

# Mobility and Circulation of Ideas Within the Mediterranean Basin: Mediterranean Colloquia in Florence and Italian Foreign Policy (1958-64)

## Abstract

This contribution aims to propose an interpretation of the Florence Mediterranean Colloquia, promoted by Giorgio La Pira between 1958 and 1964, as an opportunity for the mobility of men and the shaping of ideas around a common political project for peace in the enlarged Mediterranean. Inspired by Muhammad V's trip to Italy in January 1957 and by the outcomes of La Pira's visit to Rabat a few months later, the four Florentine colloquia constituted important moments of political and intellectual confrontation between some of the protagonists on issues that marked the destiny of the entire region at that time: the Algerian conflict, the Arab-Israeli question, and the decolonisation of sub-Saharan Africa. Two dynamics gave political concreteness to La Pira's initiatives: the support of the Italian ruling class, in search of a new international role for the country that would make it a bridge between the West and the South; and the contacts that La Pira had with political personalities who were protagonists of that scenario.

## Keywords

Giorgio La Pira, Peace, Mediterranean, Italy, Africa

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## Introduction

The Mediterranean Colloquia held in Florence between 1958 and 1964 refer to a series of appointments among figures from the worlds of culture, academia and politics coming from areas involved in the historical conflicts of the Mediterranean basin. Those meetings represented moments of discussion and confrontation, occasions for dialogue, interesting opportunities for debate on future developments and the actual role of the actors involved. The main promoter and tireless supporter of these initiatives was Giorgio La Pira. Besides showing the Sicilian professor's personal commitment and his sensitivity to issues of peace and international cooperation, his contribution takes on a precise political connotation when linked to three essential factors: the ideas that inspired Italian foreign policy between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s and, in particular, the attention that a part of the Italian ruling class devoted to the prospects for peace and development in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern area, along with the inevitable impact that this attention had on Italian relations with its Euro-Atlantic allies; the political sensitivity that La Pira shared with that part of the Italian ruling class and which made those meetings politically relevant; and, finally, the contacts that La Pira established with leading political figures – often from divergent positions – of the Mediterranean scenario.

This contribution aims to look at the Florence Mediterranean Colloquia and the importance they represented as an opportunity for an exchange of visions and the development of ideas around a common political project for peace through dialogue in the “Enlarged Mediterranean” (Corrao and Redaelli 2021). Inspired by Muhammad V, the Sultan of Morocco's trip to Italy in January 1957 and by the outcomes of a visit to Rabat that La Pira made a few months later, the four Florentine colloquia represented important opportunities for political and intellectual dialogue among some of the main characters of the international and regional scenario on issues that at that time marked the destiny of the entire region and extended beyond its borders: the Algerian conflict, the Arab-Israeli question, and the decolonisation of sub-Saharan Africa (Villani 2005). The complexity of this framework makes it necessary to place the Florentine colloquia in a clear-cut framework, highlighting the dynamics that drove Italian foreign policy at that stage, analysing the role of Giorgio La Pira and emphasising the connections between La Pira, Italian political leaders and the many voices that were being raised in favour of the full emancipation of colonial peoples from the newly independent countries.

## Italian Foreign Policy and the Mediterranean: National Context and International Dynamics

As is well-acknowledged, with admission to the United Nations (UN) in 1955 Italy achieved its final and total reintegration into the international community and enhanced a foreign policy that tried to combine the Atlantic and Europeanist commitment – i.e. the basis of post-war foreign policy choices – with a renewed interest in the Mediterranean area, the Arab world and, more generally, the countries of the so-called “Third World” (Varsori 2022). From this perspective, the Mediterranean acquired a decisive political dimension for Italian foreign policy, which appeared to be in line with post-war choices (Di Nolfo 1990; 1996).

The image of Italy as a bridge not only between East and West, but also between Western Europe and the enlarged Mediterranean, represented a new opportunity due somewhat to the “anticolonialist option” of 1949, which potentially created an opportunity for reconciling national interests with the idea of achieving greater prestige and diplomatic weight within the Atlantic Alliance, thus forging a special connection with the United States in the prospect of a decline of the old colonial powers (Bagnato 1992; Brogi 1996; Calandri 1997; Tosi 2003a). From these latter, Italy had tried to differentiate itself, though with difficulty. While the idea of settling common intents with Washington was achievable, it appeared more difficult indeed to maintain solidarity with Western allies that still maintained colonial interests in the Mediterranean area, particularly France. De Gasperi, who was aware of the tensions that the Italian anticolonial approach would provoke in relations with the Paris government, chose to limit this attempt of differentiation to a policy of cultural relations, deepened by moments of extra-governmental debate (Bagnato 1991; Pizzigallo 2006).

After the end of the De Gasperi era, increased dynamism permitted by the first East-West *Détente* pushed interest in the Mediterranean back to the top of Italy’s political agenda, and an international policy strategy began to develop that would allow Italy to combine post-war choices with the new international dynamics. Pursuing the same vision of the centrist governments, the Liberal Gaetano Martino – as Foreign Minister and member of the NATO Committee of the Three Wise Men in 1956 – indeed followed the idea of improving Article 2 of the Atlantic Pact, supporting cooperation on non-military fields as an integral part of the Atlantic project (de Leonardis 2017; Villani 2018).

