

THE LAST POPULAR ITALIAN HERESY: DAVIDE LAZZARETTI'S JURISDAVIDIC CHURCH

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I go forward in the name of Christ Leader and Judge and if you want peace I bring peace, if you want mercy, I bring mercy, if you want blood, here is my breast. I am the victim¹.

The 18th of August 1878 Davide Lazzaretti fell to the bullets of soldiers who had been awaiting the descent of the Lazzarettist procession from Mount Labbro for days, closing in the heroic mode of a martyrdom a life experience characterized by profound religious ascetism. The death of Davide did not mean the extinction of the giurisdavidic church, which still exists today despite numerous difficulties, but it did mean the end of a vast religious protest movement which was anti-institutional and had expressed, in millenarist language, the aspirations to profound social change of a major part of the population of the area around Mount Amiata, in Tuscany.

The charismatic nature of Lazzaretti's personality and still more the tragic circumstances of his death, favored the development of an impressive body of journalistic material, both denigratory and laudative, which began to appear immediately after Davide's death and tended, whatever its tone, to identify the Lazzarettist movement with the figure of its founder and to reduce its complexity to the exceptionality of an individual's experiences.

The Lazzarettist movement, which became the giurisdavidic church only in 1878 after the Holy Office had condemned it, is set in a critical moment of the history of the peasantry which in it, ideally closes the era of popular heresy with a final millenaristic tremor, opening the era of autonomous democratic organization and offers precious occasions for the analysis of the relations between religion and revolution, between innovative and conservative aspects of messianic movements in the contemporary period. Defined by Hobsbawm « a laboratory example of a mediaeval millenaristic heresy which had survived in a backward area of rural Italy »², the Lazzarettist movement seems to be a particularly important episode, an « extreme case » in the history of subaltern classes, of the transposition of antag-

¹ F. Imperiuzzi, *Storia di D. Lazzaretti. Profeta di Arcidosso*, Siena 1905, 459.

² E.J. Hobsbawm, *I Ribelli*, Turin 1966.

onistic social needs onto the religious plane in the absence of other outlets « in the world ».

The confused and blurry perception of some parts of the rural world – in the specific instance of one of Tuscany's poorest countrysides – that the situation in which they lived might be changed, combined with the impossibility of finding a clearer expression of this intuition, found its justification and confirmation in Biblical phrases and in other religious writings, which were forced to carry meanings of a far different tenor than the original ones, and isolated in a way which ignored everything that did not correspond to the aspirations awaiting expression to make their presence felt.

Lazzaretti's movement is born in years marked by the steady decline of rural conditions following the unification of Italy and reaches its dramatic break with society in a year so catastrophic for agriculture as to seem laden with signs of apocalypse. It seems significant that in the very moment in which the whole social order enters into crisis, exposing deep divisions and menacing contradictions, the Church should present itself as the basic source and prime target of contestation. Just as Catholic heterodoxy had seemed for most of the Middle Ages to be the bearer of popular religious sentiment as opposed to official orthodoxy, so this heterodoxy takes on renewed popular vigor with the advent of another major socio-economic, and political, crisis brought on by the industrial revolution and the formation of the national state³. Like other millenarist movements, or separatist movements engaged in religious revolt, Lazzarettism is born in a period of intense and rapid socio-economic transformation and is linked to new distancing, comparison and conflict among classes and social groups. It seems then to be an embryonic manifestation of social and cultural self-consciousness among inferior groups seeking out an active self-definition.

Lazzaretti's preaching expresses the malaise of social groups moving in the context of a still vital, semi-feudal, traditional agricultural economy which is, none the less, engaged in a broader, new, process forming a commercial, individualistic, industrial and urban economy. In this sense, as Vittorio Lanternari puts it:

Chiliastic movements, with their messianic expectations and their religious revolt are not only mediaeval, but belong to all periods, countries and cultures, representing without doubt the most authentically « total » form of popular contestation⁴.

Like all protagonists of millenarist utopia, the followers of Lazzaretti were not revolutionaries or rebels, though they were so viewed by the authorities and, for opposite reasons, by currents of socialist and anarchist thought – and, more generally, in the received lore of popular imagination – which all exalted the movement as one of social revolt. Lazzarettists expected

³ E. Sereni, *Il capitalismo nelle campagne*, Turin 1948.

⁴ V. Lanternari, *Antropologia e imperialismo*, Turin 1974.

the revolution to arrive and be realized by divine revelation: to be announced from above, as a miracle. The task of men as they waited for this change, was to prepare themselves for it: to meet together, to observe the signs of destiny, to listen to the prophet, to carry out specific ritual, to purify themselves casting aside the chaff of the world as it is, to enter the new world resplendent.

Though there is never, even in its most extreme phase, when he explicitly announces that the coming of God is at hand, any specific reference to the thousand years in Lazzaretti's thought, it seems correct, given the elements already noted, to use the term « millenarianism » for the Lazzarettist movement. Indeed, the giurisdavidic church presents the fundamental characteristics of millenarist movements: the refusal of society as it is; the need to separate from it (materially, spiritually, through rites of initiation and passage, etc.); and, above all, the aspiration, however confused, to a supernatural and terrible punishment which will cancel all traces of evil and evil-doers, opening a new era of happiness and justice, the « Reign of God » on earth.

No study of the Lazzarettist movement which includes this particular socio-religious experience in the social history of the lower classes in the post-unitary period has yet been undertaken, despite the fact that the phenomenon has interested historians of the working class movement like Hobsbawm and, earlier, prompted Gramsci to a series of reflections on problems relative to the history of subaltern social groups.

The difficulty of a reading of the Lazzarettist movement in the complexity of its social, religious, anthropological, ethnological, folkloristic historic components, for the very diversity of the specializations which it stimulates and calls into play, has favored the acquisition of the phenomenon as part of the history of religion or, as often has been the case in recent years, has created a folkloristic-biographic revival of the figure of Lazzaretti himself⁵. Beyond a few generic indications which we can draw from the ample material on Lazzaretti, it is difficult today to define statistically the information regarding the social composition of the Lazzarettist movement in the years of maximum development (1872-1878). The documents preserved in the archives at Poggio Marco by the present giurisdavidic group do not consent any exact delimitation of the movement, since there are no complete, detailed list of members, but only the lists of important contributors or of the participants of single assemblies. Nor are there sufficient indications to identify members (paternity, place of residence and the like) so that research in old property files or tax rolls is impossible. It must further be noted that tax rolls give no clear definition of the activities or the professional and productive roles of those listed. The attempt to substitute this type of information, making use of the various studies of Lazzaretti dating from the 19th century is also vain, since the authors are not interested in the social

⁵ A. Petacco, *Il Cristo dell'Amiata. La storia di D. Lazzaretti*, Milan 1978.

composition of the movement but only in demonstrating the exceptional nature of Lazzaretti's personality⁶.

