

Calamandrei

APPEAL TO SELF-RESPECT  
Piero Calamandrei

This is not an appeal to "generosity". That is not enough. This is no question of charity, of individual kindness of heart; it is a question of national dignity, of civic virtue; a question of showing foreigners and ourselves as well that Italy still has the desire to live, as a free nation, mistress of herself.

Many Florentines have not forgotten what happened here forty years ago, when the news reached us that an earthquake had destroyed Messina; and the disaster seemed so enormous that our faithful ally considered taking advantage of the opportunity to attack us when our backs were turned. A few days after the disaster gun carriages went through the city, stopping at every house, a bugle announcing their approach; multicolored hats passed back and forth among the people who crowded out of every door, the traditional hats of the students, who at that time reserved for themselves the honor of collecting the donations. But when the carts reached the poor districts of San Frediano, the students no longer needed to go from door to door for offerings; from all the garret windows of the poor houses in the narrow alleys, ragged and disheveled women leaned out to throw another faded coat, a patched sheet, a tattered blanket, the last covering of their beds, on the pile of clothes already heaped on the cart. In the sections of the city traditionally poverty-stricken, expressions of human solidarity poured spontaneously from all the windows.

Today a large number of Italian cities have been stricken worse than Messina was then; a hundred such earthquakes occurring in the same place would not equal the immensity of this disaster. If it is true, as we know it is, that Fascism did not succeed in destroying in this people its ancient virtue of displaying its best qualities in the midst of

calamity, then we must demonstrate our solidarity a hundredfold, as the catastrophe is increased a hundredfold. Today, as then, the poor need no urging. The experience of these years has taught us that poverty, the rude interruption of our habitual ease, the sudden disappearance of those precious things without which life was thought unbearable, brings forth, instead of a despairing isolation, a sense of common brotherhood which in the end inspires and enriches us. If Communism means conscious sharing of human fate, we have all awakened from this disaster as Communists, united in this regained clairvoyance which transforms human life from an envious struggle against another's riches into a contest of moral dignity in which the poor man, to whom alone is conceded the luxury of despising accumulated wealth, can feel himself freer and more a man than the rich. Every day one hears stories which confirm this experience, of persons accustomed from birth to living in the isolation of their luxury, finding themselves in the space of a day reduced to utter poverty, and who, at the moment when they thought they had lost everything, found, in a shepherd's hut, that expression of human solidarity whose very shadow had escaped them in the isolation of their former riches. Just yesterday an old friend who had miraculously escaped death was telling me, with a return of emotion, the lesson which his misfortune had taught him when, fleeing up a mountain like a hunted wolf, gasping for breath, with German patrols at his heels, he passed a woodcutter's hut hidden in the forest. A little old woman appeared before him and without saying a word slipped a folded piece of paper into his pocket as he ran past. Only after he was safely at the top of the mountain and had time to unfold the crumpled paper did he

find that it was a thousand-lire note.

Misfortune is a better teacher of generosity than is prosperity, and this is why the campaign now going on in Florence for the benefit of the devastated areas cannot help being successful, for here indeed the collectors knock at few houses where misfortune has not knocked first. When the committee for this campaign was organized there were those who doubted if Florence, which had been so grievously afflicted by her own destruction, could be asked to come generously to the relief of other ruined cities. Florence is itself a devastated area; looting, deportation and famine have passed through the houses which have not been destroyed by the war; at every door are found the pale faces of refugees, the frightened expressions of those whose thoughts are of the ones still behind the German lines, who may never return. Even in the houses which appear intact the drawers are empty, the beds without blankets. The cautious persons who took their most valuable possessions to the villa of some friend for safe-keeping have been the most severely hit because the Germans passed also through that villa. But for this very reason one can ask for contributions from the Florentines, certain that they will not refuse. He who in the days of prosperity had ten suits of clothes and now has only two, having learned that he can live without the eight he lost, finds that he can also live without one more. Experience has taught us that we can give up so many things without dying that ten years ago seemed indispensable. All of us know today that material sacrifices are much easier than we had thought, before we experienced them.

