

# WORLD DOMINION

The World Dominion Movement advocates Informed Continuous Co-ordinated Evangelism to reach everyone at home and abroad. Its basis is belief in the Deity and Atoning Death of the Lord Jesus Christ, the World's Only Saviour, and in the Final Authority of Holy Scripture.

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# The Religious Situation in Italy

ITALICUS

The following article has been written by an outstanding Italian evangelical minister who, for the sake of greater freedom of expression, wishes to remain anonymous. In view of the prominent place which Italy has assumed of late in the politics of Europe it is of special interest.

**R**EPLYING some time ago to a letter from the Waldensian Senator, David Giordano, the Premier, Signor Mussolini, wrote these significant words about the Waldenses :

‘ I am aware that the Waldenses are Italians both in race and sentiment, and I am an admirer of their history because of their tenacity, their sacrifices and the spirit of idealism which they have exhibited.’

More than once, in conversations with the Moderator of the Waldensian Church, the Duce has expressed his pleasure in the fact that the Waldensian Church is not merely a mission of a foreign evangelical Church, but is the national evangelical Church of Italy.

Readers of *WORLD DOMINION* will be aware that, as a fact, the Waldensian Church, of which we have well-established historical data from the twelfth century, can be considered as the oldest Protestant Church in the world. The early Waldenses, though threatened with excommunication by Rome, maintained openly their preaching of the Gospel of Christ to the people, in spite of repeated prohibitions, preferring to obey God rather than men. Among all the so-called heretical movements which arose between the tenth and thirteenth centuries in Italy (Catari-Albigenses, Patarini, Arnaldists, Umiliati, Waldenses, etc.), only the Waldensian movement was able to survive the persecutions which destroyed all the others. It may be, perhaps, that the Waldenses, hidden among the Cossian Alps (near Turin), found in those stern mountains a bulwark against their persecutors. But the external circumstances are not sufficient to explain the marvellous history of these small groups who *for seven centuries* have been able to resist the

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tremendous persecutions of the armies of France and of Piedmont which, in obedience to the Inquisition, strove with desperation to destroy them. Sometimes their aim was nearly reached, sometimes Rome raised her voice to shout victory, as for example, in 1686 when the remnants of the Waldenses were compelled to seek a refuge in exile in Switzerland. But always they returned to re-occupy their Alps. It was not only the heroism of men which preserved those small groups in life, but it was the Will of God Who had determined that the Waldenses must be spared to fulfil His plans. Thus they could not be destroyed. Every time that the end seemed imminent, God opened a way of escape and raised up defenders. Among these was Cromwell who, in 1655 (roused by the genius of Milton who, in his sonnets,\* could record in inspired tones the faithfulness of the Waldenses to God), protested to the Duke of Savoy in order to save the Waldenses.

In the sixteenth century the Waldenses established contact with the Swiss reformers and became a part of the movement of the Reformation, that is, of that same movement, the coming of which had been prepared for in the preceding centuries by the Waldensian exiles who, scattered in Bohemia, Germany and France, had everywhere given their testimony, spreading the Gospel widely and laying the foundation on which should afterwards be built the movement of the Reformation.

It was only in 1848 that the Waldenses received from the king, Charles Albert, their civil and religious freedom. On that day a new era began for them. Conscious of having been preserved by God through the fires of persecution for a special mission, they descended from their mountains and spread through all Italy preaching the Gospel. They persevered even when the people, roused by fanatics, persecuted and threatened them anew and even when they were thrown into prison for being guilty

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\* For example, the famous sonnet, 'Avenge, O Lord, Thy slaughtered saints. . . .'

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of preaching the Gospel. After the taking of Rome (1870) their missions extended and became consolidated, receiving the support of many friends, who furnished these poor mountain folk with the means to fulfil their objective. To-day the Waldenses have churches and activities in every part of Italy, and part of their mission is self-supporting.

Alongside the Waldenses there have been established in Italy the missions of English and American evangelical Churches (principally Methodists and Baptists) since conditions allowed them. They dedicated themselves to the evangelization of Italy. It would surely have been wiser if these Churches, instead of establishing new missions, often managed by foreigners who did not well understand the Italian mind, had aided the evangelical Church of Italy which was already doing the work. Thus wastage of strength and harmful rivalries would have been avoided, and certainly the Lord's work would have profited. But that was a time in which the denominational spirit was felt strongly. The mistake made in Italy was also common everywhere, and now we are seeing the prejudicial consequences. To-day we are beginning to understand that in the missionary field, above all, unity makes for strength. It should be added, however, that in spite of the error in evangelistic tactics thus committed, the work of the different missions has been faithful and useful, and for some time past has been directed and organized almost exclusively by Italians who have provided a leadership more acceptable to the Italian mind.

For the rest, during the years there have already been unions, as for example, that of the two Baptist missions, American and English, and other projects are being studied. It is to be expected that in time we may be able to mend the errors of the past and unite the evangelical forces in one Italian Evangelical Church, as indeed was proposed in 1920 by the Waldensian Church.