Far more interesting would be demologic studies or work on the history of popular traditions, the only type of study which can indicate the cultural parameters of a movement that fused the traditional values of the peasant world with forms of mysticism and manifestations of esoteric rituality to a degree that is unique for our country in contemporary times. The interesting results which Ernesto De Martino and his school have obtained in the study of magic ritual present in the collective imagination of the poorer strata of the Southern peasant world⁷, as pagan or pagan-like residues, and of the ecclesiastic attempts to suppress and overcome them, has not had the continuity it deserves at the historiographic level, nor has it created an interest, among those engaged in studying Italian folklore, for religious movements in the millenarian vein.

Systematically excluding these aspects and these problems, traditional folklore studies have always limited the idea of « popular religion » to « superstitions » and « folk wisdom », or prejudice: the variegated world of magic and the forms of so-called « popular catholicism » which really correspond to pagano-Christian syncretism. We can indeed say that the study of popular religion among folklorists, like the very idea of popular religion commonly held, indicates two very clear categories of phenomena. On the one hand « pagan residues » (or surviving remnants) untouched (or almost untouched) by Christianity; on the other, Christian forms reworked and reduced along pagan lines.

Only recently have some circles within cultural anthropology developed a certain interest for millenarian movements. Efforts to classify socio-religious movements on the part of these scholars has produced the conceptual and epistemological guidelines needed for a clearer understanding of the phenomena and their range of variation. This, in turn, has meant a new interest for the Lazzarettist movement, for example in some of Lanternari's work where it is included in an analysis of anti-institutional religious dissent in Italy⁸. But the movement is brought into the discourse on broader interpretative models with concerns for diversification so that, though stimulating, these studies do not offer useful elements for the evaluation of the Lazzarettist movement as a social phenomenon. The image which the movement, and above all the figure of Lazzaretti himself, assumed at middling levels of

⁶ For an ample bibliography on the Lazzarettist movement: L. Graziani, *Studio bibliografico su D. Lazzaretti. Profeta dell'Amiata*, 1964. Interesting for its reference to the socio-economic situation of the area and for some indications of the movement's social composition; G. Barzellotti, *D. Lazzaretti da Arcidosso detto il Santo: i suoi seguaci e la sua leggenda*, Bologna 1885; F. Imperiuzzi, *op. cit.*, E. Lazzareschi, *D. Lazzaretti. Il Messia dell'Amiata*, Bergamo 1945; A. Moscato, *Rivolta religiosa nelle campagne*, Rome 1965.

⁷ S. De Martino, *Sud e magia*, Milan 1959.

⁸ V. Lanternari, *Movimenti religiosi di libertà e di salvezza del popolo oppressi*, Milan 1960; V. Lanternari, *Antropologia e imperialismo*, *op. cit.*

public opinion towards the end of the century and the role which various forms of popular journalism assumed in making known Lazzaretti's writings, are both still to be studied. In this case we are once again in the ideal area of social history or, better, history of *mentalité*, though the existence of proposals of stereotyped models which still treat the figure of Lazzaretti as « Prophet from Arcidosso », « the Christ of Mount Amiata », « the Amiata Messiah » or « the Christ of our times », has by no means ceased⁹.

Though I think it has not been attempted in this direction, the methodology of oral history would seem to be of some use, since it would help to discover the persistence of the myth of Lazzaretti in the realm of popular peasant traditions at the national as well as the local level. The only attempt in this direction is that of F. Bardelli (*Davide Lazzaretti*, Siena, 1978) which collects a large body of testimony from members of the giurisdavidic church and makes ample use of the local traditions. But it finalizes its research to the reconstruction of Lazzaretti's figure, which it enriches with new elements of a biographic nature, relegating the vicissitudes of the movement as such to the role of simple social chorality. Bardelli – like A. Petacco, who has written a fictionalized biography of Lazzaretti – is interested in reconstructing the drama of Mount Labbro, tracing the role of central and local authorities, the personality of the protagonist, rather than deciphering the complex problematic of the genesis of the movement.

However brief a summary of points of reference for the possible methodology which a study of the jurisdavidic church involves, it should surely offer, as well, some indication as to the evaluation of the Lazzarettist movement formulated by currents within the historiography specialized in working class movements. E.J. Hobsbawm (*Rebels*) accentuates the social and antagonistic character of the Lazzarettist movement in the context of the Italian socio-economic situation of the period and characterizes it, in contrast with Southern banditry, as a millenarist movement which perceives the structures of modernization and is therefore able to integrate itself with the forms of organization and opposition of the peasant movement. He finds confirmation for this view in the massive participation of the Amiata community in parties of the Left after the Second World War.

The point of view of Italian historiography, especially in the early Sixties, was very different. Without going into detail on the historiographic debate of which it was a part¹⁰, and which is today on the whole dated, we can say that the tendency of historians of the period (Manacorda, Santarelli, Della Peruta)¹¹ is to liquidate Lazzaretti's experience as a peasant jacquerie, just

⁹ See L. Graziani, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ AA.VV., *Il movimento operaio e socialista, Bilancio storiografico e problemi storici*, Milan 1965.

¹¹ S. Santarelli, *Il socialismo anarchico in Italia*, Milan 1959; F. Della Peruta, *Democrazia e socialismo nel Risorgimento*, Rome 1973 (II).

as they judge the story of the Italian International which culminated in the insurrectional situation of 1877 known as the Banda del Matese¹². Thus, the spontaneous character of Lazzarettist group formation and even more the expression of their social radicalism in the forms of popular religiosity, seem far from the organizational forms of the dawning Italian worker's movement. The Matese insurrection seemed to be an episode of jacquerie as well, perhaps the most coherent attempt to apply Bakunin's tactic of armed bands. In this context it is worth noting the sympathy with which Parish priests in the towns forming the Matese area welcomed the internationalists who burned city archives and proposed the abolition of private property, judging the Bakuninist revolutionary to be applying the evangelical message. We can say that the Lazzarettist movement and the figure of Davide were absorbed into the traditional historic patrimony of the Libertarian movement in the Sixties and, in particular, into that of the Italian Anarchist Movement¹³.

