

CHIARA LUBICH
Prophet of Unity

a biography by
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TRENT AND SURROUNDING AREAS, 1920

BETWEEN AUSTRIA AND ITALY

Chiara Lubich was born in Trent on January 22, 1920, the second of Luigi and Luigia's four children. The birth took place – as usual in those days – at home, with the help of the midwife Domenica Pegoretti, and the child was baptized on February 1 with the name of Silvia Maria Elvira, in the parish church of St. Mary Major.

The registration of the baptism, attended by her uncle Silvio as godfather, was inscribed on page sixty-two of volume XXIV (1908-1920). She was baptized by Fr. Giovanni Battista Fedrizzi, who, by virtue of the Austrian legislation – at the time still in force in Trent – also held the function of civil registrar. This function would shortly afterwards pass under the jurisdiction of the civil authorities of the Kingdom of Italy. Following the outcome of the First World War and the peace treaties between belligerent powers, the province of Trent had become part of Italy only a few months earlier.

This baptism registration with its juridical nature reveals in part the specific geographical, civil, ecclesial, social, and cultural context in which Chiara's life began.

All historical reconstructions – first and foremost a biographical profile – need to be seen within the context and climate of its period. They should then be compared with the events that frame them, to give meaning and add nuances and details to the story. In order to understand the influences that these contexts may have had on Chiara Lubich's life and work, it may be appro-

priate to mention the historical background and to refer to some of the circumstances in which her story began.

A REGION AND A CHURCH ON THE BORDERS

Silvia Lubich's childhood and youth are set in a period in the history of Trent which was particularly dense with various events and interruptions.

One of the elements that define the features and the geographical identity of the province of Trent consists in its being a borderland ... in particular a political and cultural border between the Mediterranean basin and the Central European area. Its identity has been defined for many centuries⁹ by its status as an "episcopal principality," with the bishop administering the territory also in *rebus temporalibus* (in the affairs of the world), linked to the Holy Roman Empire. After the Napoleonic period, the principality was suppressed (even though the title of prince-bishop was formally maintained) and, until the First World War, the diocesan territory was included in the Austrian Empire.

Although faithful subjects of the Habsburg government, the bishops maintained a resilient attitude towards attempts at being assimilated by the state. They always demanded some autonomy for the Church and the local administration, and were influenced by both the Italian and German speaking worlds present in their territory, especially with regard to the social question¹⁰.

The civil and ecclesial structures were characterized by relations based on mutual recognition and a general tendency of the

9. From the 11th to the beginning of the 19th

10. The social question means certain evils and grievances affecting the wage-earning classes and calling for removal or remedy.

state to have control over the church. This political approach had marked the government of the Empire throughout the nineteenth century, and which – in many respects – considered the Church a component of the state. Symbolic of that situation was the choosing of bishops, an imperial prerogative granted by the Holy See to the sovereigns of the so-called “Catholic” states since 1822. The profiles and the actions of the bishops of Trent during the 19th century demonstrate that the right of nomination by the civil authorities was generally exercised in a far-sighted manner and attentive to the size and pastoral problems of the dioceses. While not ignoring fidelity to the crown, which inevitably led them to be considered officials of the state, bishops were usually chosen because of their spiritual and moral qualities, their knowledge of the territories, and their socio-political situations. They were also chosen for their pastoral concern and their ability to govern. This way of appointing bishops produced a series of prelates who were particularly attentive to the care of souls and dedicated to the direction and management of their churches and the needs of the people.

By the end of the century, the general economic situation, social conditions and all the problems of life in a mountain and border region, were far more pressing pastoral problems than the pure theological disputes and the defense of the temporal prerogatives of the pope and the Church. Much of the local economy was based on smallholdings and subsistence farming. There was widespread poverty and disease, as well as natural disasters and a high rate of emigration. The Church’s disagreement with the united Italian State¹¹ and, in lesser ways with liberal European regimes (sanctioned in 1870 with the end of the temporal power of the popes) were felt in the territories of the Empire in a much less traumatic way.

11. From 1861 and in subsequent stages until 1918.

The first wave of industrialization introduced the social question and caused socialist ideas to enter civic debate. The arrival of the railways and the birth of mountain tourism imported hitherto unknown elements of modernity. In those years there was a clear gap between the Church and the political participation of Italian Catholics within the united and liberal State imposed by the *Non expedit*,¹² a situation that had little effect on Trent's Catholic movement.

