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Marco Cuaz

Catholic Alpinism and Social Discipline in 19th- and 20th-century Italy

The symbolic appropriation of mountains may be a universal phenomenon, yet it can also be highly specific to one religion or confession, located in one region and historical context. An interesting case in point is "Catholic Alpinism" in the Italian Alps. This popular movement began around the mid-19th century, when some curates, based in upland communities, some educators and some urban priests identified the mountains as a place for wholesome enjoyment and austere education. It was not that the Catholic world had totally lacked an interest in the mountains before. But in order to create a new way of mountaineering, it was necessary, first of all, to change the negative image of mountains which had taken root in European culture and had been codified during the early modern period. After the change occurred, the number of priest-scientists exploring the Alps increased steadily. Yet for "Catholic Alpinism" to take off, other meanings had to be read into the mountains. Crucial was the challenge by the British: Catholic Alpinism set in as an alternative to the expansion of British sporting alpinism (based more on Protestant creeds), and later, to increasingly extreme forms of physical effort and political nationalism. The Catholic form represented a different way of using the mountains. "The rocks should be a path to virtue," stated one Italian theologian in 1921. Seventy years later, and against the background of a completely changed ideological and political situation, another theologian maintained that alpinism would only have a future if "a return to spirit" occurred.

Keywords: *Catholicism; mountaineering; spirituality; history; Alps; Italy.*

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Introduction

Christianity has a long tradition of holy mountains, and since the Middle Ages in Europe there has been a custom of pilgrimages to mountain summits. In the 18th century some priests began to go to the mountains looking for minerals or medicinal plants, or for marks of the biblical Deluge (Broc 1991; Giacomoni 2001; Ferrazza 2004). Yet we can only speak of "Catholic Alpinism" in Italy as of the mid-19th century, when people began to climb the peaks looking for God, considering the rocks a "path to virtue." At that time a group of curates based in mountain towns, some educators, and some urban priests identified the mountains as a wholesome and austere place for enjoyment and education (Cuaz 2005a). Thus the term "Catholic Alpinism" refers not only to pilgrims or priests going to the mountains, but also to a cultural and political project directed by the Catholic Church to use the mountains for social discipline and establish control over leisure time. In what follows, we will give an overview of the development of Catholic Alpinism in 19th- and 20th-century Italy, with a focus on: (1) cultural preconditions; (2) modes of social discipline; (3) hiking style; (4) the political uses of mountains after 1900; (5) the Fascist period; and (6) Catholic Alpinism after 1945.

The project of a Catholic science

In order to create Catholic Alpinism, it was necessary first of all to change the negative image of mountains as the "trash of the earth," "signs of disorder and ruin," and as a constant warning of human wickedness—a stereotype which had taken root in European culture and had been codified at the end of the 17th century due to the influence of Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, published in 1684 (Nicolson 1997). For a long time, well-ordered nature had appeared as the masterpiece of an artist, and its harmony had been used as evidence of the existence of God. Now, however, confusion in the world was proof that the earth had been generated by chaos and the casual movement of atoms. Thus the mountains, like wild nature in general, had become a problem for theology. Had they been created with the earth by the goodness of God or by the Deluge, and therefore by human wickedness? And what were they for?

Most scientific research in the 17th and 18th centuries emanated from these and other theological questions. New positions were above all taken up during the well-known *Burnet Controversy*. The mountains could be useful, even beautiful, and they could offer a valid alternative to moral depravity (Nicolson 1997; Giacomoni 2001). In the Catholic sphere, it was in 18th-century apologetics (much earlier and independent of the Romantic revolution)—expressed in particular in the best seller by Abbé Pluche, *Le spectacle de la nature*—that mountains lost their negative features (Pluche 1737–1750). This work reflected a common feeling about retrieving the old holy features of mountains as God's favorite places. They were inaccessible to men and closer to heaven, and they offered indispensable services to humans and animals by providing water, minerals and herbs. It was through analysis of the theological-scientific debate that mountains became a topic on the European cultural agenda. And it was in the the-

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ological interpretation of natural facts that one of the most traditional Catholic leitmotifs of the mid-18th century emerged (or rather re-emerged): the idea that "mountains tell God's glory," a decisive feeling which stimulated the birth of Catholic Alpinism (Cuaz 2005a).