In this case, too, what we are talking about is a reading of Lazzarettism which is forced to exalt the aspects which make the movement one of rebellion so as to find in Lazzaretti's goals and in his organization some of the characteristics of libertarian ideology and some of the societary models elaborated by the philosophic tradition of Anarchy (peasant revolt as Bakunin conceived it, community management of the means of production, individual heroism in the battle against constituted power). The identification of the Lazzarettist movement with the figure of Lazzaretti, which we find even in the most recent inquiries into the Lazzarettist phenomenon and in the series of initiatives commemorating the hundredth anniversary of Davide's death (the exhibition at Arcidosso, plays, the cassette put out by the Canzoniere Internazionale edited by L. Sattinelli), gave no elements for the evaluation of the movement in its complexity and in its development, as the giurisdavidic church, over more than a century.

In reality, many of the most interesting characteristics, those richest in suggestions for a broad appraisal of peasant culture, came to the fore in the Lazzarettist movement in the years following the death of Davide when the apostles and the disciples had to face new problems without the guide or the cultural mediation of more cultivated personalities closely associated with Lazzaretti, like Filippo Imperiuzzi, the ex-priest who assumed the direction of the movement on the Master's death, holding it until the beginning of the next century. After the killing of Davide, the elaboration of giurisdavidic doctrine becomes more collective and the oldest, latent, aspirations are realized; freed from the principle of authority, from the pressures and the control of the clergy, which had earlier, when Lazzaretti had just begun to preach, attempted to use the movement as a form of sanfedism, the faith becomes simpler and, at the same time, it frees itself from both theological

¹² P.C. Masini, *Gli Internazionalisti*, Rome 1958.

¹³ P.C. Masini, *Storia degli anarchici italiani*, Milan 1969; De Jaco, *Gli anarchici*, Rome 1971.

superstructures and the external trappings of a ritual which has never been typical of peasant culture and tradition.

As A. Moscato, the only historian who has tried to study the movement as a significant episode in the social history of subaltern classes, observes:

After the death of Davide Lazzaretti, the relationship politics-religion frees itself from all external restraint, from any suggestion of diffidence and is resolved in the more or less active participation in Left wing parties, in which giurisdavidists see an effort to adapt society to morality and so to Christianize society, since for them it is difficult to conceive an ethic which is outside Christianity¹⁴.

In the panorama of studies on Lazzarettism, besides the great quantity of apologetic journalism put out by the early followers of Lazzaretti to defend the Master's figure from the mystifications and the lies which were spread to justify repressive measures, and a series of studies by alienists like Lombroso, aimed at fitting Lazzaretti into the models of criminal anthropology, few works can be found of any interest for those who wish to understand the nature of the movement and the social base in which it was grounded. Of these few works, Moscato's *Rivolta religiosa nelle campagne*, Rome, 1965, is still the most painstaking analysis of the development of the movement from its origins to the present, thanks to the author's ability in fitting Lazzarettism into the framework of peasant society in Tuscany and to the comparison he draws to more recent studies on messianism in oppressed societies. Moscato's study, which underlines the specificity of the movement in its character of socio-religious revolt, is part of a trend in historiography which tends to exalt phenomena of spontaneous organization among the lower classes, and in this it is typical of a part of the historiography of the late Sixties¹⁵, presenting itself as a reading of the movement attentive to ideology but little interested in the analysis of the specific social organs which the movement created. The reproposal in 1978 of Moscato's book as part of the « political culture » series of the Samonà and Savelli publishing house, seemed to underline the place of the Lazzarettist movement as being within the tradition of the self-activation of workers and peasants.

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The Lazzarettist movement was born in 1868 as a Catholic revival and because of this was long encouraged by the most reactionary clerical groups in Italy and in France. Intimately linked to the preaching and the person of Lazzaretti (1834-1878), the movement developed a series of community initiatives which provoked the hostility of political and religious authorities instigated by the local clergy and landowners, afraid of the subversive potentialities of the Lazzarettist experience. The accentuation of messianic elements in Lazzaretti's preaching brought on official condemnation by the Holy Office in 1878. That year Lazzaretti founded the giurisdavidic Church,

¹⁴ A. Moscato, *op. cit.*, 48.

¹⁵ S. Merli, *L'altra storia. Bosio, Montaldi e le origini della nuova sinistra*, Milan 1977.

abolishing oral confession and religious celibacy and declaring that hell was not eternal. The proclamation of the imminent coming of a « law of right » and of « the Republic of God », which would end injustice, radicalized the situation to the degree that troops were brought in and killed Davide on the 18th of August, 1878, as he descended from Mount Labbro at the head of a solemn procession, which was to have reached Rome and end the succession of Popes. After Davide's death, the giurisdavidic Church lived on in difficulty under the leadership of F. Imperuzzi, then through the collective efforts of the local peasantry. Disturbed by internal strife between the peasants of Mount Labbro and the Roman group (the « culturals »), the Lazzarettist movement none-the-less, obtained official recognition in 1960 as the giurisdavidic Church, becoming one of the non-Catholic cults with legal standing in Italy.

The movement has been the object of numerous studies by letterati, psychiatrists and journalists who, in the variety of interpretation, have all defined the experience as folkloristic or as an episode of collective paranoia, and, in any case, as of little historic significance. In his *Studio bibliografico su D. Lazzaretti. Profeta dell'Amiata*, L. Graziani has compiled a thorough survey of material published through 1964. The journalistic material is hasty, with scarce interest for the historic and social context.

