CHAPTER THREE

THE DECLINE OF CHURCH EDUCATION AND THE RISE OF LAY SCHOOLS IN TUSCANY

Church Schools Before 1200

Recent scholarship has found no evidence for the continuity of autonomous lay schools in Italy after the sixth century; with the collapse of antique educational institutions, the teaching of the laity passed into the hands of the church, which became the unique provider of education for all sections of society.¹

The development of the curriculum in the early middle ages reflected growing ecclesiastical ascendancy in education, not least in Italy. In the Dark Ages, the dominance of the church is clear from the rapid substitution of a Christian syllabus for the traditional secular Roman curriculum: for example, the first steps in learning words and phrases in late Roman antiquity had been taken by reading and learning from memory the collection of aphorisms known as Cato’s Distichs, a text going back to perhaps the third century A.D.² In the early middle ages, on the other hand, a significant change of curriculum occurred: the Disticha Catonis were replaced as the first reading text by the Psalter:³ With the coming of the Carolingian Renaissance, secular texts and studies were restored to the syllabus, but ongoing ecclesiastical prevalence is reflected in the traditional Latin curriculum that emerged in the early middle ages. The acquisition of latinity, it was assumed, would be a slow, lengthy and arduous process: the parts of speech were studied in vast detail, with frequent reference to literary texts; syntax was learned without simplified rules or methods by total immersion in the classics.

¹ For recent assessments, see Riché (1989), pp. 5–6; Petti Balbi (1990), p. 23 n. 3; Sasse Tateo (1992), p. 24 and n. 13. The councils of Toledo (527) and Vaison (529) stipulated that the laity were to be admitted to episcopal and parochial schools: Frova (1973), pp. 44–45, citing the relevant canons. Monastic schools were forbidden to accept children not destined for the cloister by the synod of 817, but this led to the formation of external schools for non-oblates; the Lateran councils of 1179 and 1215 revoked these restrictions: Frova (1973), pp. 37–38; see also Hildebrand (1992).
This was not the age of rapid results, such as would be demanded with the emergence of secular education in the later middle ages. The aim was to educate the clergy; the lay elite tagged along, accepting the parameters of ecclesiastical education. Future clerks did not have to concern themselves or their families with earning a living; once children were intended for a life in the church, they could spend many years (so the curriculum assumed) acquiring the latinity needed for liturgical purposes and further education (normally in theology).

Up to the twelfth century, there is no evidence of disquiet on the part of the lay elite with the literary and, indeed, classical emphasis of this clerically orientated education system. Indeed, foreigners such as Otto of Freising were impressed with the extent to which Italians in general retained ‘the elegance of the Latin language’—a product of their literary and classical education. Lay society in Italy—and particularly its upper echelons—received formal instruction, according to the testimony of Wipo, the Swabian priest and chaplain to Emperor Henry III, famously noting in 1041 the Italian laity’s penchant for education:

\[\text{Rich Germans should ensure their children are literate (‘quilibet ut dives sibi natos instruat omnes litterulis’), so that they can understand their own laws and plead their own cases in court (‘cum principibus placitandi venerit usus’), using their own written documents (‘suis libris’); this is what [rich] Italians do, sending not just potential clerks but all their children to school. There is obvious hyperbole here, as Wipo is}\]

\[\text{Tunc fac edictum per terram Teutonicorum, Quilibet ut dives sibi natos instruat omnes Litterulis, legemque suam persuadeat illis, Ut cum principibus placitandi venerit usus, Quisque suis libris exemplum proferat illis. Moribus his dudum vivebat Roma decenter, His studiis tantos potuit vincire tyrannos; Hoc servant Itali post prima crepundia cuncti Et sudare scholis mandatur tota juventus; Solis Teutonicis vacuum vel turpe videtur Ut doceant aliquem, nisi clericum accipiatur. Sed, rex docte, iube cunctos per regna doceri […]}\]

\[\text{4 Ross and McLaughlin (1977), p. 281.}\]

\[\text{5 Wipo (1915), pp. 75–86.}\]