During this period, one of the symbolic initiatives of the social action of the Church in Trent was the foundation of the cooperative movement. It was a series of initiatives born with the intention of improving the living conditions of the people. It started in September 1890 with its constitution and the first cooperative society, founded by Fr. Lorenzo Guetti. The main objective of the cooperative was to finance the rural world and to limit the retail prices of food both in the countryside and in the cities. Another aim was to increase the bargaining power of the farmers, who were committed to selling their products on the market and to offer a job to agricultural workers, who were the poorest and most affected by the great economic depression of those years. With these activities the Catholic world, and directly the clergy too, entered fully into the economic system of the province of Trent, organizing and controlling the agricultural, artisan, consumer and credit cooperatives and helping develop the cooperative movement.

During the last decade of the century and with the support of the teachings of Leo XIII (in particular his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*), the anti-liberal (and, increasingly, anti-socialist) struggle of the Catholic movement became explicit in the flower-

12. "It is not expedient" were the words with which the Holy See enjoined upon Italian Catholics the policy of abstention from the polls in parliamentary elections.

ing of activities that responded to existing and emerging social needs. The development of trades unions, of Catholic youth and professional societies, of the various articulations of the cooperative world and of the press, was largely based on the fabric of the diocese and the parish. Many of the ideas were taken from the experiences of the German Catholic movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. Regarding the social question, these ideas emerged from the Bishop of Mainz, Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, as well as the *Catholic Centre Party* in Germany, started in 1870 under the leadership of Ludwig Windthorst, was perhaps the main model for dealing with the social question, with a program for the defense of Christian principles and the rights of the Church, and with a new vision of the laity.

The clash with the different currents of modern thought within the life of the Church at the end of the nineteenth century was always taken seriously in Trent, but with an eye on the local institutional and political context, as well as its social and economic situation. In Trent as in Rome, by its printed condemnations, accusations, and excommunications the Church set itself apart from Protestantism, liberalism, indifferentism, socialism, and Freemasonry, digging an ever-deeper furrow between itself and the culture of the modern world. The Church and the Catholic movement took a critical position towards modernity, rejecting its principles, aims and products. But, to bring this criticism to fruition and maximize its results, they used the means typical of modernity itself (associations, trades unions and democratically regulated party organizations, promotion and wide use of the media...).

Newspapers were the main instrument of propaganda, debate, training, and the spreading of ideas and programs. The local press offered multiple points of view, summarized by many newspapers: *La Voce Cattolica* represented, since 1865, the position of the diocese of Trent and the Catholic world, decidedly

in the majority; *Il Trentino* (1871-1875), organ of Trent's National Liberal Association founded in 1871, and the liberal-national *Alto Adige* (1886) summarized the positions of the liberal forces. Socialist thought was represented by *Il Popolo* (1900), edited by Cesare Battisti, and *L'Avvenire del Lavoratore* (first printed in Vienna in 1895), which began to come out regularly in Trent at the beginning of the new century (1901-1914).

The Catholic world of Trent and its political and cooperative movement followed the guidelines proposed in Italy within the Opera dei Congressi¹³ on the instigation of Leo's papacy aimed at regaining society for the Church through social action. The driving force behind this renewed direction was the Diocesan Committee of Catholic Action, created in 1898. For decades to come it would be the inspiring and organizing body of the difficult path taken by the Catholic movement of winning over society through an autonomous and creative system capable of giving a positive orientation to the people. It was a path that threaded its way between the need to adapt to the modern world and that of radical opposition to it. This model was designed by some young and brilliant priests, trained in Rome and at the same time sensitive to the experiences in the social setup beyond the Alps. Two such men were Celestino Endrici and Guido de Gentili. The former was a teacher of moral and social theology in the seminary, the other, editor of *La Voce Cattolica*. Both were motivated by a strong passion for the presence of the Church in history; a Church marking its own path by facing the challenges of the

13. The *Opera dei Congressi* or *Work of the Congress* was a Roman Catholic organization that promoted Catholic ideas and culture. It was created in 1874, and observed of the positions of the Catholic Church, particularly *Non Expedit*. It began as a non-political group but moved into protesting against the imprisonment in the Vatican of the pope. It fought against anticlerical legislation and the many divorce bills that were introduced by successive Liberal governments (1861-1922).