Though an interpretation of the success of the Lazzarettist movement which views it as a reaction to the harsh conditions of life and labor in some parts of the peasant world of the area is inadequate, it is not insignificant that Davide's « call » manifested itself in the decade 1868-1878, a period marked by a general decline in the conditions of the lower classes at national level and of popular unrest, especially among the peasants. The area around Mount Amiata was especially backward, both economically and culturally. Two thirds of the population of Arcidosso, its chief town, were illiterate. The inhabitants were small landholders and share-croppers, very few were day laborers and there were virtually no industries¹⁶.

Unification had set off a process which had begun to bring this area into the economic context of the unified, liberal, state and had given rise to social tension. Like the rest of the country, the most evident expression of the presence of a new social system was the addition of another fiscal system to the traditional one. The building of new roads, which began in 1868, was paid by local taxation and the cities and towns of the area bore the full weight. At Castel del Piano, Cinigiano, Roccalbegna, Santa Fiore, the additional provincial and municipal taxes added up to more than double the national tax, and at Arcidosso, three times as much. Generally, taxes were on land or buildings, as the Jacini Inquiry shows¹⁷. In the same area around Amiata, at Piancastagnaio, « the national tax was 24.40 % of taxable income,

¹⁶ E. Sereni, *op. cit.*, 57.

¹⁷ *Inchiesta agraria Jacini*, vol. II, section I.

the provincial surtax was 10.60 %, and the town tax 78.02 %, adding up to a taxation that was 109.02 % of taxable income »¹⁸. Application of forestry laws abolishing in practice the rights to pasture and to wood gathering, had dramatic effects on marginal small landholders and made their relations with large landowners tense. Piedmontese law meant the application of a rigid code of economic liberalism which brought with it the overall pauperization of the small landholder everywhere in the country.

In the Amiata area, the backward character of economic structures and the prevalence of small holders, with the additional weight of cultural isolation, made the tax system still more oppressive and considerably reduced the already limited margin of the family farm. The most active followers of Lazzaretti were, in fact, small land holders. Badly off though they were, it was much more difficult for them to hit upon the reasons for their misfortune and for economic and social instability than it was for sharecroppers and day laborers, who could find in the landowner a direct cause of their living conditions. If the law and taxation created lack of confidence in authority and general malcontent which sometimes exploded into desperate individual revolt, the causal chain constituted by the mechanism of oppression and poverty was lived and endured in terms of an incomprehensible and adverse destiny.

For the small holders of Arcidosso, Lazzaretti's messianic preaching was an apocalyptic answer to the pressure of a series of hostile and mysterious forces which had built up all around them. Perhaps we might say that the essentially religious character of the fear provoked by the unknowable and hostile nature of economic and social relations, together with the habit of imagining individual solutions at extra-historic levels, can, given a moment of social crisis in a backward peasant society, make of a movement that offers a religious and utopic solution, something which transforms the sum of confused individual hopes and desires into a unified force¹⁹. Significantly, Lazzaretti's first visions are in 1868, one of the years in which popular ferment is at its height in Italy. The agricultural crisis of the preceding year but, above all, the tax on flour, had pushed up food prices and created serious malcontent in the peasant world with a series of revolts and riots in nearly all provinces. Equally significant is the date of Lazzaretti's death, which coincides with the years of agrarian crisis and the end of hope that the passage of the Government to the parliamentary left had encouraged.

In analyzing the Lazzarettist movement, Gramsci links the episode of Lazzaretti's death to the suppression of the internationalist movement:

Lazzaretti's drama must be linked to the activities of what have been called the « Benevento bands », which are virtually simultaneous: the priests and peasants

¹⁸ A. Moscato, *op. cit.*, 114.

¹⁹ C. Marx, *Il 18 Brumaio di Luigi Bonaparte*, Moscow 1947.

involved in the Malatesta trial (Banda del Matese) had ideas that were analogous to those of the Lazzarettists, as trial records show²⁰.

Indeed, Gramsci is the first to insist on the need for a historic, critical, reading of the movement, whose socio-religious character he underlines:

The tendentially republican nature of the Movement, so strong as to spread among the peasants, must have had an important role in prompting the government to do away with the protagonist, perhaps because, in the movement, that republican strain was oddly mixed with a religious, fideistic element. But this very mixture is indeed the chief characteristic of the event, because it testifies the popular and spontaneous nature of it.

Familiar with the bibliography on the movement, which he dismissed *in toto* as literary-impressionistic, Gramsci insisted that the movement ought to be brought into the area of the social history of subalternate groups. Gramsci also links the story of Lazzarettism to the papal *Non expedit* and the failure of the Left government's policy. Gramsci does not go so far as to define the movement as part of millenarian sect formation, but he does note its profoundly religious character:

The doctrine of the giurisdavidics is a mixture of religious doctrines of other times with a good dose of socialist maxims and generic references to the moral redemption of mankind, a redemption which can only come about with a total renewal of the spirit and hierarchy of the Catholic church²¹.

The numerous biographies written by followers and sympathizers, tend to insist on the careless youth of the carriage maker from Arcidosso so as to exalt the transformation, according to the traditional hagiography in such cases. Leaving aside biographic detail, it is instead interesting to look into the chief phases of his preaching. Davide's first visions are in 1868 and are preceded by high fever and a general state of delirium. In the same year Lazzaretti begins preaching in public and takes to following a rigidly ascetic code of behavior. Judging from what he himself later wrote, and from the testimony of ImperiuZZi; Davide seems to have initially meant to promote a general moralization of life in Arcidosso and alleviate the poverty by promoting assistential activities. There are no signs of messianic mission and he makes no reference to any need of Church reform. The maxims he holds to in this period are a miscellany of common saws drawn from Lentan preachers who went about the countryside attempting to revive religious sentiment in Tuscany. Though ten years later Davide will die to the cry of « Long Live the Republic, God and Liberty » and through his martyrdom become a popular hero, at first his social doctrine consisted only of such

²⁰ A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere. Quaderno XXIII. Ai margini della storia*, Turin 1975, vol. III, 2279 e segg.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² F. ImperiuZZi, *op. cit.*; L. Graziani, *op. cit.*

things as : « The good master respects his servant and pays promptly on Wednesday », or « The good servant is he who reveres and obeys his master »²³.