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, amongst the first explorers of the Alps, there were a number of priest-scientists. Their mission was to find evidence in nature for the truths of faith (Zannini 2004). For Catholic culture, mountains became "a venerable shrine of science," according to the definition given by Don Pietro Calderini, a mountaineer and scientist promoting mountaineering in Valsesia (Bonola 1998). What mountaineers of the 19th century had in common was a passion for natural science, and in particular for botany, mineralogy, and meteorology: branches of learning that required collaboration and coordination between scholars. They went to the mountains not so much for pleasure but mainly to study nature. "One cannot study natural history without being a bit of an alpinist," asserted Abbé Henry from the Aosta Valley (1870–1947), who himself was a brave mountaineer and the first historian of Catholic Alpinism (Henry 1935).

Thus the mountaineer-priests were aiming at a science that would reconcile rationalism and religious faith, purifying the former of materialistic influence and identifying in nature an esthetic and clear divine revelation (Farinetti and Viazzo 1992). One "Christian Science" had Father Francesco Denza, the inventor and founder of Italian meteorology, as its point of reference. Thanks to help from the clergy, he established the first network of mountain weather observers. Another such mountaineer-priest was the priest and geologist Antonio Stoppani, guardian of the Ambrosian Library and founder of the Italian Alpine Club Section in Milan, a mountaineer out of passion and necessity. Their science was a sort of lay theology, a reliable guide to reading the book of the universe and a means of fighting against popular prejudice, paganism, and superstition. "Nature is a book on religion and theology," wrote Leonardo Murialdo, the founder of the Giuseppini Order and a mountaineer who promoted trips to the mountains for the young homeless. "Nature is God's theatre. The sky, the earth, and the sea are a musical show of his glory" (quoted in Castellani 1966).

Mountains and social discipline

One can discuss at length whether it is possible to consider a person going to the mountains in search of fossils and minerals an alpinist. But undoubtedly those clergymen, already numerous in the 18th century, who went climbing not in search of God but because they wanted to trace the Deluge, were not strictly "Catholic Alpinists." Science was one of the main elements in Catholic Alpinism in the 19th century (Cuaz 2005a; Zannini 2004), but the use of this term requires reading other meanings into the mountains as well.

The crucial challenge was represented by the arrival of English travelers in the Alps who first practiced British mountaineering (Engel 1950; Joutard 1986; Cuaz 2005b). Around the mid-19th century, only priests could offer reasonably decent hospitality in the mountains (Figure 1). They also served as the perfect guides for excursionists who needed particular care outside the well-known "Grand Tour" itinerary. The history of the alpine tour, between the 18th and 19th centuries, is full of the testimonies of alpinists and travelers enchanted by priests' generous welcomes. These priests not only manifested a disinterested feeling of friendship and hospitality, they also had a precise plan of cultural intermediation. They undertook the role of defending the local community, the poor, and the ingenuous parishioners who were to be protected from too close contacts with rich and cultivated foreign travelers, often protestants or followers of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. They were also unusual individuals who could afford to go for walks in the summer when ordinary people had to work, or go to the mountains on Sundays when the community celebrated mass. In the face of "gentlemen who came from the city" or "some Protestant priests who indoctrinated the local guide, not well-read in religion," it was better that contact with foreign travelers be handled by priests (Henry 1905). This was a form of mediation, not only an interference between the mountaineer and the citizen—a way of accepting the challenge of a new kind of sporting alpinism more compatible with Christian principles.

The main idea of Catholic Alpinism as an alternative to British sporting alpinism and to the superhuman patterns of the Bavarian school, is the idea of the mountains as a journey of virtue, a vocational metaphor, a school of life. "I wish the motto of our alpinism was the one expressed by the saying of a French town: *sint rupes virtutis iter* [the rocks should be the path to virtue]," suggested the theologian Gino Borghezio, the director of the first periodical on Catholic Alpinism, *Giovane Montagna*, in 1921 (Cuaz 2004).