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After thus lightly touching on the history of evangelical work in Italy, a few words are necessary on the actual

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conditions in which the work to-day is being carried on. With the signing of the Concordat between the Italian State and the Holy See (1929), the Roman Church with one stroke has acquired again an influence and a power which it had lost since 1870. The Concordat has opened the way for the Roman Church to re-establish her domination over the life of the people. It is undeniable that recently the religious life of the Italian people has profited, and there have been restored to them the sense of the divine and an interest in religious affairs. On the other hand we cannot do less than fear this new power of the Roman Church, because it is a well-known fact that that Church is never content with directing the religious life of the people, but, through religion, aims at getting control of all aspects of popular activity, and where the Church of Rome is powerful, fanatical religious intolerance immediately begins to flourish.

The Italian Government has now taken measures to protect the rights of the religious minorities, issuing a series of laws inspired by respect for liberty of conscience and worship. For this all evangelicals are grateful to the Government, but these laws do not prevent the general situation from becoming dominated by the influence of the Roman clergy, who are always growing more refractory and are usually hostile to evangelical work.

In particular the Roman Catholic press, with the Vatican organ *L'Osservatore Romano*, at its head, has carried on in recent years a campaign based on insinuations, on impudent calumnies and incredible insults against Protestantism. When one reads some of the articles of the Vatican paper, it is impossible to feel anything but profoundly humiliated at the thought that a paper which purports to be a bearer of the Christian message can be animated by such a spirit and can frequently use such language, quite unworthy of any Christian. (We do not refer, here, to the expressions employed by some reviews and parochial magazines which represent nothing more than 'cheap' abuse of Protestantism.) But if, indeed, such procedure temporarily creates among the people a

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sense of diffidence towards evangelicals, in the long run truth will triumph, and such culpable methods will react against those who have adopted them. Daily, now as much as formerly, persons come to the evangelical churches who have been shocked by such underhand campaigns, and by the unfair methods of persecution adopted against Protestantism. On the other hand the evangelicals of Italy have never been so fervent and so conscious of the imperative need of their mission and of their responsibility to the country as at the present time. Evangelical work is being carried on with ever-increasing zeal, and this is not limited to the pastors through their preaching in the churches, but is also shared by the members of the churches who are constrained by their optimism, enthusiasm and faith to give their testimony.

It is right to mention here, that among the most zealous individual evangelists are some groups of the Brethren who often form themselves into real patrols of pioneers, carrying the Gospel where it has never been preached. When the inevitable reaction against the excessive thirst for power on the part of the Roman clergy appears, the evangelicals of Italy ought to be ready for the great work which, in that hour, they will be able to fulfil for the good of the whole people. Those who know the religious mentality of the Italians cannot doubt for a moment that a reaction will come. If it were not to come one could almost say that the Italian people were no longer the same.

The educated class in Italy does not, as a matter of fact, possess a real religion of conviction. Up to a few years ago the intelligentsia were openly sceptical and strongly anti-clerical. To-day the wind blows from another quarter, and, seeing that Fascism readily considers religion to be one of the elements necessary to the well-being of a people and has given it a position of honour, even the educated class has become nominally religious, and just as the traditional Italian religion and that of the State is the Roman Catholic, so educated persons declare themselves Roman Catholics although they may have no real faith.

For many, to be a Catholic means to respect the objects

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of the Catholic worship, to have children baptized, to be married and buried by the Church. Beyond this one ought to allow the women to take part assiduously in the services of the Roman Church, and to have one's children religiously instructed in the practices of that Church. But if such persons were asked about the real implications of the Catholic religion the majority would show that they do not know or do not believe numbers of the doctrines and dogmas of that Church. It is needless to add that the moral standards of the educated classes are not very high, seeing that the only power which could raise them, that is, a living faith, is an exceptional thing.

A typical example of this inconsistent attitude among men who call themselves Roman Catholics is that of the Duce himself, who, although accounted a Roman Catholic, did not hesitate to make the following statement to Ludwig :\*

“ I wish to explain to you my religious development. In my youth I did not, in fact, believe. I had called uselessly upon God. But I did not altogether exclude, as might Renan, the possibility that once in the course of millions of years there might have taken place a supernatural revelation. It may also be that within millions of years in the future such a revelation may be repeated. In recent years there has grown within me the faith that there may exist a divine force in the universe.”

“ A Christian force ? ”

“ A divine force,” he replied, with a wave of the hand, which left my request unanswered. “ Men can approach God in many ways : to choose his own way ought to be left finally to each individual.”

The people, however, are profoundly religious, if by being religious is to be understood the possession of a realization of profound religious needs, a spirit of blind credulity towards all the teaching of the priests (whom the people hate and fear at the same time), devotion to an infinite number of saints and madonnas, let alone to

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\* Emil Ludwig—*Colloqui con Mussolini*, p. 224 (Editore Mondadori).

