THE ITALIAN PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT AND THE REFORMATION:
DOCTRINAL INHERITANCES AND NEW SPIRITUAL “DISCOVERIES”

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The subject of the relationship between the Pentecostal Movement and the Reformation seems to have been little studied so for above all because the pioneers of the Pentecostal Work, in their absolute simplicity and spontaneity, thought to refer directly to the Church of the Apostolic Age. Recently, one of the first precious works of reconstruction of history and doctrinal ties with the past movements has been achieved by the second Chairman of Italian Assemblies of God, Francesco Toppi, who, drawing on the concept of a Waldensian historian, Emilio Comba, has talked about spiritual “genealogy” of the Pentecostal Movement. Starting from his reconstruction and in relation to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Pentecostal Movement appears to be “related” doctrinally to the German Pietism and to the Moravi brothers movement, till it draws on the British Methodist movement and its following American subdivisions of Holiness Movement and of Christian Missionary Alliance. According to Toppi, this latter would be the nearest and the direct forerunner of Italian Pentecostalism.

However, the Pentecostal Movement has also an important doctrinal tie with the Reformation and the Lutheran theology. From a strictly Pentecostal point of view, although most churches derived, from the Reformation and directly linked to it, are nowadays greatly secularized, it seems honestly impossible to deny that they have in common real doctrinal principles with the Wittemberg popular theses. The most important doctrinal inheritance that the Pentecostal Movement received from the Reformation lies in the following three principles: “sola Scriptura”, “sola gratia”, “solus Christus”, and in the following doctrines of the “Scripture as the only infallible authority of faith”; Justification for grace through faith in the blood of Christ” (not by merits or works); “Universal Priesthood of all believers”. The reflections advanced up to here will concern essentially the doctrines of the “Scripture as the only infallible authority of faith” and of “Universal Church of believers”. Subsequently I’ll analyse not a doctrine, but important affinities that Pentecostalism and the Lutheran Reformation seem to have in common in the “method” of the theological analysis,

1 F. Toppi, And you will be my witness, Adi-Media, Roma 1999, pp 9;
that’s the “scriptural flourishing” and the “inspired meditation”. At last, I’ll mention “Glossolalia”, the most important spiritual experience which characterized the Pentecostal Movement as an original Christian revival totally different from the previous movements historically speaking, including the Reformation. Besides, I specify my analysis will concern exclusively the relationship with the Lutheran Reformation omitting the remaining reformist experiences, for example, from Zwingli to Calvin.

The doctrine of the “Holy Scriptures as the only infallible authority of faith” is part of the statute of Italian Assemblies of God as the first doctrine the Pentecostal follower professes to believe. Anyway, no Minister of religion or senior may be considered the leader of the Pentecostal Church. Christ is the only leader of the Pentecostal Church. As a matter of fact, the Pentecostal minister, including the chairman of the movement, is not the “vicar” of Christ, but simply an administrator of his authority within the congregation. The principle of his ordination compared to other believers lies in his preaching of the word of God. According to the Pentecostal doctrine, preaching the word of God is a Christian ministry, a spiritual gift. However, the authority of faith is neither the minister of religion nor his ministry: it is the Word of God. The Word of God is the Bible, the Holy Writ. The Holy Scriptures are the only infallible authority of faith, because through them, Christ risen from the dead reveals himself to his Church. The chairman and the committee structure, of presbyterial-congregationalist kind (taken on by the movement), are not at all a vertical hierarchy, but simply they have a function of legal representation before the State. In Germany, in the Middle Ages, in which Luther lived and preached, this doctrine had great consequences on the theological and political plane, as it gave the German princes the legal antecedent fact in order to declare the vassal’s bond dissolved towards the Pope as well as the theological legitimization in order to show the groundlessness of authority of the Roman – Catholic Church “tradition”. The war which followed between the Lutheran princes and the Catholic emperor Charles V ended in 1555 with Augsburg Peace, whose treaty, marked by the “cuius regio, eius religio” principle, established a primitive moderate form of religious freedom for the prince, whereas the subjects had to profess the faith of the sovereign. A biblical principle was the “inspiration” of an important historical change that brought the idea of religious freedom, not just the right, so contributing to the most general democratizing process of Europe.

2 What we believe, art n°1, www.assembleeidio.org;
“The Universal Priesthood of all Believers” is perhaps the most important doctrinal principle handed down by the Reformation and accepted by Pentecostal churches too. This doctrine teaches everyone can reach freely God without human mediations thanks to Christ expiatory sacrifice. In the Old Covenant or Hebrew Scriptures the Supreme Priest could reach God in order to intercede for the sins of all mankind. By his death Christ inaugurates a New Covenant founded on his sacrificial offering, of which himself can be the only priest. Christ is the authentic priest able to reach God because He is the unique able to make an offering worth appeasing the divine justice: He himself. He is at the same time the Priest and the offering of the New Covenant. Therefore after the cross there isn’t a hierarchical distinction between priests (the pure) and laity (sinners): all men are sinners, but they can reach God freely and directly through Christ eternal expiation. Reaching God isn’t a privilege reserved only for the priest any more, but it is a right of all men believing in God. It is in this sense that everyone can reach God like the old Hebrew Supreme Priest thanks to the only authentic expiation of Christ.