The roots of the idea of "Catholic Alpinism" are to be found in the overall concept of 19th-century social Catholicism, which considered physical activity—and in particular walks and exercise—as "very effective means, good for discipline, morality and health" (Cuaz 2005a). Don Bosco, Ferrante Aporti, Leonardo Murialdo, and Francesco Denza had begun the custom of "scholastic caravans"—outings for the young in the midst of nature—as a preventive measure against the problems of adolescence. In the Salesian Oratory and in the Artigianelli boarding school, sport gained more and more space in the curriculum, primarily to attract young peo-

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FIGURE 1 The *rifugio Calvi* in the Karnisch Alps, northern Italy—an example of the kind of accommodation typical of a later stage of alpinism in Europe. Pope Paul VI once visited this mountain hostel, testifying to the importance of such places for Catholic Alpinism. (Photo courtesy of Peter Nausester, www.BERGFOTOS.com)



ple and channel their aggressiveness within socially acceptable boundaries. Taking the young to the mountains became an important habit for the Christian apostolate between the 19th and 20th centuries. It was a way to deter the young from temptations and vice, and to sublimate their sexual activity and violent impulses into an itinerary of virtue. It was also a way to spend spare time and keep the young away from idleness, alcohol, taverns, and the dangers of the street.

To Abbé Gorret, one of the greatest theoreticians and interpreters of Catholic Alpinism in the 19th century, going to the mountains meant "saving the young from the pleasures of the cities and transmitting to them the powerful emotions of nature: (…) The remedy for evil is located in the mountains." According to him, spoiled urban youth should learn to endure hunger, thirst, and effort in order to become true men (Gorret 1876).

Alpinism "à l'eau de rose" (sentimental alpinism)

What kind of alpinism did Catholic trainers and mountaineer-priests practice? Certainly it was not extreme alpinism—a challenge to human limits, an absolute risk, a game with death, or the exaltation of the body and a gym for superior men, according to the patterns provided by the Bavarian school. Nor was it purely a sporting concept, as Leslie Stephen suggested, a kind of alpinism that was freeing itself from all scientific explanations to become a "game" (Stephen 1871).

Catholic Alpinism was, first of all, alpinism that envisaged only 3000-m high peaks consisting of "ordinary routes," something we would nowadays call "hiking" or "trekking," a practice without record, without hurry, challenges or supremacy, a custom that had a reassertion of the love of scientific research at its origins (Figure 2). In contrast, protagonists liked to define "alpinism" in order to distinguish it clearly from rowdy groups of tourists (Henry 1905). Going to the mountains was a way to be trained in fatigue and caution, more than in courage and force. It meant absolute rejection of gratuitous risk, of the stupid sacrifice of life, the most precious gift that God has given us. In the words of Abbé Henry, "It is better to fail a hundred times climbing a mountain than succeed in losing a life once" (Henry 1905).

For a Christian alpinist, the mountains were not a place of bold enterprise, but of socialization and discipline, a place of education in life and care. It was not a "fight against the mountains," but a "fight the alpinist carries on by himself, or with the brotherly solidarity of a group of climbers, against the weight of his own body that tends to drag him down to his weaknesses and miseries (…) Only the latter will refrain him from rising and deeply understanding the Mountains, the work and temple of God," wrote the *Rivista dei giovani*, published by the Salesians in Turin in 1936 (Carroccio 1936). Climbing the mountains became a real educational metaphor, an activity where "there is no competition, emulation, envy, selfishness, but only the bare cliff pointing to the sky towards God." Therefore, alpinism

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FIGURE 2 Final ascent to the summit of the Plattkofel (2955 m) in the Italian Dolomites: an example of the goals that Catholic Alpinism tried to encourage. (Photo courtesy of Peter Nausester, www.BERGFOTOS.com)



could be considered "a branch of ascetic theology, while the ascension was a pilgrimage to the Mount of the Lord." It was not "something for daredevils; on the contrary, it was all a question of caution, a bit of courage, strength and perseverance, a feeling for nature and its more hidden beauties," stated Achille Ratti, the alpinist Pope Pius XI, who saw mountains as the ideal place to experience religion (Bobba and Mauro 1923).

