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Prophecies, eschatology, and the fall of the Pope. The prophetesses of Pusiano and the crisis of the Roman Church (19th century)

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Title in English

Prophecies, eschatology, and the fall of the Pope

The prophetesses of Pusiano and the crisis of the Roman Church (19th century)

Title in Italian

Profezie, escatologia e la caduta del papa

Le profetesse di Pusiano e la crisi della Chiesa Romana (XIX secolo)

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Abstract (inglese)

This article retraces the case of the prophetesses of Pusiano (Angela and Teresa Isacchi), which developed in the 19th century in conjunction with the Italian unitary movement and the imminent end of the Pope's temporal power; it explores the case as a form of expression of apocalyptic, anti-revolutionary sensibility, which developed in Italy since late 18th century. Based on the analysis of Angela's political prophecies on the Papacy and the apocalyptic literature composed by her devotees, this study aims at shedding light on their prophetic-eschatological interpretation of the Italian revolutionary context. The Isacchi's followers, in fact, employed their revelations, known as the Holy Word, as the unique possible key of interpretation of the contemporary political, social, and religious crisis. In this sense, the Holy Word is understood as a new and final part of divine Revelation, after the Old and New Testament, and as God's final act of mercy towards the Church and men, corrupted by the values of modernity. The analysis of Pusiano hierophanies (ca. 1850-ca. 1895), such as Marian apparitions, Christological visions and revelations by the Persons of the Trinity, makes a contribution to the study of the religious and "supernatural" manifestations that developed, in the delicate passage between Ancien Régime and modernity, as an answer to the crisis of the Catholic world.

Abstract (italiano)

Questo saggio ricostruisce il caso delle profetesse di Pusiano (Angela e Teresa Isacchi), sviluppatosi nel XIX secolo in concomitanza con gli eventi del movimento unitario italiano e l'imminente fine del potere temporale dei papi, come espressione di una sensibilità apocalittica anti-rivoluzionaria che aveva fatto la sua comparsa in Italia sin dalla fine del Settecento. Attraverso l'analisi delle profezie

politiche relative al Papato esposte da Angela e della letteratura apocalittica composta da alcuni seguaci delle veggenti, questo studio si propone di mettere in luce la lettura escatologico-profetica del contesto storico dell'Italia rivoluzionaria da parte dei protagonisti del caso. Questi utilizzano il complesso di rivelazioni delle Isacchi, denominate "Santa Parola", come unico filtro interpretativo della contemporanea crisi politica, sociale e religiosa. In questo senso, la "Santa Parola" assurge a nuova e ultima tappa della Rivelazione divina, dopo Antico e Nuovo Testamento, e atto finale della misericordia divina nei confronti della Chiesa e degli uomini, ormai corrotti dai valori della modernità. L'analisi delle ierofanie pusianesi (ca. 1850-ca. 1895), tra cui apparizioni mariane, visioni cristologiche e rivelazioni da parte delle tre Persone della Trinità, contribuisce a porre un altro importante tassello nel quadro degli studi delle manifestazioni religiose e "soprannaturali" sorte in risposta alla crisi sviluppatasi nel mondo cattolico nel delicato passaggio tra Ancien Régime e modernità.

Key-words (English)

Holy Word, Prophetesses of Pusiano, Antichrist, Eschatology, Pope's temporal power

Parole chiave (italiano)

Santa Parola, profetesse di Pusiano, Anticristo, Escatologia, potere temporale del papa

Introduction. Supernatural elements in the Italian late 18th-19th centuries

«Hell, seeing that idolatry was almost destroyed, and furious for the Church's victories in times of persecutions, tried to afflict her with schisms and heresies, which for four hundred years have lacerated her»¹.

This passage is taken from a work by Giovanni Bosco (saint, 1815-1888): a founder of an oratory for younglings in an increasingly industrialised 19th-century Turin, and of a congregation dedicated to education of children (Salesians), *don* Bosco is also known for a series of prophetic dreams and revelations, particularly significant in the context of revolutionary Italy; in a period when papal power and authority were at risk, and Catholics values were challenged by a more and more secularized society. *Don* Bosco's prophetic dreams are useful for understanding the major elements characterising the 19th-century apocalyptical and philo-Roman prophetic movement, including the case of Pusiano, which is the object of this study. In the 1840s, *don* Bosco was a protagonist of an intense prophetic activity and mystical visions of Mary². According to his reading of history, the Church's afflictions were provoked by the Devil himself, in an apocalyptic frame. In the Italian 19th century, this interest for the eschatological role of Satan in the life of the Church was particularly accentuated due to the on-going revolutionary movements, which challenged the political establishment of the Papal States, and consequently the Italian traditional Catholic world.

Since late 18th century Italian Catholicism was shaken by a wave of religious manifestations, including Marian and Christological hierophanies, and the development of apocalyptical prophetic movements³. These phenomena can be read as an attempt of part of the Catholic world to respond to a challenging situation, characterised by changes in both the political stage and religious sensibilities; these changes developed in conjunction with the French Revolution (which carried new values threatening the Church's establishment in Catholic Europe), the French army's descent to Italy in 1798-1799, and the opening of the *Questione Romana*, in the context of the Italian unitary movement.