As we can imagine, this doctrine had, already in 1517, great consequences on the theological and political – institutional plane. In Germany, the so called protestant princes started to reject the idea of the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, the peasants rebelled and sacked the countryside. Their excesses were condemned by Luther himself as Christianity is against any form of violence. But the Universal Priesthood of all believers taught and still teaches that all men are equal before God because of Christ sacrifice. Historically in Europe of the “Ancien Régime” founded on the right of birth, this doctrine inaugurated a primitive principle of law and democracy, by showing that all men were born equal before God and without distinction of class. Just in this aspect I consider the Universal Priesthood of all Believers as an anticipation of the ideas of the Enlightenment of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, typical of the French Revolution; in fact they derived from the Christian culture and the Protestant Reformation and later they were developed by the lay philosophy.

The Pentecostal Movement includes this doctrine in its statue of faith even if it is called “Universal Grace”3. That’s why, differently from Lutherans, the Pentecostal theology underlines mainly the action and the role of divine grace of universal reception in the spiritual experience of the conversion. Nevertheless Pentecostalists accept the whole thematic corpus of the doctrine, they

3 What we believe, art. n°6 , www.assembleedidio.org;
assert that Christian conversion, or salvation, is above all an “experience”, a “new birth” by personally meeting Christ risen from the dead. It is an experience, fit to be told because it is lived by the “human being” in his body and soul directly with Christ. Pentecostalism is a participating experience of the communion of the man to the divine love in Christ; communion is experienced rather than to be perceived mystically. And the fundamental rule of democracy is participation rather than representation.

The Lutheran Reformation was the result of a work of clear theological – doctrinal revision to which Luther arrived through rationalism and criticism on biblical texts. He could not accept the idea of a furious vindictive God as his Augustinian preceptors taught him. And how did he oppose to this? He did not oppose through an exasperating devotion or a corporal mortification; he never conceived the religious experience as an emotional or romantic experience of mystery. He enjoyed a more modern idea of the religious experience, and for this reason he fought his depression which often led him nearly to suffocation, by practising “the direct reflection on biblical texts”. Initially he was arisen from a need to confute the unacceptable principles of his own education, and then he experienced the divine revelation until he discovered the authentic evangelical values. This “inspired criticism” as a method of theological reflection divided into faith, reflection, revelation, far from being devotion or mysticism was the most important and innovative feature of Lutheran thought.

“The Ministry of the Word” is the central subject of the Pentecostal theology. It is the supreme spiritual gift by which and by reading and reflection inspired by the Holy Scriptures, the Minister of religion conveys the Christian virtues to the congregation. Obviously the Pentecostal religion is not limited to this. As said before, it is above all a spiritual experience of revelation of divine love through the faith. Pentecostalists cannot simply accept the elitist view that Luther had of the theme of “inspiration” or “illumination”. But in scriptural analysis the Ministry of the Word has in common with the Lutheran theology the same “methodological imperatives of direct reading” of biblical texts and their “inspired reflection”. That is why the Pentecostal and Lutheran theology agree to have “a commonly modern approach” of the religious experience: not romanticism or mysticism, but criticism or revelation. Pentecostalism has in common with the Reformation the same theological character of the Christian religion: it is a non – ecstatic religion, but conscious,
rational⁴, spiritual. It is this rationality of religion, this presumption to be able to understand the divine truths that links together the theology of the Reformation and Pentecostalism.

It is not possible to give a complete doctrinal description of what Pentecostalists call “Glossolalia”. As a matter of fact, it is not simply a doctrine, but a very precious spiritual experience that can be defined slightly. “Glossolalia” is meant to worship God in unknown languages thanks to his spiritual gifts. What is interesting here is not the description of the experience in itself which would not be possible; but, I say it again, the fact according to which “Glossolalia” is a peculiar experience that makes the Pentecostal movement particularly original within the great outline of Evangelical subdivisions.

In the whole history of Christianity Pentecostalism is the only movement to have contemplated the return of revelation of this powerful experience⁵. I talk of return because “Glossolalia”, that’s the experience of praising God in unknown languages, occurred for the first time in the New Testament church and the Holy Scriptures document the revelation of this spiritual gift as a charisma typical of the first century church. The reason for the present interest Protestant academic world towards Pentecostalism lies in the fact that it seems to be the only movement directly linked to the New Testament church having in common a spiritual charisma, that’s “Glossolalia”.

In conclusion, “Holy Scriptures as the only infallible authority of faith” and “Universal Priesthood of all believers” are the main contributions by which the Christian Protestant tradition took part ideologically in the democratic emancipation. They also represent the marginal unsubstitutable background that Pentecostalism inherited from the Reformation. Therefore this link is very important because it is a clear evidence that historically it is not a marginal phenomenon, but it is completely integrated, participant of the great civilization of Modern Europe.

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⁴ “Rational” according to the definition of Romans 12.1.
⁵ According to some scholars, in the middle of the second century AD, Montanism was the only movement that experienced Glossolalia insisting on themes such as inspiration, Spirit, prophecy.