

Pope Francis and Don Mazzolari: Ecumenism and the Poor

Stefano Albertini (June 21, 2017)



Pope Francis at the tomb of Don Mazzolari, archpriest of Bozzolo, the priest whose books were withdrawn from the Holy Office. The same trip on which he also pays homage to Don Milani, the Prior of Barbiana. An attentive and sincere reflection that connects Pope Francis and the unheard prophet Don Mazzolari. The sensibility of two men coming from the suburbs, who, at different moments in history, knew how to open the windows and doors of the Church to the Spirit that constantly renews and transforms it.

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Pope Francis is a pope who, despite the strength of his sermons and his writing, prefers gestures to words: for his first trip outside the Vatican, he wanted to go to [Lampedusa](#) [3], where he celebrated mass in memory of the migrants who died. He used the wreckage of a boat as an altar and a cross made with two pieces of wood, which came from the same shipwreck. At the [Holocaust Museum](#) [4] in Jerusalem, he kissed the hands of concentration camp survivors. He celebrated his first [Coena Domini](#) [5] mass in a juvenile detention center, where he washed and kissed the feet of twelve detained youths, both boys and girls, two of whom were Muslim.

Even in remembering [don Primo Mazzolari](#) [6], Pope Francis' gestures accompanied and underscored his words. A few months ago in [Cremona](#) [7], during the presentation of *La parola ai poveri* curated by Monsignor Sapienza, the Pope handed the Bishop of Cremona a small blue box, which contained the so-called "[Golden Rose](#) [8]" (coming from Francis, obviously it's not actually



gold) for don Primo's tomb. It's a highly symbolic gift that popes have been giving for over one-thousand years to leading Christians, cathedrals, and important Marian Shrines. For the first time, I believe, the precious rose wound up on the tomb of a country priest in a church within the village. But the most symbolic, effective, and memorable gesture on this journey to discover don Primo is definitely the Pope's pilgrimage to [Bozzolo](#) [9], his silent prayer over the tomb of don Primo, and, later that same day, over that of don Lorenzo, two priests who in their times were considered "rebels," "disobedient," and "agitated."

The sentiments of the Pope and don Primo regarding the poor are so clear that if you were to thumb through their written accounts on the subject at random, it would seem that they were written by the same person. The archbishop of Buenos Aires always made the poor an absolute priority even before becoming Pope and even before becoming familiar with don Primo. And I believe that it is reasonable to think that this discovery happened after becoming Pope. His associates remember that when Pope Francis was asked to preside over a Latin-American episcopate conference, they kept asking him if there was a mock-up for the conference. His response was simply "Jesus Christ and the poor."

The Pope himself said that during the conclave while the votes were still being counted, but the quorum for his election had already been reached, his friend Claudio Hummes, a Brazilian (and Franciscan) cardinal, hugged him and whispered "don't forget about the poor."

He gave, and continues to give, unequivocal evidence in facts, more than in words, of wanting "a poor church for the poor." However, this attention to the poor is not sentimental pauperism; it's a radical and revolutionary change in perspective. In 1949 don Primo wrote "The destiny of the world develops in the suburbs." This is the suburb where Bergoglio comes from. He believes it to be an existential locus more so than a geographic one.

Pope Francis' [ecumenism](#) [10] is under the eyes of the world. Even here, we see an ecumenism of gestures in addition to words; the embracing of orthodox patriarchs, the visits to both Lutheran and Evangelical churches, and the trip to Germany for the anniversary of the Reform have strengthened a reciprocal trust and has reopened a dialog that had lost steam during the last papacy.

Francesco's ecumenism is, like the rest of his papacy, more pastoral than theological. When asked questions regarding existing doctrinal obstacles, he says that he prefers to leave that discussion "to the theologians. They know it better than we do. [...] What do we, as the people, need to do? Pray for one another. [...] And, second, we need to do things together: there are the poor; we work together with them; [...]; And the migrants? Let's do something together with them..."

Don Primo's ecumenism came from his heart and soul and was persecuted and punished. That's why it's still rare and precious even today. In 1934 his book *La più bella avventura* was published. It was a reflection on the [Parable of the Prodigal Son](#) [11]. For Mazzolari, the older brother represented the conformist Catholic that struggles to understand God's mercy and the church's embrace of the prodigal brother.

The book was received favorably among Italian Evangelicals, and, as a consequence, it caused the first overreaction from the [Holy Office](#) [12] toward the archpriest of Bozzolo. Even the bishop of Cremona, Cazzani, who tried to protect and defend don Primo from his prosecutors, was struggling to understand don Primo's attitude and would scold him for his friendship with Ferreri, the Wesleyan pastor.

In comparing the Archpriest of Bozzolo to the Bishop of Rome, I didn't want to invoke primogenitures, put quotations on the same level, and much less demonstrate the influence of one on the other. I only wanted to note the common sensibility of the two priests coming from the suburbs, who, at different moments in history, knew how to open the windows and doors of the Church to the spirit that constantly renews and transforms it.

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Pope Francis' entire conversation in Bozzolo was published on Facebook by Don Antonio Spadaro (Consultore at Pontificio Consiglio Della Cultura, Direttore Responsabile at La Civiltà Cattolica and Editor at La Civiltà Cattolica) [>>](#) [18]

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