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FATHER LOMBARDI EXPLAINS HIS SILENCE

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For some time not very much has been heard about Father Riccardo LOMBARDI, the Jesuit priest who became famous the world over with his prayers in the squares and churches of Italy and over the radio. Drawing listeners by the hundreds of thousands and answering the Communists on their own ground, he sought to re-awaken that Christian fervor which was the glory of other days.

The fame that Father LOMBARDI acquired when he came to be known as "God's Microphone," was well deserved. Exceptional crowds gathered to listen to his winged words, which burned with passion and love, and lashed out at those rich and influential persons who are shut up in their egotism and insensitiveness. At the same time while he reminded the workers of their rights, he also pointed out to them their duties, and called upon everyone to live according to the divine precepts.

Then came complete silence. The voice of the Flying Jesuit was suddenly cut off. Had his idealism failed him? What lay behind Father LOMBARDI's retirement from the scene? Why was he no longer heard on Radio Vatican and in the pulpits and squares of Italy? Had his vision of a better and more humane world been shattered?

The answer to all these questions came from the person most qualified to give them - Father LOMBARDI himself. An RFE reporter happened to encounter him on the Blue Train while returning to ROME from a congress in VENICE.

"Few people know," said Father LOMBARDI, "that after my many missions abroad, which included visiting America, I returned to ROME and, with the blessing of Pope PIUS XII, I started on a campaign for the spiritual and social regeneration of the Roman Catholic world in general and the ecclesiastical world in particular. My aim was to create a movement which would be close  
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to the problems of modern life and would base its actions accordingly. This movement was started two years ago and today it is deeply rooted and has spread abroad. Its main seat is the Jesuit college of MONDRAGONE near NAPLES, which used to be crowded with young students from all parts of Italy, but which was later closed as a school on the grounds that it did not correspond to the exigencies of modern life. This is the ancient and grandiose villa where Pope Gregory VIII signed the Papal Bull for the Calendar Reform on February 24 1582, which later became known as the Julian-Gregorian Calendar."

"Do you think that there really is a way out of the confusion of our times?" Father LOMBARDI was asked.

"You are too skeptical, my friend," he replied, "you will yet see our tired old Europe and the whole world re-awaken. ROME is the spiritual capital and its spirit can never perish, can never die. We have still a great deal to give to the whole world."

Father LOMBARDI's way of speaking is extremely simple and easily grasped by all. He always speaks extemporaneously. He recalled the occasion when he had to address a meeting at a University in WASHINGTON. He arrived with a roll of newspapers under his arm, bearing the screaming headlines that Russia had the atom bomb, too. Without preamble, Father LOMBARDI began: "The fact that Russia has atom bombs at her disposal can be looked upon as good rather than bad. In this way, we at least come to realize that a material weapon alone cannot defeat Communism. To weaken this modern materialist doctrine one must meet it with another doctrine, that is, science and faith. This faith is lacking here and it can only be drawn from our ancient continent where stands ROME -- the center of the Roman Catholic faith."

Many people maintain that a real and clearly-defined reform is necessary in the Church and it is possible that such reform might arise from the present movement. But that is not the aim of Father LOMBARDI and his colleagues.

Here is how he himself expressed the aims of his movement: "We wish to create a new ecclesiastical staff formed of priests who understand the exigencies and problems of modern life right from the very bottom. This is a movement, therefore, not a reform, and a species of regeneration with a polemic program which aims at the realization of a 'better world,' meaning a world less dominated by brute force and material ambition in individual as well as social life, a world governed by the laws of justice because, alas, social injustice is far too often the reason why human beings rebel against the powers of the spirit and give undue importance to the immoderate powers of material things."

"What was the date when the movement began?"

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"The movement really began with the words of the Pope in his speech to the people of ROME on February 10 1952, when he pointed out the need for 'general mobilization' to 'renew the world from its very foundations,' beginning with ROME itself as the center to spread the word to all mankind. To reach everybody, the Pontiff naturally assigned this movement of revision, innovation and re-awakening to the hands of the clergy. Soon after this speech, we set up our International Center at MONDRAGONE with the aim of creating a better world."

Asked how many persons were attached to the movement and how the direction at MONDRAGONE was managed, Father LOMBARDI said:

"At MONDRAGONE we hold special meetings at which priests and laymen from all over Italy take part. The 'promoters' who organize these meetings are not all Jesuits. For example, shoulder to shoulder with Father ROTONDI there are the Scolopi Fathers, such as Father SAPA, and the spiritual moderator of the groups is the secular priest Don Giuseppe CASALI. This group has no direct organizational function, but serves as a catalyst for the various currents that pour into MONDRAGONE from all Catholic countries. Up to the present, 21 courses or conferences have been held, with 1,400 priests attending and many laymen too. This specialized and cosmopolitan attendance is significant, for among them there are representatives from France, Austria, Spain, America, Brazil and Africa. At one of the meetings, the speaker was Father Mario di ABY ADDI, a Capuchin Father from Ethiopia, who outlined the religious problems of his country at some length."

"What is the principal aim of these courses which you hold?"

"The courses generally last ten days and their main purpose is the examination of problems of the moment, which range from strictly apostolic matters to didactic and cultural problems. At such meetings one may hear discussed such things as the cinema, priestly and charitable vocations, relationships between the Catholic and Protestant Churches, and Freemasonry.

"Bishops of every diocese send specialist priests to take part in the congress and courses at MONDRAGONE. There have also been several meetings attended by bishops alone. Cardinals of the Curia also attend the meetings, for this is one of the few ways in which they can make personal contact with the problems which are stirring the world. For at MONDRAGONE they have the opportunity of meeting the clergy which is engaged in the daily struggle and controversy.

"Abroad, we have held congresses in Brazil, a very important course in Spain and another in Portugal. But the driving center is always MONDRAGONE, itself."

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