None the less, even in the early writings we can feel the deep malaise of a world whose lack of justice and instability Lazzaretti feels dramatically. He announces in his poetry and in his sermons that divine wrath is about to fall upon « Emperors and kings » who will be laid low in the « dust of the roads », and on « the seducers of peoples and nations » who have « driven the ignorant populations mad with impious frauds », on the « possessors of goods and villages », on the « buyers and sellers »²⁴. In these early stages, Davide's preaching is not in contrast with the Church, indeed, on several occasions he attempts to tell Pius IX about his visions. Scorned and derided by local and Roman clergy, profoundly disillusioned by the brief meeting with Pius IX and the failure of his early initiatives, Lazzaretti found comfort for his anxiety for religious renewal in the pages of an apocryphal « Letters of Saint Francis de Paola » then rather widely diffused in the central Italian countryside²⁵.

Davide drew from these letters a series of prophecies of all kinds, there presented with intent that appears clearly ultrareactionary. But in Lazzaretti's writings the prophecies are reworked and merge with other elements including his own personal experiences, and the confused echo of previously read works. The important thing about the encounter with this text is that it gave the decisive push in the direction of messianism to the viewpoint of the movement then in formulation. The avenging judge of whom the letters speak was to be a descendant of the kings of France and this may explain Davide's insistence on the idea that he was the illegitimate son of French kings.

In the four years from 1868 to 1871, Lazzaretti's influence grew around Arcidosso and each time he returned there from a penitential retreat, his fame as a seer of visions and a prophet drew more peasant disciples.

By 1869 his prophetic function had indeed been institutionalized, when, to allow him to dedicate all of his time to preaching, some hundred inhabitants or Arcidosso offered to work his land by turns²⁶. These are the years in which the original nucleus of the movement forms through a series of rep-

²³ The work of D. Lazzaretti to which we refer here are: *Manifeste de D. Lazzaretti aux peuples et aux princes chrétiens*, Lyon 1876; *Scritti del vero originale D. Lazzaretti sul principio della sua missione (1869-70)*, Follonica 1923; *Il risveglio del popolo*, Grosseto s.d.; *Il libro dei Celesti fiori*, Grosseto 1950; *Visioni e profezie*, Lanciano, n.d.; *La mia lotta contro Dio ossia Il libro dei sette sigilli*, Rome 1955.

²⁴ *Rescritti profetici di D. Lazzaretti di Arcidosso per cura di Raffaello Vichi di detto luogo*, Arcidosso 1870, 9-11.

²⁵ *I futuri destini degli stati e delle nazioni ovvero profezie e predizioni riguardanti i rivolgimenti di tutti i Regni dell'Universo sino alla fine del mondo*, Turin 1864.

²⁶ F. Imperiuzzi, *op. cit.*, 26.

representative organs and the founding of the Tower of New Alliance (*Torre della nuova alleanza*), embryo of the future « Republic of God ». The first organizational structure of the movement is the Institute of Penitential and Repentant Hermits (*Istituto degli eremiti penitenzieri e penitenti*) composed of 33 of the most faithful followers of the prophet. The hermits were to serve as examples of industry and piety, preach the faith, aid the weak, bring sinners to redemption, make decisions and take responsibility for the movement. They were to strengthen the atmosphere of collaboration and brotherhood which had already appeared among true believers as they worked together tilling Davide's field. The Institute of hermits was the first community organ of the Lazzarettist movement, which would take the three theological virtues – faith, hope and charity – as their criteria.

Faith was represented by the very organizing of the 13 disciples in the Institute, and it would find further realization in the association of all the families of the Amiata in the Society of Christian Families (*Società delle famiglie cristiane*) whose intent was to pool property and labor in a common venture. Charity would be symbolized by the Holy League of Brotherhood (*Santa Lega della fratellanza*), a mutual assistance society which all believers might join by paying a modest sum.

The hermits were the movement's leadership. A part from some ascetic exercises which were individual, the hermits carried out all of their religious rites together. While sojourning on the Mountain and while on pilgrimage, they were not allowed to use any of their property and their support depended on a common fund. Though there were some practical problems, for the hermits were nearly all the heads of families and their rules obliged them to attend to family duties, the strength of this group was long-lived. They were the chief nucleus of volunteers who built and serviced the new community as it grew up.

On his return from a long penitential retreat on the Isle of Montecristo, Lazzaretti announced the promulgation of a new « law of right » to his faithful, and read them a poem full of severe attacks on the « King of the world » and the clergy²⁷. From 1871 to 1875 the Lazzarettist movement becomes a community in every sense, and is autonomous and separate. Next to the tower, a chapel is built in 1872 and it is consecrated thanks to the interest of two priests of the San Filippo Neri congregation who had met Davide during his pilgrimages and found this figure of a prophet so interesting that they followed him to Mount Labbro. The fact that the consecration was authorized by the Church shows the relative tolerance for Lazzaretti's preaching. Though it had by now begun to trouble the local clergy, it was not yet a target for punishment.

There were strong tensions among the various levels of the Catholic hierarchy due to the affirmation of the unitary Italian state and this made the Church

²⁷ *Il risveglio dei popoli, cit.*, 76, 84.

favorable to spontaneous phenomena of popular piety – especially in the countryside – viewing them from the reactionary point of view of their utility in resisting government authority. Besides the chapel, a hermitage was completed in 1875 and a real church. Probably Lazzaretti was not himself altogether clear as to the way in which working together forged unity, nor did he perceive the symbolic value of the community's isolation from worldly society. Probably he only wanted a church of his own, one that was not the same church the people of Arcidosso used; and the physical separation was an anticipation of the spiritual separation.

In 1871 the Holy League, or Christian Brotherhood (*Santa Lega o Fratellanza cristiana*) was created as separate from the Institute of hermits, to improve the living conditions of the peasants of the area. Many families from the villages of Pastorelli, Poggio Marco, Nacchie, Zancona, joined²⁸. The Brotherhood intended to offer spiritual and material assistance to members who were ill or especially poor, to orphans, widows, and vagabonds who were not able-bodied; and it functioned over a long period offering support and solidarity along the lines of workers' mutual aid societies. The common fund also served to buy staples wholesale; these were then resold at cost. Two Leaders, whose names were extracted monthly among those of all members, directed it with the aid of two Servants chosen in the same way. In both cases one of the two posts was covered by a woman. Anyone could join the League by paying 5 cents a week. The initiative was very successful among the small holders of the area who were able, through it, to have the benefits of social cooperation with a consumer's cooperative as well²⁹.