Here in Florence this civic campaign has a moral significance higher and more moving than charity could ever have in happier times. It is not the rich who give to the poor, but the poor who give to those

poorer than they. While our finest young men risk their lives in the front lines with such prodigality that General Alexander greets them as the sons of the soldiers of the Carso and the Fieve; while the partisans in northern Italy heroically defy Fascists, gallows and torture; while the advance over the mountains leaves behind it the burnt land where only wandering bands of people, who have returned to the pre-historic life of the cave-dwellers, can survive, we feel here that if our house has remained standing and we have clothes to cover us we are still too rich and fortunate in comparison with their present plight, so much more grievous than our past misfortunes. And in this time of new and increasing poverty we feel that no one has yet acquired the right to consider that by his past suffering he has made his full contribution to the common sacrifice.

But among so many poor people even in Florence there remain the rich, those whom misfortune has spared or hardly touched. This appeal is made to them more than to the poor because wealth on account of its fatal heritage is the enemy of generosity, and the greater the wealth the more difficult it becomes for its possessor to free himself from a selfish attachment to possessions.

We must teach these rich people, since the poor need no lessons in this, to respond to this call of the devastated land, to respond generously, even to the extent of self-deprivation. This is not a question of charity but of self-respect. It is not a philanthropic gesture, but an expression of political understanding and forethought. It is true that Italy will need the aid of the Allies to get back on her feet, but we cannot call on them and still hold our heads high if first the Italians, and particularly the rich, have not shown by their deeds that they are

ready to throw their last jewel into the furnace where the future of the world is being cast. The measure of the political maturity of this people, of its national consciousness, of its right to collaborate in European affairs, is shown by the facts, that is, by the measure of its actual contribution to the common sacrifice. The Italian divisions which wipe out, one by one, along the Senio and under Comacchio, the strong points of the German line, are facts. The patriot brigades which assault supply trains behind the enemy lines are facts. These offers of money and clothing, blankets and wool, which permit those of us who are not able to handle machine guns or shrapnel to contribute to the victory are also facts.

We must give the Allies continued proof of these facts, for it is in this way that we gain the right to their respect. But there are still too many people in the drawing room who instead of facts prefer speeches, useless discourses in which the idle complain that the war is lasting too long, that the Allies are not giving us enough, and that if they wanted to they could give us more. Miserable wealthy beggars, more despicable than the pitiful ragamuffins who to our shame we see bent over the sidewalks shining shoes for their supper. But these gentlemen pretend not to know that in the Allied countries, and particularly in England, social clubs such as still exist in Italy have not been tolerated for years, places where ladies can still waste afternoons playing bridge and comparing black market prices, ladies who do not work from morning to night in hospitals and offices, like the poor, among the poor. This idleness and this unconsciousness is the real menace which hangs over Italy. This is the betrayal which can leave the Allies hesitant and

dissuade them from again placing their full confidence in a country where privileged persons have too many fur coats and too many rugs and tapestries which might be converted into bread.

This appeal must go particularly to these classes of privileged persons. If they do not respond it means that they are voluntarily cutting themselves off from the Italy of tomorrow, from that of our soldiers who have returned to the front lines, and of our partisans who have never left them.

But they will respond. I am certain that a response will come even from that gentle lady with the aristocratic figure whom I saw pass by me recently in a fashionable spring dress, a bright dress that looked as if it came from an exclusive dress shop. Do exclusive dress shops still exist in this Tuscany of ours, where people in mountain caves are dying of hunger? I do not understand these things, but I remember when this same lady proudly wore another dress. I met her almost every day on the street. She was clothed in orbace<sup>1/</sup> then, with a bit of gold trimming at wrists and throat. In those days perhaps she thought that the black color and the military cut of the uniform would better set off the lines of her no longer young body; even the hat on her bleached hair was black and pointed, with a military air. When she passed there almost came over me a feeling of shame for the drab mediocrity of my civilian clothes, in comparison with her, who in her warrior's uniform was valiantly saving her Fascist fatherland.

Now, my dear lady, you must try to understand what has happened in the world and in Italy during these last few years. You are not even asked

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<sup>1/</sup> Orbace--material of wild goat wool for Fascist uniforms, originally from Sardinia.



to give your new spring dress to the person who will come and knock at your door tomorrow; you are asked only to give that dress of orbace which you have hidden in the bottom of a drawer in your closet (we guarantee that it will never be in style again). Wrap it in a white sheet or in a colored blanket if you do not wish its funereal shade to be seen. Even that ill-omened uniform will be a welcome gift for those who have no shelter from the rain. When it serves to cover a shivering child we will no longer remember its color.

LA NAZIONE DEL P.C.I.O., Florence, March 23, 1945.