These phenomena reflect devotees' religious emotions in times of crisis, when men turn to God for reassurance and a connection with the Sacred is sought. The exploration of human emotions in history, pioneered by Lucien Febvre and eventually become known as history of emotions, allows to consider the role of feelings in historical changes, and focus on the expression of emotions with language and actions⁴. Lately, interest for the emotional component of religion has grown; this approach helps to understand the religious sensibilities that favoured the explosion of supernatural phenomena and the use of eschatology in times of crisis. These religious manifestations can be read on different levels considering both the socio-political background and a devotional, emotional dimension.

This essay will integrate these approaches for exploring the case-study of the prophetesses of Pusiano, sisters Angela (1827-1895) and Teresa Isacchi (1833-1890), and especially the political

¹ G. Bosco, *Storia ecclesiastica ad uso delle scuole*, Tipografia Salesiana, Torino 1845, pp. 115 ff.

² Cfr. P. Stella, *Don Bosco*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2000.

³ Cfr. M. Caffiero, *La Nuova Era. Miti e profezie dell'Italia in rivoluzione*, Marietti, Genova 1991.

⁴ Cfr. L. Febvre, *La sensibilité et l'histoire: Comment reconstituer la vie affective d'autrefois?*, in «Annales d'histoire sociale (1939-1941)» 3, 1/2 (1941), pp. 5-20 and, for example, J. Corrigan, *Religion and Emotions*, in *Doing emotions history*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 2014 (eds. S.J. Matt – P.N. Sterns), pp. 143-162.

predictions concerning the end of the temporal power of the Pope; the case represents a religious response of part of the Italian, especially Lombard, Catholicism to the crisis brought by the Italian revolutionary movement, and more generally the spreading of secularised costumes and novel cultural trends, radically condemned by Pius IX's *Syllabus*⁵. As we will see, the Isacchi sisters' prophecies had much in common with *don Bosco's*, and their devotants' attitude reveal an emotional dimension characterised by anxiety and soteriological tension, exacerbated by the contemporary events.

The way for the 19th century prophetic explosion had been paved since late 1700s. I am referring especially to the diffusion of Marian miraculous phenomena in late 1790s. During the descent of the French army, suspiciously saw as atheist, in the Italian Peninsula, fear spread among the locals, and a series of comforting, supernatural events were registered⁶. Several images of the Virgin Mary were seen smile or move their eyes in front of devotants, as a sign of sympathise. The religious-political situation had been a catalyser for these events during the early modern age; the passage from the Ancien Régime to Modernity even increased such a response from the Catholic audience. It is sufficient to name the intriguing case of the prophetesses of Valentano, whose activity was strictly linked to the apocalyptical climate developed after the Suppression of the Society of Jesus⁷. These miraculous manifestations of the Sacred expressed a desire for protection; their prophetic function, able to mobility devotees, was celebrated in the anti-revolutionary literature, which combined the call for a new crusade for the Catholic faith against demoniac forces and the promotion of miraculous events as a sign of divine protection, for containing popular anxiety⁸.

The employment of Marian hierophanies as a form of consolation in the post-revolutionary period is not a surprise, considering Mary's traditional role of human beings' *advocate* before her Son. In Italy, as an illustration, we can remember the case of a painting traditionally called "Nostra Amata Signora della Misericordia", in Rimini, which was seen rolling eyes in 1850; in the same year, a French official's wife's conversion, after the vision of Mary during a papal audience; finally, the recognised miracle of the statue of Mary in Taggia (Liguria), seen rotating eyes in 1855⁹. In the 19th century, however, Mary has also been bearer of apocalyptic messages, as the apparitions of La Salette (1846) and Lourdes (1858) show. These hierophanies constituted a prototype of novel forms of manifestation of the sacred; a model only partially shared by the contemporary prophetesses of Pusiano.

It is in a context of preoccupation and prophetic explosion, catalysed by the events of the *Questione Romana*, that, in Pusiano (Brianza, Lombardy), an extraordinarily lasting case of female prophecy developed. Between the 1850s and 1890s, sisters Angela and Teresa Isacchi engaged in a multifaceted series of "supernatural" activities, ascribable to the category of simulation of sanctity, although the two women have never been put on a trial or properly investigated. Eschatological

⁵ For a historical-sociological approach to the 19th century Church's attitude toward liberalism, and the attacks against the Pope's temporal power: G. Burns, *The politics of ideology: the papal struggle with liberalism*, in «American Journal of Sociology» 95,5 (1990), pp. 1123-1152.

⁶ Cfr. M. Cattaneo, *Gli occhi di Maria sulla Rivoluzione. "Miracoli" a Roma e nello Stato della Chiesa (1796-97)*, Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani, Roma 1995.

⁷ M. Caffiero, *Le profetesse di Valentano*, in *Finzione e santità tra Medioevo ed età moderna*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 1991 (ed. G. Zarri), pp. 493-517.

⁸ Ead., *La fine del mondo. Profezia, Apocalisse e millennio nell'Italia rivoluzionaria*, in *Chiesa italiana e Rivoluzione francese*, Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, Bologna 1990, 287-357, here 302.

⁹ For a quick overview of Marian miracles: G. Heirzenberger, O. Nedomansky, *Tutte le apparizioni della Madonna in 2000 anni di storia. I suoi messaggi. I documenti. Le testimonianze*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1996, pp. 204-205.

reflections on the end of the Pope's temporal power and Christological hierophanies intertwined in this fascinating case¹⁰.

