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Danilo Dolci: the Gandhi of Sicily dies at 73

STANISLAUS CONNECTIONS

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Danilo Dolci died on December 31, 1997. The Modesto Peace/Life Center co-sponsored his 1974 California visit to Modesto

Sicily has long been the home of Mafioso looking to profit from the island's agricultural economy. Poor, often with little education, Sicilian peasants learned to see the government as full of corrupt officials more interested in padding their bank accounts than in improving the lives of peasants. Because of this, Sicilians have a strong sense of *omertà*, the idea of receiving help locally rather than getting it from outsiders. It was into this environment that an outsider came to help in 1952. Danilo Dolci arrived in the slums of Trappeto hoping to use his peace-loving background to make a difference in the lives of Sicilians.

Danilo was born in 1924 in the northern village of Sesana (later a part of Yugoslavia) to parents who thought there was nothing wrong with beating their children as punishment. The beatings he received, often occurring even when he had done nothing wrong, would play a major role in Dolci's hatred of violence as an adult.

In 1925, Mussolini declared Italy a fascist state. This would have little impact in Dolci's early years but would greatly affect him later. As a teenager Dolci saw Europe enter into World War II, and detested even the idea of war. Danilo worried his family by tearing down any Nazi posters he came across, even though he realized that he could be drafted into Mussolini's Fascist army at any time. According to Danilo, "I had never heard the phrase 'conscientious objector' and I had no idea there were such persons in the world, but I felt strongly that it was wrong to kill people and I was determined never to do so." Danilo tried to escape from Nazi authorities but he was caught and jailed for a short time.

After World War II, Danilo, inspired by the work of Don Zeno, a Catholic priest, gave up his middle class life to work with the poor and unfortunate. Though he himself had never been a big

follower of the Catholic Church (much to his mother's chagrin), Danilo liked the work he saw the priest doing, and quit school at the age of twenty-five to join him.

Don Zeno was running Nomadelphia, a Christian commune in Tuscany caring for war orphans. Danilo abandoned his family's middle class values and learned to see that the people of Nomadelphia were just as beautiful and good as members of the upper classes even if they did not lead lives filled with luxuries and privileges. Danilo worked alongside everyone else, cleaning latrines and hoeing gardens. Don Zeno was so impressed with Danilo's work that he had him start another commune in Tuscany called Ceffarello. While working at Ceffarello, the army, though no longer under fascist control, finally caught up with Dolci. He performed his compulsory army service in 1951.

During this period, Danilo became aware of the workings of the Christian Democrats, since Don Zeno was being harassed by the Minister of Police who felt he was a Communist. The government wanted to put the orphans into asylums and close down both Nomadelphia and Ceffarello. Even the Vatican turned against Don Zeno, calling him the "mad priest." Danilo had to watch as government forces took many of the commune's children. He then had to gather up all his energy to help build a new Nomadelphia. By 1952, he was ready to work elsewhere.

Dolci headed for "the poorest place I had ever known" -- the western Sicilian town of Trappeto. Danilo was full of Northern stereotypes about the South, even though he had already learned to see past a person's social standing. As Danilo said, "Coming from the North, I knew I was totally ignorant. Looking all around me, I saw no streets, just mud and dust... I started working with masons and peasants, who kindly, gently, taught me their trades. That way my spectacles were no longer a barrier. Every day, all day, as the handle of hoe or shovel burned the blisters deeper, I learned more than any book could teach me about this people's struggle to exist..."

From the beginning, Danilo noticed that people were suspicious about telling details of their lives to an outsider. ...Danilo learned that he had to be friendly, yet forceful enough to convince them that they needed to tell him the truth. Peasants realized he was there to help them unite and improve their living standards, unlike the Mafia, who tried to improve their own lives but not those of the peasants. Because of this, Dolci, with his peaceful way of doing things, came to be an opponent of the Mafia.

Dolci began his crusade by claiming that government officials were receiving help in their elections from the Mafia. Rather than make his accusations only in Sicily, Danilo traveled to Rome to participate before the Anti-Mafia Commission to ensure that his worries about the Sicilian Mafia were heard. When some Sicilians turned on him for this, Dolci made copies of the propaganda produced against him for his supporters and continued his work. His willingness to stand up to the Mafia in his quest to improve the living conditions of Sicilians helped him to gain the confidence of the locals.

Early on, Danilo realized that he would get nowhere with officials if he tried to reach them in conventional ways. At first, he tried to talk to officials, or at least their secretaries, but soon found that "the doormen behave like lazy dogs assigned to guard the tranquillity of their masters." This led him to use a new method for which he would become known as the "Gandhi of Sicily"--- hunger strikes.

Throughout his career, Dolci used fasting to force the government to make improvements. One of his most famous fasts occurred in November, 1955, when he fasted for a week in Partinico to "draw

attention to the misery and violence in the area and to promote the building of a dam over the Jato River that could provide irrigation for the entire valley.”

Danilo’s method of peaceful protest has proven successful in gaining the government’s attention, but it has not always kept supporters at his side. Many left because they felt that he had not followed through with his protests by making sure that the government followed through with its promises. Others left because they thought his protests were held to gain self-serving publicity.

Danilo Dolci sacrificed much to try to improve living conditions in Sicily. He left the middle class to live in substandard conditions, and put his life at risk to make improvements. Dolci used the hatred of violence that he learned as a child and the hatred of poverty that he learned after World War II to motivate his work. He knew that he could not completely change Sicily, but he believed that he could at least make small improvements.

-- *Edited by James Costello*

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