The curate of Saint-Nicolas, Abbé Bionaz, defined the concept as an *alpinisme à l'eau de rose* (sentimental alpinism) in 1921. In other words, those ascensions accomplished "without much suffering, without dangers or fears on the summits which were not really unreachable" (Bionaz 1921). An alpinism accessible to all, even to women, although, as Abbé Henry advised, it was better they stopped at the limits of grazing lands, "flowers amongst flowers," leaving the glaciers and jutting cliffs to the men (Henry 1935).

Catholic associations and the political use of mountains after 1900

When alpinists in all European countries began to plant national flags on Alpine summits, Catholics began to celebrate mass and to erect crosses and statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary on mountain summits. In a few years, around 1900, all the most important (or most visible) summits in Italy became lands to conquer and to mark with holy symbols. Altars were set up in the name of the Lord, as a symbol of a renewed alliance (Cuaz 2005a).

The mountains became a battlefield, not only among the national Alpine clubs, committed to the "war of the flags," but also among the sporting associations, lay and religious, liberal and socialist, which were competing to reach the summit with their symbols to establish a scale of courage (Pastore 2003). For Catholic alpinists, the prize was not conquering the summits, but controlling youngsters' spare time and the larger and larger number of young people participating in alpine trips.

While in the big cities more and more associations were engaged in the organization of trips to the mountains, with programs sometimes inspired by socialism, religious institutions involved in and with the sporting associations came to regard the mountains as an ideal field for the solace of families, and in particular youth. No longer was Catholic Alpinism the privilege of a few mountaineer-priests or of priest-scientists climbing with a barometer and a herbal. Instead, a type of mass alpinism had been created which aimed to be a project in social discipline, a precise pedagogical mountaineering plan, supported by the Holy See, and carried out by the Salesians and the Catholic Action.

While the secular alpinism of the first half of the 20th century, supported by nationalist propaganda, was becoming the supreme sport of courage and a proof of patriotic heroism, Catholics kept going to the mountains in larger numbers, following their ordinary routes, taking with them students from schools and seminars,

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inventing the holiday home and the summer camp, accompanying women, children, and teenagers. They considered alpinism the sporting discipline most suitable for shaping the Catholic militant's temperament, and the mountains a sort of ideal symbol, a remote and unblemished refuge, far from the temptations of the city and the summer beach resort—"such a morally miserable place, that all the ocean is not enough to wash away," warned the *Salesian Review* (Hoornaert 1934).

At the core of all this social activity was the trip—a moment of joy and "sincere enjoyment" (very far from the traditional custom of pilgrimage), of socialization and education, always under the guidance of a trip leader, with an easily attainable aim, even for inexperienced alpinists, and in which it was convenient to involve a large number of participants. It was not important to discover new routes, to solve mountaineering problems, to experience new techniques and materials. The crucial point was to create a gathering point that was completely different from lay places; and where "a path that leads to God" could be set against the modern "sporting craze." It was essential "to combine love for the mountains with scrupulous compliance with the principles of faith," "to promote walks in the mountains, during which the same care has to be taken for physical activity as well as for the fulfillment of one's duty of the celebration of masses on holidays" (Anonymous 1914).

Sporting antifascism?

Confronted by Fascism and growing state control over sports and all forms of popular association (Pastore 2003), the Catholic alpinist world took responsibility for difficult choices. It was unthinkable to join the militarist and heroic ideology of official alpinism, because it was a means of celebrating the regime, glorifying "race" and exalting virility, and searching for "beautiful death." Nevertheless, it was impossible to survive without obeying the authorities and devotedly collaborating with the government to train good soldiers. The only remaining strategy was the one supported by the Vatican itself. The latter was prepared to sacrifice its more exposed organizations (the scouts) in order to save the more popular ones (ie Catholic Action). This encouraged Catholic circles to join fascist organizations, while preserving their autonomy in the name of sacramental rites and the organization of different religious celebrations (Cuaz 2005b).

If "sporting antifascism" does not seem appropriate, we still have the testimony of the Catholic world, which preserved autonomous religious values objectively, in opposition to fascist pedagogy, which annoyed the regime. Catholic Alpinism was certainly a radical popular alternative to Fascism's concept of sport and to its political use of the mountains. In all likelihood, Fascism did not succeed in molding sports because the Church, and particularly groups like Catholic Action and the Salesian oratories, kept much of the extra-scholastic education of the young under their control and organized adults' spare time on Sunday.