Angela and Teresa Isacchi. The faith in the Holy Word as a Catholic response to crisis

Angela and Teresa's story begins in the 1820s-1830s in a poor family; devotants' sources claimed that Teresa's early alleged supernatural experiences raised the suspicions of the neighbours, and compelled the family to move very frequently¹¹. Teresa (1833-1890) paved the way for the sisters' prophetic activity; she revealed, in fact, to be granted with apparitions of Mary and various saints since she was a child. She claimed to have even received an apparition of the Virgin of Lourdes, during her pilgrimage to the grotto of Massabielle¹². The sources depict her with the traditional features of the 19th century visionary-child, on the model of the little prophets of La Salette and Lourdes (i.e. ignorant and poor). Teresa was completely illiterate, and nonetheless during her prophetic activity even composed with her sister a *Guide for Hearing the Mass*, which she claimed had been dictated to her by a Crucifix in a church in Como¹³.

Pietro Benassedo, parish priest of Dolzago (near Pusiano) in 1900-1934, was one of the last active devotees of the Isacchi sisters, and the author of a *Raccolta di Notizie* on the their revelations¹⁴; he also narrated about Teresa's particular socio-religious vocation: the pilgrimage to Marian sanctuaries, on the indication of the Virgin herself, for begging for God's graces for the needy. Devotees were compelled to resort to Teresa for asking for divine help, as her alone could obtain graces for those who asked; they were taught, in fact, they needed the prophetess as a necessary mediator: an excellent way for gaining authority within the community. Teresa's seeking for Marian miracles reveals information about the needs of her social environment. Alleged miraculous healings, operated by the prophetesses, also allow the retrace the daily difficulties experienced by those who asked for their intervention; the healing of the dairy cow of a family from Brianza, indispensable for survival, is extremely significant in this sense¹⁵.

¹⁰ My book on the case of Pusiano was published in 2013 (E. Rai, *La Santa Parola. Le veggenti di Pusiano e I loro seguaci*, Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, Milano 20013). I retraced the case by exploring a rich archival group (*Fondo Isacchi*), stored in the Archivio Parrocchiale di Pusiano (APP), which until few years ago was temporarily conserved in the Historical Archive of the Dioceses of Milan (ASDM). I presented further research connected to the case in three articles: *All'ombra della Santa Parola. Dio, il Diavolo e il XIX secolo*, in «Ricerche storiche sulla Chiesa Ambrosiana» XXXI (2013), pp. 203-230; *L'apocalittica come spiegazione ai «mali» del XIX secolo. Il caso di Giacomo Maria Montini (1874)*, in «Ricerche storiche sulla Chiesa Ambrosiana» XXVII (2009), pp. 167-190; *La clamorosa processione del Venerdì Santo. Sregolata devozione della Pusiano "teresotta,"* in *Religione, cerimoniale e società nelle terre milanesi dell'età moderna. Atti dei convegni di studi. Milano 2013-2015*, Magazzino Storico Verbanese, Germignana 2018 (eds. D. Zardin – F. Pagani – C.A. Pisoni), pp. 247-257. Besides my work, the only existent literature on the case is Pusiano local author Giancarlo Molteni's text, *Il Giardino della Santa Parola*, Cattaneo Paolo Grafiche, Oggiono 2009.

¹¹ Besides few documents produced between 19th and early 20th centuries by the Archdioceses of Milan and the Holy Office, the case of Pusiano can be retraced through the exploration of a very rich documentation composed by the sisters' devotees. These sources have a hagiographical intention and are thus useful to investigate the religious sensibilities developed within the group of devotees, although they often lack of any realism.

¹² Rai, *La Santa Parola*, p. 82.

¹³ *Meditazioni per ciascun giorno del mese e guida per ascoltare la messa di Angela e Teresa Isacchi contadine illetterate della provincia di Como*, Tipografia cattolica, Firenze 1869.

¹⁴ Benassedo collected information and material from the eldest devotees, in particular Catholic priests Felice Mariani and Giuseppe Confalonieri, who witnessed the central years of the Isacchi's activity.

¹⁵ On these miraculous events: Rai, *La Santa Parola*, p. 88.

Angela is depicted by the sources as more clever than Teresa, to the point that, at the time when she was a housekeeper for Felice Mariani, parish priest of Pusiano between 1855 and 1877, she started to organise prayer groups, focusing on the devotion to the Eucharist (the *Garden of the Holy Word*), and preach in the church on Sunday; a rather peculiar activity, which shows very well the influence that the woman played on the community, and especially the parish priest. Angela's "prophetical career" suggests that she rode the wave offered by her younger sister, and – more or less consciously – built her fame of prophetess for gaining authority in Pusiano, and beyond.

Although the case of Pusiano is characterised by a rich variety of supernatural phenomena (e.g. daily prophecies, miraculous healings, and even the resurrection of the dead), the major element to be taken into consideration is certainly the so-called *Santa Parola* (Holy Word), which constituted the fulcrum of the sisters' activity and authority for forty years, and attracted devotees (not only) from the surroundings. The devotants' records call *Santa Parola* all the revelations by Angela and Teresa, which were believed to constitute a third (and last) part of the divine Revelation, following the Old and the new Testaments. The sources tell us that these revelations were of great consolation for the devotees, who flew to Pusiano seeking a contact with the divine sphere. The revelations, characterised by a deep Christological piety and soteriological anxiety, were communicated to the audience, gathered for assisting to the phenomenon, and then transcribed and adapted to Italian by some of the followers (the sisters usually spoke, in fact, in regional dialect)¹⁶. The modalities of these revelations, also called *parlate* (talks), are not completely clear, as sometimes it seems that Angela and Teresa simply report a message just received by God, for example through a vision, but more often the prophetesses act as *medium*, allowing the most diverse celestial entities to speak through them (e.g. the three distinct people of the Trinity and various saints).

