

Religion and democracy

By Ezio Mauro | Translated by Graeme A Hunter

“Let’s stop this.” With this exhortation, which sounds like an order, the Secretary of State of the Holy See, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone has publicly come out against Curzio Maltese and La Repubblica’s investigation into the cost of the Church to the Italian taxpayer. “Let’s put an end to this tale about Church finances”, said Cardinal Bertone, sermonising. “The pathway to faith in God brings nothing but benefits to society”, he then adds. “Each day a newspaper pulls out a scoop like this one. Religious Education in schools is sacrosanct”.

La Repubblica doesn’t do sanctity, so we shan’t respond to that, but we can’t not find His Eminence’s tone peremptory and out-of-place in a democracy: more appropriate to a Syllabus (a reference to Pope Pius IX and the list of liberal texts condemned by the Church in 1864). The Vatican’s protest concerns an investigation into how much the Catholic Church costs the Italian people, from tax breaks to direct income tax contributions (the *otto per mille*), to funding of private schools, to RE in State schools. Other examples will follow, until the plan of the piece is clear.

Let’s stop this? Why? Who says? In the name of which authority? Perhaps the Holy See still thinks it can block the free publication of a newspaper for its own ends? Does it think it is able to decide whether an investigation can be published “each week” or with a different frequency? Is it convinced that it is enough to ask for the paper’s investigation to be closed down early, to avoid having to discuss “this tale”? The *imprimatur* (the old Vatican censor) no longer exists, at least not in Italy, and if a newspaper believes it must “come up with a scoop like this”, it is free to do so. Except where we make errors and which we are happy to correct, if we received requests for rectification which are never made, this is because no substantial point of the investigative work has been confuted.

The confutation, for what it is and it seems incredible to even say it, is about the very legitimacy of this paper to confront these issues. As if there existed, as we have already said, an unwritten journalistic servility in Italy toward the Holy See, not directed toward any other Italian or foreign institution, but absolutely typical only of non-democratic countries.

Moreover, His Eminence is the head of government of a foreign power who is asking us to “stop it”; “it” being a free work of investigative journalism (open to debate, naturally), from an Italian newspaper. He must be aware that in the West this is just not done. Ever.

His reaction is unbelievable as we’re not talking about fundamentals of faith, but of money. Anyway, if the Church, as is only right, wants to take a full part in public discussion in an open and democratic society, it can’t just withdraw itself from it in the name of some sacred exemption from the obligations that such a discussion carries: it applies to everyone and everything, even those elected to the common good. This, too, is another aspect of today’s continual challenge between religion and democracy.

La Repubblica 25 October 2007