In the 1930s, when the news was focusing on the conquest of the Eiger North Wall and on fantastic climbing feats in the Dolomites, Catholic Alpinism did not count great enterprises and sporting heroes among its numbers (perhaps this is why it disappeared from the history books). Nonetheless, the pedagogical use of the mountains invented by the mountaineer-priests and Catholic 18th-century pedagogues remained one of the most prominent cultural alternatives to Fascism's mythology of the superhuman and to the prevailing political use of sports in the totalitarian regimes in this period. For many young people, Catholic hiking was the only occasion to live an alternative to the rhetoric of the "knights of the mountains" (Pastore 2003). It was an opportunity to listen to a different voice: a voice talking about caution and care, love and attention, nature and God, a school where the expression "our mountains" did not mean a borderline land to conquer and to defend, but a familiar landscape to discover and respect (Cuaz 2005b).

Catholic Alpinism after the Second World War

After World War II and the demise of Fascism, one of the most recurrent arguments in Catholic assessments of alpinism was the defense of mountains: a defense against the construction of cableways, streets, buildings, and huge hotels; against a mass tourism accused of the degradation of mankind and its environment, and a modernization of the mountains that was moving skyscrapers into grazing lands and turning mountain dwellers into tourist operators.

"Let's defend our cliffs," said the periodical *Giovane Montagna* in 1951; "is it really inevitable that reserved inhabitants of the mountains, quiet climbers, and enthusiastic excursionists, should be trampled by speculators?" Cableways and aerial ropeways were a "profanation of the holy temple of those who loved the mountains." Natale Reviglio, the president of *Giovane Montagna*, added: "Today's popular custom, maybe too popular, of going back and forth from the mountains—so easily reachable by anyone who has other reasons than exploring or conquering the inside or outside worlds—has become nothing more than a by-product of urbanization. Weekend or seasonal trips to the mountains are meaningless and have become a tasteless habit of people based in towns who put them on the same level as going skiing, dancing, watching a football match, or reaching the Refuge of Turin by aerial ropeways" (Reviglio 1951).

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The second relevant argument was the rejection of "spectacular" alpinism, a "curse of our times," and of new forms of climbing, from free climbing to ice-fall climbing—gratuitous risks, circus shows that had nothing to do with real alpinism. Catholic alpinists were asked to "forgo a bit of their ambition and instead commit themselves to a wholesome alpinism" (De Mori 1969). That kind of alpinism brought caution and harmony into the relation between man and the mountains. It was not important to conquer the summit; what counted was the path of virtue. "Anyone can be an alpinist," said Fausto Masante, a priest from Padova, "no matter what summit he wants to reach: it could be the summit of a high mountain or of a low hill, provided that his body is subdued to the spirit in order to get ready for other tests either in the mountains or in everyday life." Catholic Alpinism is not "an academy, nor a complicated technical method with an end in itself, nor is it noisy and merry hiking, but rather traditional physical activity of caution and courage" (Masante 1969). It is, for the writer Armando Biancardi, "an ascension of energy, self-restraint, endurance to fatigue, solidarity and charity;" therefore, it is essential to modern man who "has lost the sense of suffering" (Biancardi 1959).

Conservando renovare (renew by conserving) was the slogan that Catholic associations used in the post-war period—above all preserving and retrieving the "spiritual and religious contentment" of alpinism (Ravelli 1969). In the face of the "whirling movement of crowds during the celebration of masses on holidays in the evenings or on the eves," the "degradation" provoked by the invasion of tourists, unauthorized building, the abandoning of grazing lands and traditional trades by mountaineers who became hoteliers or ski instructors, alpinism changed into "funambulism, with the sole help of artificial means… that keep its users from enjoying the fascination of the mountains." In the face of the death of traditional alpinism, it was necessary to restore an in-depth use of the mountains, to find again "the spiritual relation between man and mountains." "The future of alpinism," said Don Gianni Scroccaro in 1991, "will be possible only if a return to spirit occurs" (Scroccaro 1991). That could be an indication both of the continuity of symbolic needs in mountain practices and of the necessity to continuously re-invent and reproduce them.

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