Although sin is a relevant element in the Isacchi's mystical revelations, the case is different from traditional early modern and 19th century cases of hierophanies, especially Marian apparitions. In Pusiano, God did not express his disappointment for sins corresponding to the violation of rituals and commandments, such as blasphemy or work on Sundays; but complained for the lack of faith – atheism was a major concern traditionally expressed by Mary in modern times – in the Holy Word, which was thus presented as a necessary means for placating God, in a process of construction of authority over the audience. It is not a case that the opponents of the Holy Word, such as the ecclesiastics of the Archdioceses of Milan, are described as the real sinners, who deserve divine punishment¹⁷.

John Augustine Engliefield, English Catholic man of ancient noble family, who lived in Italy, was Angela's greatest devotee, and founded a Secret Society to divulgate the revelations of Pusiano (investigated by the Holy Office in early 20th century), claimed that the disbelief in the Holy Word was the main reason of an impending Apocalypse, whose signs were easily acknowledgeable in contemporary events¹⁸. Engliefield's eschatological reflection referred to and re-interpreted the theory of the three ages by Gioacchino of Fiore (1135-1202), identifying the third age, namely the era of the Spirit, with the time of the Holy Word. Revelation constitutes the foundation of

¹⁶ A philological issue emerges in analysing these transcription, as it is impossible to know in what measure the compilers adjusted the original oral message.

¹⁷ On traditional themes in Marian apparitions: S.L. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary. From La Salette to Medjugorje*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991, ch. 7.

¹⁸ APP, *Fondo Isacchi*, folder 2, sub-folder 3, file 2, p. 40.

eschatology¹⁹, and the Holy Word, as a new divine revelation, bore novel eschatological meanings. In this sense, the lack of faith in the Isacchi's prophecies – especially within the Church – assumed particular gravity and an apocalyptic symbolical meaning. The importance of Pusiano in the history of salvation had been once predicted by Maria Annoni, former housekeeper of Felice Mariani²⁰. Pusiano, she foretold, would produce a light (i.e. the Holy Word) capable of enlightening the all world, filled with darkness. Englefield identified this obscurity with the “ills” of modernity, namely the novelties introduced in an increasingly secularised, post-Revolutionary European society; and attributed to the action of the Devil the decay of the Catholic Church, the development of freemasonry, and, first of all, the disbelief in the Holy Word. Englefield provided the Isacchi's followers with a rational, although dramatic, contextualisation of their revelations. In this sense, it is of the utmost importance to address Angela's political predictions as a seminal part of the Holy Word, for a better understanding of the role of contemporary events in the woman's prophetic activity, and vice versa the influence of her prophecies in the religious sensibility of her followers.

Prophetic, political revelations

Besides prophecies concerning daily and local matters, interesting for understanding the microhistory of 19th century Brianza countryside and the inhabitants' preoccupations, the Holy Word presents a second level of contents. It is especially Angela that, in an auto-referential process aiming at advertising the authenticity of the Holy Word and its primary role in the contemporary political situation, engages in political prophecies on the Papacy and the Austrian Empire. Angela was particularly interested in the fate of the Roman Church that, in the 1860s-1870s, was troubled by a severe crisis and political instability, due to the Italian revolutionary movement, which eventually led to the end of the Pope's temporal power. The overall message is clear: the acceptance of and faith in the Holy Word is the *conditio sine qua non* for the Roman Church to survive.

As Pier Giorgio Camaiani as pointed out in an essay considering the religious aspects of the *Questione Romana*, there was a strict connection between the Pope's temporal power and the ways of thinking religion, in a society modelled and disciplined by the Church's ethics and politics²¹. The Pontiff's sovereignty was interpreted by exponents of intransigent Catholicism as necessary for safeguarding Catholicism before the secularisation of the society. Pius IX's pastoral sensibility was also touched by another matter: a preoccupation for those Catholics who were still his subjects, although not for long, and could be protected from the revolution ideals only by his sovereignty²². Besides, the organisation of the Italian Catholic society was at risk, and Catholics of the Italian Peninsula were in danger of being absorbed by liberal governments. In this context, and within a

¹⁹ G. Tinder, *Eschatology and Politics*, «The Review of Politics» 27,3 (1965), pp. 311-333.

²⁰ Pusiano is depicted by the sources as a gathering of people with various prophetic abilities: besides Maria Annoni and the Isacchi sisters, the case of Giuseppina Colombo is particularly interesting, as she was told to have abstain from food or water for years, feeding herself only with the Eucharist. Despite the hagiographic nature of the sources, it is relevant to notice that the Catholic community of Pusiano was influenced by a Christocentric piety, based on the frequent Communion; a practice still seen with suspicion by large part pf the clergy, in a time when the Jansenist and rigorist influence was still present in terms of Sacraments.

