

## First economist saint packs contemporary punch

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 30, 2012 NCR Today

**ROME** -- Giuseppe Toniolo, a renowned late 19th and early 20th century lay Italian economist and political theorist, was beatified on Sunday in Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, the final step before a formal declaration of sainthood. Among other claims to fame, Toniolo is now the first economist ever beatified by the Catholic church.

(Toniolo's sainthood process began in 1951. He was declared "venerable" by Pope Paul VI in 1971, and beatified under Benedict XVI in 2012. That's a gap of 20 years to cross the first threshold, and 41 years to reach the second. If a similar trajectory continues, we can probably expect canonization in about 80 years, somewhere around 2092.)

During his Regina Coeli remarks on Sunday, Pope Benedict XVI referred to Toniolo as a figure of "great relevance" for today.

For one thing, as Stefano Zamagni, a leading Italian economist who advised Pope Benedict XVI on his 2009 social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, has observed, given the state of the global economy these days, the "dismal science" could undoubtedly use some celestial support.

More broadly, Toniolo's legacy has a contemporary feel for five reasons.

### *1. An exclamation point on social teaching*

Toniolo was among the pioneers of Catholic social teaching during the period of its infancy. He helped lay the intellectual groundwork for Pope Leo XIII's landmark 1893 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, and was among the most energetic propagators of a distinctively Catholic approach to the new social questions raised by the industrial age.

Toniolo was an early Catholic advocate of labor unions (he favored the so-called "white unions," as opposed to the "red" unions linked to Marxism), the fight against child labor and exploitation of workers, mandatory days off work, just wages and access to credit, and a number of other social reforms. He was part of a budding European network of Catholic social thinkers in the late 19th century pushing similar ideas; one of his fellow-travelers in Germany was a fiery social priest and founder of a political party for farmers and workers by the name of Monsignor Georg Ratzinger, who, as it happens, was the great-uncle of Benedict XVI.

In that sense, Toniolo's beatification is a way of putting an exclamation point on the legacy of Catholic social teaching, which is sometimes wistfully called the church's "best-kept secret."

### *2. Intermediary bodies*

On the level of theory, Toniolo advocated a form of what's known as "corporatism," a vision with historical roots in the guild system of medieval Italy. (Toniolo grew up in the Veneto region, centered on Venice.) In

practice, Toniolo put great stress on intermediary institutions standing between the individual and the state – the family, professional groups, voluntary associations, unions, and so on.

Toniolo saw these intermediary bodies as the best expression of what Catholic social thought would later come to call “subsidiarity,” meaning not substituting centralized authority for what can better be handled at lower levels, or privately.

Especially at a time in the United States when there’s ferment about the ability of faith-based groups to play this intermediary role without compromising their religious identity, that aspect of Toniolo’s thought may be of special relevance.

### ***3. Political homelessness***

Politically speaking, Toniolo parted company with both the dominant trends of his time: laissez-faire capitalism as articulated by Adam Smith, and state-centered socialism as advocated by Karl Marx. He insisted that classic capitalism rested on a false anthropology (assumptions of psychological individualism and egoism), while Marxism centered on a false idolatry of the state.

In remarks to a Rome symposium on Toniolo Sunday afternoon, Zamagni suggested that Toniolo’s unwillingness to side with either of these intellectual and political currents left him “completely isolated,” and, for a time, “almost completely forgotten.”

Translated into the terms of the 21st century, Toniolo was at home neither on the left nor the right. That’s probably a salient reminder that anyone who takes Catholic social theory seriously is likely to wind up “politically homeless,” and that any Catholic who feels too much at home in any of today’s major political camps might want to ponder Toniolo’s example.

### ***4. The lay role vs. neo-clericalism***

Toniolo was a layman, a married man and father of seven children. In that sense, many observers regard Toniolo as a forerunner of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its vision of the laity as the primary agents of the transformation of the secular world.

Reflecting on Toniolo’s memory could act as an antidote to what Italian Vatican writer Andrea Torielli recently described as a growing tendency of “many prelates to interest themselves too much in politics, in political alignments, in who gets nominated for public entities, in the mass media, and to intervene often – sometimes, extremely often – in issues where it could be done with greater liberty by lay Catholics.”

To be clear that he wasn’t just talking about Italy, Torielli warned of a “neo-clericalism emerging in various countries – which seems to consider the laity solely as the “secular arm” of a hierarchy that directs everything, or at least wants to direct everything, often well beyond the boundaries of its competence.”

In a message dispatched to a symposium organized to celebrate the memory of Toniolo, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican’s Secretary of State, underlined his importance as a model of lay activism.

In every historical moment there were pioneers who gave a new impulse and vigor to the gospel’s perennial message of salvation,” Bertone said. “In the first millennium it was predominantly the monks, and in the second it was the mendicant orders. In the third, I’m convinced it will be principally the laity, as the witness of Giuseppe Toniolo demonstrates.”

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### ***5. Overcoming polarization***

Catholicism in the Italy of Toniolo's day was every bit as polarized as the church of today. The fault lines didn't run along today's culture wars, but the so-called "Roman question" concerning whether Catholics could make their peace with the loss of the Papal States and the new secular Italian nation.

Beneath that divide was a fundamental clash between Catholics nostalgic for the ancien régime, the so-called "intransigents," and modernizers eager for détente with democracy and secular thought.

At a time when virtually everyone felt compelled to stand in one camp or the other, Toniolo was a rare figure who seemed to span both. He took part in the organizations linked to the intransigents, but also kept open lines of communication with the modernizers, engaging in frequent and warm correspondence with the leading liberal thinkers.

Ecclesiastically, of the four popes during his lifetime (Pius IX, Leo XIII, Pius X and Benedict XV), Toniolo was probably closest in spirit to the reform-minded Pope Leo XIII. Yet when the staunchly conservative Pius X took over in 1904 and launched an anti-modernist crackdown, Toniolo never went into the opposition camp; he once wrote, "I desire and want, with the grace of God, to adhere to the Holy See in every argument without exception."

That adherence, however, was never uncritical. During the anti-modernist years, he gently tried to cajole the powers that be toward engagement with the new world being born. Italian Minister Lornezo Ornaghi compared Toniolo to English Cardinal John Henry Newman, another towering figure of 19th century Catholicism, in the sense that both men "offered the motives for a reasonable faith to those who believe, and laid the basis for friendship with those who don't."

Toniolo tried to found an international Catholic association for the progress of science even at the height of the anti-modernist period, which arrived still-born. Yet he also inspired the foundation of a new Catholic university in Italy, which became the massive University of the Sacred Heart in Milan.

In that sense, Toniolo's legacy perhaps offers a lesson for navigating the tribal divisions in Catholic life today. In effect, he's a model for how to remain in touch with officialdom, without surrendering the effort to push the church forward.

(As a footnote, it's ironic that the memory of someone who tried hard to straddle the divides of his day recently became embroiled in a classic example of ecclesiastical in-fighting. As part of the Vatican leaks scandal, correspondence surfaced in early March showing that Bertone had attempted last year to take control of the "Toniolo Institute," which is the governing body for the University of the Sacred Heart. The university's affiliated institutions include the famed Gemelli Clinic in Rome, where a private suite of rooms is always reserved for the pope. In the end, Benedict XVI sided with the Italian bishops, a rare instance in which he overruled Bertone, a longtime friend and aide.)

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