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Danilo Dolci

by Frank Walker

On December 30, 1997, **Danilo Dolci**, “the Sicilian Gandhi,” twice a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, and once (despite being an explicit non-Communist), the recipient of the Lenin Peace Prize, died at seventy-three of heart failure - a political maverick to the end.

For four decades he lived in rural western Sicily, using active nonviolence to win jobs and water rights away from the Mafia and into the control of local farmers’ and craftsmen’s collectives. One technique that he innovated was the “strike in reverse,” which initiated unauthorized public works projects for the poor. In 1958, after one such strike brought 150 unemployed men to repair a neglected dirt road in Partinico, Dolci was arrested on invented charges and spent eight months in jail. In 1967, when he accused prominent members of the government, by name, of collusion with organized crime, he spent another two years in jail for libel. He responded by broadcasting his opinions over a private radio station, which was promptly closed.

It was a source of wonder to local people why the Mafia never seriously retaliated against Dolci; the speculation was that he was so popular that mobsters feared mass retaliation. He was a profuse and widely-read writer: his works include poetry and moving interviews with otherwise invisible members of humble trades whose lives he brought into evocative focus. He was also a famed teacher of young children.

Born of a Sicilian father and a Slovenian mother, Dolci originally studied architecture in Switzerland before moving to Sicily at the age of twenty-eight and finding his life’s work. He is survived by three daughters and two sons from a first marriage, and two children from a second.

(This obituary appeared in the March/April 1998 issue of Fellowship)

Danilo Dolci was born near Trieste in 1924, son of a devout Slav mother and a sceptical Italian father who worked for the railways and became a station-master. Danilo trained as an architect and engineer. As a student he published works on The Science of Construction and The Theory of Reinforced Concrete. He was hailed as a man with a brilliant future.

He was also a deeply devout Catholic. Instead of immediately embarking on a professional career, he gave up everything to work for a time with a remarkable priest, Don Zeno Saltini, who had opened an orphanage for 3,000 abandoned children after the war. It was housed in a former concentration camp near Modena, and Don Zeno called it Nomadelphia: a place where fraternity is law.

Danilo Dolci first came to Sicily for the sake of its ancient beauty. He was specially interested in Greek buildings and had decided to spend a week or two at Segesta studying the ruins. But the man with a professional interest in Doric temples was also and above all the man of conscience and loving-kindness. What kept him in Sicily for the rest of his life and made him throw away a lucrative professional future was the island's present wretchedness. During his visit a baby died of starvation. The giant misery of Sicily was a command to him. Something simply had to be done about it.

Thousands lived in holes in the ground and in slums worse than those of Calcutta, without electricity, water, sanitation. They existed on the edge of starvation, weighed down by ignorance, illiteracy, superstition, fear, injustice, oppression by the Mafia, indifference from the Church, and above all with the all-pervasive hopelessness of unemployment.

Danilo settled down in Trappeto, a country slum. He married one of his neighbours, a widow with five children. From their small house with none of the usual conveniences he launched his campaign against the misery that surrounded him. Alone he stood, faced by the hostility of the Church, the government, the landowners, the Mafia. Surely, only with a flame of faith in his heart could he face hatred, corruption, ignorance, superstition, brutality, indifference, poverty, dereliction and despair. But face them he did, and won his victories. He lived on the level of those he was trying to help, attempting to leaven the lump with love and knowledge so that it would rise up of its own accord.

First there was the giant problem of unemployment. Work, Dolci insisted, is not only a right, it is a duty. Inspired by this idea, he organised his famous 'strike in reverse' in which the jobless protested by going to work. Dolci and the unemployed began work on a local road that was badly in need of repair. They were arrested. There was no violence, for Dolci was a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and believed in a non-violent approach as a matter of principle. He provided schooling and education and persuaded parents to allow their children to go to school. As a result of his tireless campaigning three dams were built, bringing irrigation, energy, and new jobs. He persuaded the government to bring new industry from the north, and a new life for the slum dwellers. Fearlessly he exposed and faced down the Mafia, again and again being threatened with prison and death.

"Without charity knowledge is apt to be inhuman," wrote Aldous Huxley in his introduction to Dolci's book To Feed the Hungry, "and without knowledge charity is foredoomed to be powerless. Today a new Gandhi, a modern St Francis, needs to be equipped with much more than compassion and seraphic love. He needs to be something of a scientific expert and make the best of both worlds, the world of the head no less than the world of the heart. Only then can the twentieth century saint hope to be effective. Danilo Dolci is one of these modern Franciscans-with-a-degree. . ."

Dolci was a great writer. His books are remarkable accounts of the society he surveys, and their accuracy and insight have helped to give a realistic basis to any schemes for improvement. Above all he has given a voice to the abandoned, forgotten, despairing, nameless, suffering people of Sicily. Unforgettably he enabled peasants and fishermen, mothers and prostitutes, street urchins, outlaws and bandits, police and mafiosi to tell their stories. Of the Sicilians he said, "There is God in these people like the fire beneath the ashes."

Prophets are rarely honoured in their own countries. Italians disliked Sicily's dishonour being openly shown to the world. Dolci was attacked and subjected to a torrent of lies and abuse. Even the Church in Sicily failed him. It was suspicious and, incredibly, often seemed more sympathetic to the Mafia than to those like Dolci who so bravely exposed the Mafia's crimes. Dolci left the Church because he found it too narrow, and in its manifestations in Sicily actually harmful.

Did he cease to be religious? Emphatically no! His whole life was the expression of a profoundly humanitarian religious sense. It is something Unitarians understand and sympathise with. A friend once said to him: "You don't use the word God any more." Dolci replied: "When I understood that the word 'God' was likely to bring more confusion than clarity, then, I stopped using it. I don't believe in a personal God, not in the old traditional sense any more. For me the key is creativity. "To create".... how do we create? It can be 'by the will of God' and if there's no fatalism involved then this is also creation in an educational sense. But for me this isn't enough. Man must also intervene to try to change things, to modify and perfect, and this is outside the traditional religious concept. St Paul says we must be co-creators with God - which is the same idea, though Paul doesn't expand it. Jesus was ambiguous, or rather you find both viewpoints in him. In the parables there is the thought of the condemning God. This is the old world. But he also says "My God is the God of life," and he talks about the seed having to die before it can bring forth fresh fruit. What matters is that people should be creative. There's nothing higher in men and women. But is this religious? Some say it is. Here we're trying to graft this possibility of human creativeness on to a fixed old-world attitude. Western Sicily is our experimental field - to try something which may become valid for the rest of the world."

(Quoted by James McNeishe in his Fire under the Ashes, p.239)

In the 1960s Danilo Dolci became almost a cult hero-figure in Northern Europe and America. Young people idolised him and committees were formed to raise funds for his work. In recent years all that faded. People found newer and to them more glamorous causes. Dolci did not repine but went on with his work. Indeed it was a case of "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat these two imposters just the same."

The world is full of suffering and evil, all too often in the grip of Giant Despair. We need to refresh ourselves with the stories of people like Danilo Dolci who have broken down the prison of Giant Despair, not only for themselves, but for so many others. They are the light of the world that the darkness shall never overcome.

Dear and Blessed Danilo Dolci, give us some of your warm-heartedness, your devotion, your encouragement, your bravery, your insight.

The Rev. Frank Walker
Unitarian Church, Cambridge - February - March 1998

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