²¹ P. Camaiani, *Motivi e riflessi religiosi della questione romana*, in *Chiesa e religiosità in Italia dopo l'Unità (1861-1878)*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 1973, vol. II, pp. 65-128, here 68. Cfr. also id. *Il diavolo e la questione romana. Saggi sulle mentalità dell'Ottocento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2017; *Il diavolo, Roma e la rivoluzione*, Olschki, Firenze 1972.

²² *Ibi.*, 74.

prophetical activity characterised by Christological piety and visions of Jesus, Angela began to prophesise on the fate of the Papacy.

The first prophecy dates back to the 1850s. Angela had a vision of three boxes, allegory of the very moment when God would present the Holy Word to the Pope himself²³. The first, bright box, which was full with God's graces, represented the Pope's immediate and unconditioned acceptance of the Holy Word; the second box, less bright than the first one, a late and reluctant acceptance; finally, the third, dark box, a total denial. Pius IX would open the third box, according to the interpretation of the devotees of the Holy Word, rejecting the prophetess' message²⁴.

The Pope's disbelief in the revelations of Pusiano had thus to be considered a major reason for the abandonment of the Church by Jesus, and its consequent fall. In a second prophecy, in fact, Angela had a vision of Christ and the Pope falling into a river; the enemies immediately surrounded the Pope, who drowned, whilst Christ left him to his destiny²⁵. Jesus himself revealed that the time of mercy ended: the Church was destined to be despised and priests mistreated. The fate of Catholic ministers in Paris is specifically mentioned, which is interpreted by Benassedo (who writes in early 20th century) as a reference to the violent events of the Commune (1870)²⁶. These predictions reminds of *don Bosco's* political prophecies, and especially the "visionary-dream" in which the Pope, standing on a boat (allegory of the Church), is attacked and killed by the enemies.

Whether Angela's political prophecies on the Papacy in the 19th century are not an isolated case, a major difference emerges in the case of Pusiano. The only reason for the Papacy's defeat is a lack of faith in the last step of Revelation, represented by the Holy Word. Sin, both intended in his general meaning and, in this case, as the disbelief in the revelations of Pusiano, is ultimately the reason of the Church's suffering in the course of the century. *Don Bosco*, personally communicating to Pius IX further prophetical dreams, referred that the Pope and the clergy had to persevere, in such a complicated situation, for organising an important ecclesiastical gathering (later identified with the Vatican Council I), and until the condemnation of the "faults", namely the declaration of the dogma of the papal infallibility in 1870²⁷.

Angela strongly desired to meet Pius IX as well. In 1858, she communicated to Mariani (who was her confessor, but eventually became Angela's spiritual son) that God even commanded her to go to Rome for asking for a personal audience with the Pope²⁸. An encounter that never occurred; on the contrary, Mariani experienced various issues in Rome (while Angela remained hidden); even a convocation to the police, and a suggestion to submit his requests to the Roman Inquisition. Benassedo narrated that, in Rome, Angela stayed under the observation of Jesuit Giovanni Antonio Cassini who, conquered by the prophetess, promised to beg the General of the Order to intercede before the Pope for a private meeting²⁹. However, Angela foretold that the General would not agree,

²³ APP, *Benassedo*, 5, XXI, p. 2r. On Angela's prophecies cfr also Joseph Englefield's memoir in APP, *Fondo Isacchi*, folder 2, sub-folder 3.

²⁴ Rai, *La Santa Parola*, p. 64.

²⁵ APP, *Benassedo*, 5, ch. XXV, p. 31r.

²⁶ *Ibi*.

²⁷ Cfr. P. Stella, *Per una storia del profetismo apocalittico cattolico ottocentesco, messaggi profetici di don Bosco a Pio IX e all'imperatore d'Austria (1870-1873)*, «Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa» 4 (1968), pp. 448-469.

²⁸ Vedi APP, *Benassedo*, 5, XXII.

²⁹ Giovanni Antonio Cassini (1810-1867), professor of humanities and rhetoric. Cfr. P. Beorchia, *Cassini, Jean Antoine*, in *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*, vol. II (Boulangier-Desideri), Societe Belge des Librairies-Librairie des

and that for this very reason the Jesuit House would be the first place attacked by the people rising up against the Papacy. Mariani stated that the prophecy was realised on 20th September 1870³⁰. Such a prediction well represents the image of a vengeful God, fostered by Angela, and explains the political upheaval of 1870 through the lens of the Holy Word.

A casual, not-proven meeting between Mariani and Pius IX in the streets of Rome is also narrated in Benassedo's chronicon³¹. According to the report, the Pope refused to talk to Mariani on cardinal Giacomo Antonelli's suggestion, whilst in another occasion Angela would have managed to miraculously enter the papal private garden and probe Pius IX's soul. These marvellous events characterise the narrative of the journey to Rome, which ended likewise with an astonishing threat: the Pope needed to be ready for God's rage, for he refused to welcome his messenger Angela, sent as a sign of the divine mercy³².

There is more. On 5th January 1859, Angela asked to Mariani to address a letter to the Pope, which she claimed had been dictated to her by God himself³³. The letter is nothing but an expression of pity and reprobation, for the Pope's disbelief. God the Son – as a fictional author of the text – accused Pius IX of rejecting the Holy Word due to the prophetess' low social condition, although «Io per mia Madre ho scelto una povera in Maria»³⁴.