But it was with the constituting of the Society of Christian Families (*Società delle famiglie cristiane*), founded in 1872, that Lazzaretti made a real adaptation of social structure according to evangelical principles. Of all the institutions of the movement, this was the shortest lived because of the radical nature of what it attempted. The objectives of the Society were set forth in the Statute: 1) Make of many families a sole family; 2) Remove all laziness from the family and make every member work daily; 3) Improve agriculture, arts and crafts; 4) Educate sons and daughters of members morally and civilly; 5) Remove envy and egoism from the hearts of members; 6) Make brotherhood and love live in the hearts of members; 7) Teach all members their rights and civil duties, as well as their duty to their country and their religion³⁰.

Some hundred families joined the league; they came from surrounding villages and were for the most part small landholders. On joining, members swore to accept and respect a code whose fundamental points were:

²⁸ G. Barzellotti, *op. cit.*

²⁹ E. Lazzareschi, *op. cit.*

³⁰ F. Imperiuzzi, *op. cit.*, 74.

The member gives himself and all of his worldly goods, his wife and, if possible, his children to the Society. Everyone must serve the Society and earn their living. The Society keeps and feeds the members, cares for the ill [unable], educates the children of members according to their previous condition. Until new hermitages are built, the members may continue to live in their houses, but they must always depend on the Society and let it have the harvest from their fields. The members, whether living together in the hermitage on mount Labbro or in their houses, must dress in the same way in clothing furnished by the Society³¹.

It was a sort of labor cooperative to which all members had given their property and the administration of their persons as well. The community was governed by a president and twelve judges chosen by members among the oldest and wisest of their number. Besides having the right to vote just as the men did, women could also be elected and the rule required that at least one woman be a member of each governing body. Each member was obliged to do a day's work in whatever activity they were capable of, with work, land, animals and other means of income to support the community, in common. Members also had a personal ledger in which each family entered credits and debits. At the end of each quarter a general accounting was made so that the administrative situation was always clear.

The community had, too, the right and duty to take an interest in the internal affairs of the families participating in it. The rigorous behavior code codified, in fact, interpersonal relationships within the family circle. One could be expelled from the society for swearing, beating one's wife «without just cause», insulting God's ministers or the representatives of the government, for habitual drunkenness, vagabondage or refusal to take the sacraments³².

The success of the community among the peasants of the area was noteworthy and brought many of those who had previously viewed the preaching of Lazzaretti with scepticism to his credo. While the major landowners of the area expressed open hostility for the initiative, though they did not attempt direct repression of Davide or his followers, the clerical party gave the community its approbation and support. But these good results did not depend on external aid, nor can they be ascribed exclusively to the religious fervor which animated Davide's followers, but rather to the availability of a common fund to tide over members in critical periods, to the collective organization of work on the land entrusted to the Society with the pooling of equipment and work-animals, as well as the possibility to exchange agricultural produce for artisan manufactures directly, without the need for money.

On the basis of the studies available and Lazzaretti's ample works and papers, we can affirm that the communitarian project was in no measure influenced by the models offered by the infant Italian socialist movement. When Laz-

³¹ *Manifeste de D. Lazzaretti aux peuples et aux princes chrétiens*, op. cit., 68.

³² F. Imperiuzzi, op. cit., 87.

zaretti outlined his Society of Christian Families he was responding to essentially religious stimulæ, even though his activity was grounded in the desire to bring the world into line with Christian principles, breaking down the abstract divisions between moral principles and social reality: to realize Christ's message on earth. His vision was religious, but his intent was practical and his action was a response to real problems and expressed real economic and social measures. The community was, in every sense, autonomous. A general master governed it with the aid of other hermits, each of whom was charged with a specific area of competence. An intelligent vision of labor on the community lands and the addition of a considerable number of day laborers to its membership enabled the Society to broaden its activities, renting more land to cultivate in the Amiata area and even in the Maremma. Another important initiative was that of rural schools. Opened with government approval, they had a regular elementary school teacher, who was hired by the Society. In these schools the normal program in use in government schools was supplemented with religious instruction and the study of Davide's works³³.

The community followed strict rituals which characterized all aspects of daily life. Members all wore wool garments in ash grey and had a three strand cord with five knots as their hat band: five for the five wounds of Christ and for the knots on Davide's mysterious switch. Members' houses were marked with the symbol Davide had on his forehead — a double reversed «C» (O+C) — which he said had been placed there by the hand of Saint Peter during one of his first visions. Even the livestock, the farming equipment and the personal linen of the disciples had the same mark on them. On Saturday all of the members went up on Mount Labbro (Labaro in Lazzarettist language) for a vigil of prayer which went on well into the night. At midnight the hermits were once again in the chapel to recite Matins; in the early hours of Sunday morning all of the faithful who had spent the night on the mountain came together to pray once more. Sunday was dedicated to a general assembly where work problems were discussed and Davide preached³⁴. When, in 1873, Davide was arrested, the administrator and the steward appropriated most of the common property and, in 1876 the Society was dissolved.

Lazzaretti's problems with the law had, in reality, already started in 1869-70 when, after the speeches he made on his return from the retreat on the island of Montecristo, he was accused of directly attempting to overturn and change the form of the government. No proceedings were made against him, since he was considered a fanatic but not a danger to the social order. For the same reason, he was acquitted by the Grosseto court in 1871 of the police change of persistent fraud.

³³ A. Moscato, *op. cit.*, 84.

