Adriano Prosperi


“All history is contemporary history” wrote the Italian idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952). Much of the long career of Adriano Prosperi, doyen of Italian early modernists, has been concerned with explaining to his readers (and himself) how Roman Catholicism not only resisted the ideas of Protestantism in the sixteenth century but also colonised the consciences of the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula and thereby shaped the destiny of a nation. The cost of this unifying victory was nothing less than the “defeat” of the Italian people, who allowed themselves to be persuaded that acquiescence to the hegemonic power of the church was a price worth paying for the avoidance of religious war; a conclusion that was shared, incidentally, by Croce. Prosperi’s argument is expressed in the full title to his opus magnum: *Tribunali della coscienza: Inquisitori, confessori e missionari* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996; reprinted with a new preface in 2009), which identifies the three principal architects of this victory/defeat: the network of holy tribunals of the Roman Inquisition (which Prosperi considered to be Italy’s first “national” institution); the sacrament of confession (which was now conducted in the privacy of the confession box by priests equipped with manuals for confessors of unprecedented detail and thoroughness) and the work of missionaries (working in small teams and making dramatically theatrical use of spectacle) mainly to the rural hinterlands of the Italian peninsula, referred to evocatively at the time as “the other Indies.”

Since members of the Society of Jesus were leading protagonists in two out of the three processes: as confessors and as missionaries, it is only logical that the Jesuits should be an abiding concern of this son of Tuscan farmers and former altar boy, who as a very small child (b.1939) was direct beneficiary of the vital role played by the church in attending to the physical needs of a starving and broken people, who from 1943–45 had effectively been abandoned and betrayed by their political masters; their country host to an army of Nazi occupation which was fighting a brutal rearguard action against an American-British invasion force and its citizens engaged in a bitter civil war. As Prosperi noted in the moving preface to the first edition of *Tribunali della coscienza*, it is thus not to be wondered that at such subsequent times of crisis as the kidnap and murder of the Christian Democrat prime minister of Italy Aldo Moro by Red Brigade terrorists in 1978, the country turned in its grief and shock not to the other members of the Italian governing cabinet of ministers or even to the president of the republic as head of state, but to Moro’s friend, Pope Paul
vi, who led the mourning at the funeral Mass which was conducted in Rome’s cathedral, St. John Lateran.

Readers familiar with Prosperi’s brilliant portrait of “The Missionary,” one of the regrettable few of his writings available in English translation (in Rosario Villari ed., Baroque personae [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995], 160–94), whose picture of the “apostolic [Jesuit new] man” is compared with the enthusiasm and method displayed by members of the Italian Communist Youth Federation (FGCI), whose heyday coincided with Prosperi’s own adolescence, will not be surprised to find explicit comparisons being made in the “proemio” of his latest book between the education strategies deployed by the Jesuits and by the Communists (xiv–xvi). The specific focus in this most recent volume of Prosperi’s autopsy of victory/defeat is provided by the autobiographies that individual Jesuits were ordered to write by their superior. Prosperi explicitly credits the study of the uses of autobiography in the cultural formation of militant communists by Mauro Boarelli (La fabbrica del passato: Autobiografie di militanti comunisti (1945–56) [Milan: Feltrinelli, 2007]) for having “reawakened and given shape to the long-standing interests of he who writes [this book]” (xvi). Boarelli focuses on the similarities between the self-criticism demanded of Jesuits by regular confession and that demanded of communist militants by the party hierarchy. In another striking parallel, both groups demanded of their members unquestioning, absolute obedience as well as the desirability that they give written as well as oral expression to their autobiographical narratives. But where Boarelli merely makes a suggestive comparison, Prosperi, building on his long familiarity with the Jesuit archives in Rome as well as the classic account by Lorenzo Gilardi (“Autobiografie di gesuiti in Italia (1540–1640). Storia e interpretazione” Archivum historicum Societatis Iesu 127 [1995]: 3–37) together with the recent article by Miriam Turrini (“Poco oltre la soglia. Racconti autobiografici di aspiranti gesuiti a metà Seicento,” Studi storici 55 [2014]: 585–614), whose expertise he generously acknowledges, analyses the series of volumes Vocationes illustres containing autobiographical writings of Jesuits 1540–1640, in Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Hist. Soc. 176–77, together with the autobiographical writings of such early, leading protagonists as Juan Alfonso de Polanco, Francisco de Borja, Jerónimo Nadal as well as, of course, those of Ignatius Loyola himself.

The book is divided into three sections. The first is devoted to the role such autobiographical writings of vocation/conversion played in the construction of the collective memory of the Jesuits; the second, to the fundamental role played by Jesuit colleges in enabling vocations and the third, with the various kinds of vocation including a brief section on those who subsequently...