Over the years, the archdiocese of Milan would discourage any interest in the case, although it is not clear if, in 1850s, any knowledge of the Isacchi's activity already reached Rome. The first documented discussion over the case has to be placed at the Holy Office in 1893, when a copy of the Guide for Mass was sent to the Congregation³⁵. In the same years, archbishop Andrea Carlo Ferrari (1850-1921) quickly dismissed the matter; it appears clearly from the inquisitorial records that the prophetic activity of Angela and Teresa was not considered as particularly dangerous or noteworthy³⁶. However, still after the prophetesses' death, a pastoral visit by Ferrari detected the presence of the cult in Pusiano³⁷. Belittling the entire affair was a successful strategy, as proved by the natural disappearance of the cult after the death of the last devotees in early 20th century.

In 1860, Angela organised a second trip to Rome, this time with Teresa. Once again, Benassedo blamed the Devil for contrasting the encounter with the Pope and even narrated his direct intervention in the story, under the semblances of an old woman beating Teresa in a church. In 1862, another prophecy predicted the catastrophic consequences of Pius IX's disbelief³⁸.

We learn about Angela's political prophecies on the destiny of the Church and Italy also from the transcriptions of the *parlate* to Giuseppe Confalonieri, a priest and one of the truest believers of the Isacchi's revelations. The prophetess' restlessness before contemporary events emerged in 1868,

Archives nationales et de l'Ecole de Chartes, Bruxelles-Paris 1891 (ed. A. & A. De Becker, A. Carayon, C. Sommervogel), col. 820.

³⁰ APP, *Benassedo*, 5, XXII, p. 9r. Benassedo takes information concerning this prophecy from Mariani's letter to the well-known Theatine Gioacchino Ventura (2 March 1859). Cfr APP, *Benassedo*, 5, XXII, p. 7r. Cfr M. Tesini, *Gioacchino Ventura. La Chiesa nell'età delle rivoluzioni*, Edizioni Studium, Roma 1988.

³¹ APP, *Benassedo*, 5, XXII, p. 12r.

³² *Ibi*.

³³ *Ibidem*, XXIV, p. 20r.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 21r.

³⁵ Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (ACDF), *Censura Librorum*, 1893, n. 2.

³⁶ Rai, *La Santa Parola*, p. 166.

³⁷ ASDM, *Visite Pastorali*, II, Pieve of Incino, parish church of Pusiano, 1907.

³⁸ It is important to notice that no trace of Mariani's letters to the Pope was found, neither in the *Fondi Isacchi* nor in the *Secret Vatican Archive*.

when an emotional Angela predicted an anti-clerical rebellion, followed by the destruction of convents, and a tragic situation for many religious men; the prophecy was more probably a comment on the suppression of ecclesiastical institutions, which had already taken place two years before, and evidently inspired the woman to further predictions (1866)³⁹.

Angela claimed that God allowed the contemporary turbulent situation because Italy and the Church needed a purification; also, that he planned to re-design a new, pure country, healed by the lack of faith of those years⁴⁰. In 1869, furthermore, Jesus himself would talk through the prophetess for announcing that the Church was going to suffer as he did in the Gethsemane⁴¹. After the *Breccia of Porta Pia*, on 20th September 1870, Angela exulted for the realisation of her predictions. In reality, her political prophecies did not present any detail or chronological reference, to the point that they effectively appear as pure awareness of the contemporary socio-political situation, and as an attempt to employ a higher reading level for understanding history and the contemporary crisis.

In the same way, the devotants suggested that God (an active actor on the historical stage) supported the Austrian Empire in the fight against the Italian revolutionary movement. On the one hand, the devotees (especially clergymen) belonged to a part of Lombard population that strove for maintaining the *status quo*, and expressed their connection to the Austrian Empire through declaring God's support. The Isacchi sisters, who spent their lives in the Parish Church's environment, were probably scared of the incoming socio-political changing. On the other hand, in the 1850s the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom (Austrian royal domain) was placed under military regime, and an anti-Austrian feeling grew. It is extremely significant, in this sense, that Benassedo stated that God revealed to the prophetesses that Radetzky was destined to burn in hell.

It is at this point, in a crucial moment of hostility against the Austrian dominion (1857), that Angela revealed to have divine messages for the Emperor, Francis Joseph⁴². In a letter to the Emperor, transcribed by Benassedo, Mariani made clear that the destiny of the Empire, like the fate of the Papacy, would be a direct consequence of the Emperor's reaction to Angela's prophecies. Denial of the authenticity of the Holy Word would mean defeat. «Chi e causa del suo male, pianga se stesso», Benassedo concluded⁴³.

«Errors of our time». The upcoming apocalypse

The prophetesses of Pusiano were surrounded by a group of anxious, intransigent Catholics, whose writings openly declared not only that the age when they lived (19th-early 20th century) was a prelude to the end of times, but also that the Holy Word constituted the final step of the history of salvation. «Mondo e Diavolo trionfavano per l'incredulita degli uomini»⁴⁴. Such lack of faith, not only in God and the Church, but in the Holy Word, allowed, in other words, the Devil's triumph.

A young Barnabite preacher and true devotant of the Holy Word, Giacomo Maria Montini (1842-1877)⁴⁵, went as far as identifying those years with the time preceding the arrival of the Antichrist, recognising all the signals predicted by John, and the prophetic, apocalyptic elements

³⁹ APP, *Fondo Isacchi, Parlata*, 22 October 1868, folder 3, sub-folder 2, file I, p. 15r.