³⁴ A. Petacco, *op. cit.*

It was only after the Lazzarettist movement began to acquire a numerous following and a vast social terrain, that the concern of the large landowners in the area began to take the concrete shape of a request for judiciary action. Lazzaretti was arrested in 1873 on the charges of vagrancy, persistent fraud and political conspiracy. Sentenced to fifteen month's imprisonment, he managed to obtain release on bail thanks to the efforts of the lawyer Giovanni Salvi, a powerful exponent of the clerical party. During the proceedings, at the court's request, Lazzaretti underwent psychiatric examination. All the ensuing psychiatric interest in Lazzaretti might be said to date from this period. During his life, and even more after his death, he became the subject of research for psychiatrists and criminal anthropologists. There are numerous studies of this kind in the Lazzaretti literature. Apart from C. Lombroso, who made various studies of Lazzaretti³⁵, in particular a chapter in *Genio e follia* (« *Genius and Madness* »), A. Verga, E. Tanzi and R. Garofolo also researched his case. Although they included Lazzaretti among paranoid monomaniac stereotypes, they never questioned his honesty and sincerity. Two years after Lazzaretti's death, A. Verga wrote in an article in *Archivio italiano delle malattie nervose* (*Italian Archive of Nervous Diseases*),

...it is very strange that the suspicion of madness never crossed the minds of the magistrates and the many learned men who came into close contact with Lazzaretti and were able to analyse his actions, his speeches and his writings! It is very strange that, in order to account for his actions, his ideas on social reform, the fascination he held not only over the crowd but also over educated and distinguished persons, his works, the serenity and constancy with which he faced so many hardships, persecutions and death itself, to explain all these things they had to resort to love of novelty, ambition, greed, extremist instigation, in fact to everything but the hallucinations which he himself had so often confessed to, commented on and spread abroad, publicly and privately, in speech and in writing and in the press!³⁶.

The court-requested examination, however, established that Lazzaretti was mentally sane, but socially dangerous, because of the revolutionary character or his preaching. The two doctors in charge of the examination were also asked by the court to look into part of his writings, and it was on these that they tried to base the charge of political conspiracy against the state. They found Lazzaretti to be normal in character, with no particular anthropological signs of deviance. In their analysis of his writings and in particular of some passages taken from *Il Risveglio dei popoli* (*The Re-awakening of the Peoples*) and *Rescritti profetici* (*Prophetic Rescripts*), the experts discovered the existence of a strategic plan of political destabilisation, supported by the most reactionary elements in the Papacy circle:

³⁵ C. Lombroso, *Genio e follia*, Turin 1882; *Pazzi e criminali*, Città di Castello 1890; *L'uomo di genio*, Turin 1894.

³⁶ A. Verga, « D. Lazzaretti e la pazzia sensoria », in *Archivio italiano per le malattie nervose delle alienazioni*, Milan, Fasc. 1, 1880.

For these reasons we suspect that Lazzaretti intends to achieve a two-fold aim: that is, to incite religious fanaticism, and to propagandise a political party. The first aim is merely a pretext, the second is the main objective³⁷.

According to his medical censors, Lazzaretti did not act in a state of mental aberration, but was a clever mystifier stirring up social unrest through his religious preaching. In the appeal case at Perugia, Lazzaretti was acquitted: even a statement written in his defence by Don Giovanni Bosco had been sent to the court.

His persecution by the judiciary and the administrative and legal difficulties arising from the break-up of the Society of Christian Families forced Lazzaretti to accept the invitation of a group of French legitimatist aristocrats (including L. Du Vachat), to settle in France with his family for a period of time. Lazzaretti's relations with French clerical circles during his stay in Lyons (1875-78) have not yet been thoroughly researched; but it appears that it was the clear intention of part of this group to instrumentalise Lazzaretti's movement as a shock force, a peasant army for the restoration of the monarchy.

From its beginnings, the Lazzarettist movement had attracted the attention of clerical and aristocratic exponents in various European countries. They had often travelled to Mount Labbro to offer Davide substantial aid for his movement. During his voluntary French exile, Lazzaretti's preaching took on the more precise shape of a millenarian vocation. In the first months after his arrival he edited the translation and published *Il libro dei celesti fiori* (*The Book of Celestial Flowers*), written during his previous French exile at Grenoble in 1873. In the book he openly announces the imminent proclamation of « the new Law of Right proceeding from the Holy Ghost ». As the ancient Law of Justice descended from the Father and the Law of Grace from the Son, so the Law of Right and the Age of the Reform of the Holy Ghost was about to begin. The influence of Gioacchino da Fiore seems clear in this message. Although Lazzaretti had not himself read the Gioacchimitic texts, they were known to F. ImperiuZZi, who helped him in the writing of the book. In the text, amid praise and lamentations, is announced the constitution of the Arc of the Covenant of the Turris Davidica, a vaguely defined international religious community whose task was to prepare the world for the coming proclamation of the « New Law of Right ».

Davide declared that in the writing of this book also he had been inspired by a heavenly vision, that of the Virgin in mourning, telling him:

I want this book to be propagated among all the peoples on earth. Thus the family of mankind will learn of the ceaseless efforts of my mercy to reduce the numbers of the millions about to fall under the scourge of divine justice. I want the plan set

³⁷ E. Lazzareschi, *op. cit.*, 75.

forth in this book to be a trumpet to awaken all those who in their unbelief are sleeping the sleep of the dead³⁸.

Here once again we have Lazzaretti's old dream of reforming the status quo, purifying the Church, turning out the merchants from the House of the Lord, banishing greed and deceit, to create with God's help that juster and more humane society that all the disinherited of the earth were striving towards. But in illustrating his ambitious plan, Lazzaretti exceeded the limits of orthodoxy when he declared that the work of redemption had not ended with the Crucifixion; he was unconsciously putting forward the millenarian heresy when he prophesied the advent of the kingdom of the Holy Ghost to be consecrated in the Second Coming of Christ. In 1876 he also wrote *La mia lotta contro Dio, ossia il Libro dei sette sigilli* (*My Struggle with God or the Book of the Seven Seals*), springing from an intense and tormented reading of the Apocalypse and intended as its development and completion. Its symbolism is directly derived from John's, with frequent mention of the magic numbers (3, 7, 12, 144), descriptions of fabulous animals and details of the future Zion or City of the Sun.

After this first « eternal city », Lazzaretti goes on to describe the foundation of six other cities in France, Spain, Greece, Germany, England and on the ruins of Jerusalem. The truly original part of the book, however, is the description of the « struggle with God » (Davide uses the term « struggle » in the sense of an oratorical contest). He takes up the defence of mankind to defend it from the most terrible consequences of divine wrath. Interceding with God, he hints at a possible holocaust which will save man from « the flood of blood and fire ». This messianic evolution of Lazzaretti's preaching as theorised in his last works led to his summons by the Holy Office.