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miraculous relics of every kind, and an incredible superstructure of superstition. But even the people are not acquainted with the doctrines of the Catholic religion and do not believe in many dogmas; they are attached to the Catholic religion through tenacious tradition and the religious instinct.

As it is easy to see, it is no light task to carry out a work of evangelization in Italy, especially because of the scepticism of the educated classes which are, in reality, indifferent, and give no heed to those who seek to preach the pure religion of Christ. Their attitude amounts to a constant and wilful repetition of the words of the Governor Felix to Paul, when he spoke to him of righteousness, temperance and judgement to come. Such people say in effect, 'Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee' (Acts xxiv, 25). But that 'convenient season' never returns.

As for the people they easily take up a new enthusiasm, but when tribulation or persecution comes because of the Word, they often draw back.

In the last seventy years many methods of evangelization have been tried. Some have thought that they ought to seek especially to promote a movement of internal reformation in the Catholic Church, but the violence with which certain indications of internal reformation, for example, modernism, have been suppressed in that Church, has shown the futility of those efforts. Others have founded their work on anti-clericalism of the masonic type. By this means they have succeeded in forming groups of anti-clericals, but when the political situation has changed and has appeared unfavourable to anti-clericalism, those groups have disappeared. Others have dreamt of the possibility of penetrating the intellectual life of the country by forming a school of Christian thought and by imposing a Christian imprint on the culture of the country. Such a proposal is excellent, but it would need geniuses and exceptional men to carry it through, and such men are not found everywhere. Others have sought to open the Italian mentality to pan-Christian ideals, building up a religion



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which would be the synthesis and the resultant of the specific religious values found in Romanism, Protestantism and the Orthodox Faith. But the apparent breadth of these views has been considered as a mistaken attempt by all parties, and they have left the situation as they found it.

Finally, others have followed simply the apostolic method of preaching the Gospel in season and out of season, and of spreading it widely with the most valued aid of the British and Scottish Bible Societies, which have branches in Italy. This is the method that the Waldensian Church follows, without being preoccupied so much with making many proselytes, as with announcing the Gospel to the greatest possible number, not only to the people in general, but also to the educated classes, in the confidence that the Light, when it shines, will chase far the darkness. Its motto is, '*Lux lucet in tenebris*' (The Light shineth in darkness).

In this work there is no lack of difficulties to-day, but the Fascist laws (and especially Article 5 of the Law No. 1159 of 24th June, 1929, which provides that, 'discussion of religious subjects is entirely free') guarantee the necessary liberty in order to continue a steady and persevering evangelical work, a labour of faith for him who believes in the power of the Truth and who grasps the vision of success even in the most difficult moments. It often results, in the pursuit of this task, that some local authorities, stimulated by the priests, try to stop the work, and it is then necessary to refer to the central authorities in order that the law may be respected. It also often happens that evangelicals are boycotted in their business and persecuted in a thousand ways. Only persons really converted can continue in the task of witnessing under such conditions.

We may add that the halls suitable to attract the public to hear the preaching of the Gospel are scarce and that the Italian people, who are accustomed to large and artistic churches, do not willingly condescend to enter modest and plain halls or churches. Where large and

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beautiful evangelical churches exist, the crowd comes of its own free will. We may also add that means to carry on the work are scarce, and when means are lacking many things which would be useful cannot be done. Nevertheless the work of faith continues on a modest scale, but without faltering, and God, Who does not abandon those who trust in Him, cannot but bless the work to which the Waldenses and others have given in the past, and give to-day, their best energies, convinced as they are that the greatness of the country is inseparable from the knowledge and application of the truths of the revelation of Christ.

By way of conclusion to this brief sketch of the evangelical movement we wish to add one word to those brethren who do not seem to regard with sufficient sympathy the work which the evangelicals are fulfilling in Italy. May we remind them of the world-wide importance of this task of forwarding the penetration of the Gospel, world-wide because an Italy more completely penetrated by the Gospel of Christ would, for obvious reasons, represent a great benefit not only for the Italians, but for all the world.

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### The Eternal City

It is safe to assert that no other single city has ever exercised such a great influence, political and religious, as Rome. She has passed through many vicissitudes of fortune. The population which, at the dawn of the second century, reached 1,200,000, had declined to 55,000 at the opening of the sixteenth. At the beginning of the Fascist régime it was about 700,000 and is now over a million.

The greatness of ancient Rome was ascribed by her historians to the 'rare and almost incredible alliance of virtue and fortune.' Byron, visiting her in the days of her decadence, called her the 'Lone mother of dead empires. . . . The Niobe of nations.' Yet to-day she flourishes once more, and, whether in art, history or religion, and increasingly in politics, her place and influence cannot be ignored.

There are a number of evangelical churches in Rome, the principal ones being those of the Waldensians, Methodists and Baptists. There is also an agency of the British and Foreign Bible Society, a theological college, and other centres of evangelical work.