story of failure, the story of redemption, the folly of the Cross which leads to the Resurrection. The same theme runs through Silone's work. **The Seed Beneath the Snow.** "Unless the grain of wheat fall unto the ground and dies, itself remaineth alone. But it is dies it brings forth much fruit." . . . "Anyone who would save his life must

lose it.”

In one of his critical essays in **Politics and the Novel**, Irving Howe says that in the novels of Malraux and Silone, the true hero is the author himself. I felt privileged indeed in meeting Silone, a moral hero of our time, committed to the poor and the landless, the agricultural worker whom we have encountered in our own country in the novels of Steinbeck, **Grapes of Wrath** and **In Dubious Battle**. Certainly the poorest people in our own country are not the industrial workers, who have won their battle for the eight-hour day and the five-day week, and for some share in the prosperity of our urban civilization, only through bloody defeats during half a century and more of struggle. The struggle on the land goes on for the right to organize agricultural work, to bargain collectively, to build up community by way of cooperatives and social-service centers, where Masses are offered up for the workers, and **campesino** players can put on their acts and their songs.

I am grateful indeed for the writing of Ignazio Silone. In a meeting in Switzerland not long after the second World War, he said that those writers who sold their words to governments in the prosecution of a war were as guilty of profiting by war as the men who remained at home to work on the instruments of death – the bombers and the Bomb, the napalm and the anti-personnel bombs (and the personnel in these cases are mostly women and children, the old and the feeble).

When I first mentioned the book **Bread and Wine** in my column years ago, one of our Bishops, a good friend, wrote to me that he was sorry to see my praising a writer who spoke of the Holy Father (Pius XI) as Pope Pontius Pilate. **Bread and Wine** is the story of the return of an exile, who hides out in the mountains of the Abruzzi, disguised as a priest. When war is declared against Ethiopia he goes out in the night and chalks up his opposition on the public buildings of the village in which he is staying in the form of a large and repeated “NO!” When he is asked what good such a puny dissent does, and why he is risking his life, which is so precious to others, by such a futile gesture, he replies that as long as one man says “NO!” the unanimity of consent is broken. At that time it certainly seemed that all hierarchy and the clergy (all but Don Luigi Sturzo, that great Christian sociologist) were blessing that war.

As far as I know, Silone is not generally called a practicing Catholic. I certainly did not presume to question him on the subject. But I do know that his writings bring to us the Christian message and my heart is warm with gratitude. I know too that he is interested in and follows all that is happening in the Church, not only in the ancient order of the Trappists, the monks of the desert, but also in “The Seeds of the Desert,” (not the book of Father Rene Voillaume by that name, though it is a great one), but the seed scattered by the solitary, Charles de Foucauld, which bloomed in a new order, the Little Brothers of Jesus, who go out into all the poverty-stricken places in the world and work for their daily bread and live the life of the contemplative in the world. Let us all pray for each other, that we may learn this profound truth, the way of the Cross which leads to joy and fulfillment and eventually to victory.