⁴⁰ *Ibi*.

⁴¹ *Ibi, Parlata*, 31 March 1869, pp. 23r-25r.

⁴² APP, *Benassedo*, 5, XVIII, pp. 30r-33r.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 35r.

⁴⁴ Benassedo. 5, XXIV, p. 23r.

⁴⁵ L.M. Levati - I.M. Clerici, *Menologio dei Barnabiti*, I: Gennaio, Tipografia Derelitti, Genova 1932.

presented in the Book of Daniel⁴⁶. Most of all, Catholics' incredulity bothered the anxious Barnabite, who was deeply influenced by Angela's political revelations.

A late 18th century apocalyptic-prophetical interpretation of contemporary history, read as the manifestation of God's rage, and especially centred on the figure of the Antichrist, spread through anti-Revolution propaganda and popular preaching, and attracted also educated Catholics and clergy⁴⁷. Such an insistence on the arrival of the Antichrist and the upcoming Apocalypse deeply influenced the concept of history of the 19th century Catholic intransigence⁴⁸.

Englefield developed a real obsession for the apocalyptic role of the Holy Word within the contemporary situation, and worked for diffusing the cult in monasteries in England, when a daughter of his was a nun. In a personal memoir, which is of the utmost importance for understanding the devotants' interpretation of current events in light of the Isacchi's revelations, Englefield focused on the Holy Word as a means for discerning the right path in a world under diabolic attack⁴⁹.

Englefield fostered the values of Pius IX's *Syllabus* (of the errors of our time), an addition to the encyclical *Quanta Cura*, which listed a series of novel philosophies, pseudo-medical activities, and cultural and political movements, such as socialism, liberalism, spiritism, and naturalism, as erroneous; and ultimately proclaimed the incompatibility of the Church's values with modernity⁵⁰. The *Syllabus* ultimately represented an anti-Enlightenment, anti-liberal, and self-defensive expression of papal authority against the innovations of modernity⁵¹. In contrast, the Pope's action was deplored by liberal Catholics, and several members of the clergy started to look at it with suspicion. Among the critics, cardinal John H. Newman even claimed that a twenty-year pontificate was not good, as in such a long time the Pope would become a God, and nobody could contradict him⁵².

Englefield believed that the Church of the Antichrist was already established, and had to be identified with the freemasonry within the Church, penetrated by evil forces. He especially investigated the opposition to the Holy Word within the Roman Curia, promoted by these evil presences, and attacked Antonelli, State Secretary for Pius IX, as a diabolic presence, an atheist, a freemason (a rumour diffused in Rome at that time), and the Holy Word's major opponent⁵³. Angela's vision of the cardinal in hell surely carried weight in Englefield's accusations, and vice versa his mindset most probably influenced Angela⁵⁴.

Also, the Catholic public opinion had been influenced at length by the Pope on the risks of masonry. As an illustration, in 1884 and again in 1892, Leo XIII attacked masonry as a diabolic institution aiming at diverting the peoples from God, for establishing the cult of reason instead of that

⁴⁶ Archivio Storico dei Barnabiti di Milano (ASBM), MS 30B .G.M. Montini, *Conferenza intorno alla prima parte della profezia di Gesù Cristo sulla fine del mondo*, held in Milan, Church of S. Barnaba, 1874. Autograph manuscript. See also Montini's work on Jeanne Le Royer's apocalyptic revelations: G.M. Montini, *Vita e Rivelazioni di Giovanna Leroyer poi Suor della Natività, clarissa conversa nelle urbaniste di Fougère dettate da lei stessa e raccolte dal suo direttore, tradotte e ordinate in cinque libri da G.M.M. Barnabita*, Tipografia Fratelli Bertola, Piacenza 1875.

⁴⁷ M. Caffiero, *La fine del mondo*, 308.

⁴⁸ *Ibi.*, 309.

⁴⁹ APP, Fondo Isacchi, *Dattiloscritto of J.A. Englefield*, folder 2, sub-folder 3, I-II.

⁵⁰ Pius IX, *Syllabus*, 8 December 1864.

⁵¹ R.J.B. Bosworth, *Whispering City. Rome and its histories*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2011, 104.

⁵² E. Duffy, *Ten Popes who shook the world*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2011, p. 99.

⁵³ APP, Fondo Isacchi, *Dattiloscritto*, II, pp. 13-14. On Antonelli, E. Aubert, *Antonelli, Giacomo*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 3, 1961, pp. 484-493.

⁵⁴ APP, Fondo Isacchi, *Dattiloscritto*, II, p. 14.

of God⁵⁵. A prayer to Saint Michael, who fights Satan in the book of Revelation, was composed by Leo XIII as a sign of his perspective on the needs of contemporary world.

Englefield's reflections must be thus contextualised in a general preoccupation, concerning masonry, expressed by the Church in a number of official documents between 18th and 19th century. Montini's and Englefield's theories, characterised by profound soteriological anxiety, can be considered within the frame of a pessimistic, apocalyptic, philo-Roman strand, which developed after the Suppression of Jesuits and the Revolution, and was a seminal aspect of the counter-revolution movements and Catholic intransigence. From their perspective, the calamities afflicting the 19th century (such as natural disasters and wars) needed to be read as divine punishments for men's sins and diversion from Catholicism⁵⁶. In this context, characterised by eschatological waiting, miracles and revelations became a significant aspect of the anti-revolutionary Catholic activity, as it happened in late 1700s⁵⁷.