On his way to Rome, Lazzaretti stopped at Mount Labbro, where he institutionalised the Giurisdavidic Church. The first radical innovation which Lazzaretti introduced into Catholic tradition was the abolition of auricular confession, replaced by confession by reparation. The abolition of auricular confession was welcomed enthusiastically by the sympathisers of the movement. From the day following its institution, many peasants flocked to Mount Labbro from nearby villages to obtain remission of sins through confession by reparation. Another sensational novelty was also greatly welcomed: the temporaneity of sentences to Hell. According to the prophet, eternal punishment for sins which were limited in time were not reconcilable with divine mercy and justice. Lazzaretti was condemned by the Holy Office and forced to make a general retraction³⁹. This was seen as a temporary yielding and interpreted as the prophet's first death, his spiritual dying, followed by his resurrection on 3 May, the feast of the « Invention of the Cross », when Lazzaretti received the order to reveal his mysterious mission to the world.

³⁸ *Il libro dei Celesti fiori, op. cit.*, 16.

³⁹ F. Imperiuzzi, *op. cit.*, 59.

As Lazzaretti interpreted it, the Church's sentence was the last « sign » he had been waiting for to end the apostolic succession and make way for the apocalyptic conflagration. From France, where he had returned without stopping at Arcidosso, he announced his return to declare the solemn manifestation of the « Great Monarch », Christ, Leader, Judge of the peoples of the earth. At the beginning of June, 1878, the general council of hermits met to solemnly reaffirm their fidelity to Lazzaretti and to finish *The Symbol of the Holy Ghost (Il simbolo dello Spirito Santo)*, a clear, organic declaration of faith, written by the prophet and completed in some points by his followers⁴⁰. The assembly had also elected 12 apostles and 12 disciples, who in their turn appointed 12 fellow-disciples to help them in spreading the gospel.

It was probably the news of the activity going on on Mount Labbro which hastened Lazzaretti's return to Italy in the July of that year. His first move was to announce from the tower (the Arc of the Holy Covenant) of Mount Labbro that on August 14 he would reveal himself to the Latin people, and the Age of the Reform of the Holy Ghost would begin. In the same period he issued the *29 Precursory Edicts of the New Reform on Religious, Moral, Political and Civil Law (Editti precursori della Nuova Riforma sul Diritto religioso, morale, politico, civile)*, forming the program of the future society pre-announced by Davide. At the end of the succession of the Roman Pontiffs, the Law of Right came into its own, abolishing all civil and religious laws, to be replaced by the single new Code. « Thanks to the Reform, the new order of things will bring peace, prosperity and health to all the earth »⁴¹. In the *Edicts* occur fiery expressions deriving from the *Letters of Saint Francis da Paola*, denouncing the corruption of the clergy, now unbelieving and guilty of taking possession of the goods which were

the common treasure of all the people, as they were the bread of orphans, widows and all the beloved and poor of Jesus Christ... This treasure will be held to your account, you swindlers, on that terrible day of revenge and blood, at the rebellious uprisings of the peoples.

The *Edicts* contain all the dreams of the followers of the new messiah. It is indeed significant that alongside the dominating accusations of hypocrisy and injustice (more dramatic than precise, but not new in Lazzaretti's preaching – in fact, they were the basic components of his first appeal to the small landowners and impoverished artisans), we find in the 11th *Edict* a new, radical attack on the egoism of man, now embracing the very concept of ownership:

At the coming of the New Reform, in the severity of the Law of Right, every human and superhuman Law will return to its Law, as all things were in ancient times... and these laws will be eternal with the Republic of God on earth⁴².

⁴⁰ A. Moscato, *op. cit.*, 87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

These new themes are due to the expansion of the movement's rank and file, which in mid-August also included farm laborers and share-croppers. The local authorities feared that the movement might spread to the mercury miners on Mount Amiata, who so far had proved unaffected by Lazzaretti's preaching. Those passages in the *Edicts* which were fervently acclaimed by the peasant masses, aroused an unbridled campaign of alarm among the landowners, clergy, local councils and the police, who thus provided the basis for the tragic shooting on August 18. Drastic government intervention was called for from all sides to finally put an end to this socially dangerous situation. The radicalism of some of the themes of Lazzaretti's thinking were only the logical consequence of his striving to extend the brotherhood of man, proclaimed on a spiritual level, to social relations. Davide in fact had always used the term « socialist » negatively, alongside that of « instigator » of the people, and had absolutely no belief in the possibility of eliminating social injustice from the earth by human force.

The period leading up to the August 18 procession was entirely dedicated to preparation of the great event. Much attention was paid to each detail of the ritual to create the atmosphere of sacred performance underlying Lazzaretti's mission as the « Celestial Monarch of the Republic of God ». Scrupulous attention to the performance of the ritual planned for the descent from the Mount was to guarantee its success: by carrying out part of the prophesied events the others were bound to come true. This was a magical rather than religious attitude which none of Lazzaretti's followers failed to respect even before the guns of the carabinieri. The crowd gathered to hear Lazzaretti's *Edicts* and to pray. Although Davide, when he spoke of happiness in the Kingdom of God, did not give this term a concrete and material meaning, his peasant followers did not hesitate to see in that « Kingdom » the solution to all their economic problems, a solution above all to be found in the transformation of the existing social relations.

The way in which the decision was taken by local and national political forces for the repression of Lazzaretti's movement and the killing of its leader, has not yet been clarified⁴³. But we have reason to believe, on the basis of existing research, that Lazzaretti's killing was, if not previously planned, at least the logical outcome of the tension and attitude towards the peasant movement generated by the ruling classes. It is, therefore, natural to conclude that the Lazzarettist movement was being closely watched even at central government level, and considered to be working towards social renewal, beneath its religious disguise. Tuscany was also considered a region to be closely kept under control, both because of the numerous republican, socialist and anarchist groups that were active in many districts, and of the widespread discontent arising from the deterioration of economic conditions after the Unification of Italy.

⁴³ A. Petacco, *op. cit.*

Lazzaretti's killing signified depriving the movement of its driving force, dispersing his followers and above all giving a forceful example of the repression of social unrest. On the day of the descent from Mount Labbro, Lazzaretti had declared to his closest followers: « My mission is completed; my time has come; the promissory note of Christ's blood has expired. I am the pledge and now I have to pay, I will pay for all of you »⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ A. Moscato, *op. cit.*, 110.