Conclusion. Eschatology, history, and the Holy Word

In 1960, Ernst Käsemann stated that apocalyptic was «the mother of all Christian theology»⁵⁸. The Events of Easter and Pentecost spurred the primitive Church to turn to apocalypticism for responding to Christ's preaching. In the last decades, discussions over Jesus' eschatological dimension have developed, especially for understanding the reasons of the rising of apocalyptic thought in early Christianity⁵⁹; the reading of New Testament's eschatological texts, such as John's Book of Revelation and letters, has nourished a continuing wave of reflections, which has resulted in concrete apocalyptic movements. Paul Hanson suggested that the term apocalyptic should be read on three levels: firstly, as a specific literary genre; secondly, it may allude to a religious perspective for interpreting God's plan in historical events; finally, it refers to «a symbolic universe in which an apocalyptic movement codifies its identity and interpretation of reality»⁶⁰.

These considerations are useful for understanding the explosion of many apocalyptical movements over the centuries, certainly including the 19th century Italian apocalyptical prophetism, and here specifically the case of Pusiano. The latter must be read on different levels: firstly, the socio-political aspect, which is entangled with the religious dimension. Employing Hanson's interpretation of apocalypticism, we can state that the Holy Word provided the Isacchi's troubled devotees with a novel prism for understanding the divine design in a moment of turmoil, when difficult living conditions (due to the increasing of tax burden in the Austrian dominion) went side to side with a more general religious preoccupation. The fate of humanity and the Church is deciphered through mysterious prophetic visions and revelations, which are transmitted to the mediator (between God and the world) directly from the celestial sphere. An unsettling understanding of history emerges from these apocalyptic hierophanies⁶¹; eschatology, after all, responds to times of crisis.

⁵⁵ Leo XIII, *Humanum genus*, 20 April 1884; *Inimica vis*, 8 December 1892.

⁵⁶ P. Camaiani, *Castighi di Dio e trionfi della Chiesa: mentalità e polemiche dei cattolici temporalisti nell'età di Pio IX*, in «Rivista storica italiana» 88 (1976), pp. 708-744.

⁵⁷ Caffiero, *La Nuova Era*, pp. 29-30.

⁵⁸ E. Käsemann, *The beginning of Christian theology*, in *Apocalypticism* (Journal for Theology and the Church 6,) Herder & Herder, New York 1960 (R.W. Funk ed.), p. 40; cfr. also C. Mostert, *God and the future*, T&T Clark, New York 2002, ch. 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibi*, pp. 28 ff.

⁶⁰ *Ibi*, p. 33. Cfr. P.D. Hanson, "Apocalypticism," *The interpreter's dictionary of the Bible*, supplementary volume, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1976, 28-34.

⁶¹ A. Nava, *Teresa Urrea: Mexican mystic, healer, and apocalyptic revolutionary*, in «Journal of the American Academy of Religion» 73,2 (2005), pp. 497-519, here 509.

Secondly, the devotional context, characterised by a deep Christocentric piety and Marian cult (especially for Teresa), and the emotional response of the audience. Montini and Englefield, whose writings revealed an interior struggling with contemporary events, built up a system based on the Holy Word as divine Revelation for understanding their time through eschatological perspective. The Holy Word and its “commentaries” reveal a substratum of religious emotions: fear for the turn of events, which could subvert the traditional Italian Catholic world; anxiety for the living conditions in the Austrian dominion, and the upcoming revolution; and hope, derived from the identification of the Holy Word as the key of interpretation of reality. The devotees’ inflow into Pusiano for attending the *parlate* is extremely significant from this perspective, as it showed people’s search for God for getting consolation, reassurance, and a clearer understanding of that time of crisis.

It has been pointed out that the historical understanding of prophetic apocalypticism looks at «the primary imagery from Revelation to the end of the world as a chronological backbone stretching across the period from the beginning of the Christian Church to the end of the world»⁶². This mysterious Revelation imagery unveils itself in a sequence of historical facts corresponding to the symbolic contents of prophecies, according to the prophets’ and their commenters’ interpretations. The contribution of Montini and Englefield in interpreting the Holy Word is precisely an attempt of reading the language of Revelation in a time of crisis, dominated by the *Questione Romana*. It is also certainly a form of propaganda, which aimed at raising awareness of the necessity of faith and return to the Church’s ethics in the Catholic society.

Apocalyptic prophecies and manifestations of the sacred in the case of Pusiano are ultimately to be read as an attempt to decode a critical time of upheaval, which affected Catholics. Besides that, Angela and Teresa employed the suggestive power of their prophetic revelations as a means for increasing their fame and authority in the area, in an ascending climax that led to the manifestation of typical elements of simulation of sanctity; not least, Angela’s declaration, on her death bed, of her participation to Christ’s redemption. The case of the prophetesses of Pusiano is an excellent and only recently explored example of the employment of eschatology, apocalypticism, and manifestations of the Sacred at the time of the end of the Pope’s temporal power.

⁶² W. Johnston, *Revelation Restored. The Apocalypse in Later Seventeenth-Century England*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2011, p. 27.