This approach – which Martino pursued also after the approval of the report and until the end of his appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in March 1957 – was aimed at definitively acquiring equal status with the Atlantic allies and, at the same time, broadening its diplomatic horizons (de Leonardis 1999).

Domestically, the easing of tension between East and West also had obvious effects on the Italian political system, which was engaged in the difficult transition to a stable balance. A climate of coexistence built the conditions for systematic dialogue between Catholics and Socialists on a basis of international politics as “the ideal and privileged sphere in which to measure the possibility of bringing the two parties together on common ground” (Bagnato 2002: XVI).<sup>1</sup> As is well-known, the Italian Socialist Party started a series of reflections on Italy’s international role and from 1955 – and with greater intensity following the events in Hungary one year later – accepted the Atlantic Alliance and opened up to an entente with the Christian Democrats. The consequence of all of this was to encourage them to revise relations with the Italian Communist Party (Colarizi 1992: 229).

This view, supported by the Socialist Secretary Pietro Nenni, found support in the left wing of the Christian Democrats, at that stage represented by the Christian Democratic Secretary Amintore Fanfani and the newly appointed President of the Republic Giovanni Gronchi, and in a substantial part of the national economic establishment, in the figure of ENI’s President Enrico Mattei. These were members of the second generation of Christian Democrats, in terms of social background, education and political proposals, who were distant from De Gasperi’s entourage, and who had come to politics during the 1930s through social question issues. This was a generation committed to the project of the country’s post-war social and economic reconstruction and renewal, animated by an activism and internationalism partly derived from their own political and religious experience (Formigoni 1998; Giovagnoli 1996: 69-73; Malgeri 1988: 21-2). La Pira shared a common cultural and political horizon with this generation.

## **La Pira’s Political Background and Origins of the Mediterranean Colloquia**

Born in Pozzallo, Sicily, and raised politically in the circles of the Catholic University of Milan, after the outbreak of the Second World War, La Pira started his political activity and developed a series of reflections on the themes of

pacifism and Christian universalism. He pursued a strenuous struggle against the power politics led by the Fascist regime and, together with Don Primo Mazzolari, represented one of the few Catholic voices of protest against the war (Campanini 1982: 195-206). He condemned nationalism and the power politics carried on by Fascism, and later this view became a common ground of reflection among members of the “Civitas Humana” group, among whom there were Giuseppe Dossetti and Amintore Fanfani. The Dossetti group in the post-war period highlighted the importance of a strong political commitment to build institutions based on democracy and social justice (Moro 2006).

As a Dossettian, La Pira, therefore, experienced the transition from Fascism to the Republic and made his own fundamental contribution to the work of the Constituent Assembly. In that context, he had the opportunity to express his position on the issues of peace and war by intervening, among other things, in the debates on Article 11 and in discussions on the ratification of the peace treaty (Giovannoni 2003: 36-7). Following this, during the debate on the Western choice, the Sicilian professor expressed a position on international policy issues that distinguished him from much of his party. He pointed out some elements of absolute irreconcilability between the Italian experience and the US capitalist model and approach. The goal of social and economic renewal, according to the Dossettians, was linked to a renewal of the Italian initiative at an international level, outside bipolar schemes and in favour of a neutral policy, which was considered to be closer to both national interests and the Catholic political tradition (Vezzosi 1988: 195-221).

With Dossetti’s exit from the political scene and after his only government experience as Undersecretary of Labour, La Pira, despite his new position as mayor of Florence, continued to support the line of the left wing of the Christian Democratic Party, and in particular the line of the party’s new secretary, Fanfani. La Pira shared the project to give Italy a more dynamic role on the international arena with Fanfani (Tosi and Giovagnoli 2010), with the Christian Democrat Giovanni Gronchi (Varsori and Mazzei 2017) and with Enrico Mattei – since 1953 at the helm of the new ENI company (Bagnato et al. 2022b; Maugeri 1994) – and, consequently, a respectable international status both in the Euro-Atlantic sphere and towards the new group of countries arising from the Bandung Conference.

In accordance with this political background, La Pira’s political sensitivity developed and led him to become a protagonist of the Florentine colloquia, giving room to dialogue among the Mediterranean countries. In La Pira’s con-

ception, the Mediterranean was a multi-faceted area: it was a border between Europe and Africa as well as an area of meeting between different cultures; it was a place of conflict but also of possible dialogue, due to the common roots among the three monotheistic religions; it was a crucial and strategic theatre of the dynamics of the Cold War, as well as a midline between the North and South of the World. The several dimensions of that area, being an advantage rather than a limit, could make it a kind of laboratory from which perspectives of dialogue and peace were to emerge and that Italy, as a Mediterranean, European and Western actor, was to grasp (Bagnato 2022a: XLII-XLV; Villani 2005).

In January 1952, La Pira started the reflections and dialogue with Mediterranean partners by organising the Conferences for Peace and Christian Civilisation, inaugurated in a climate of pacifist mobilisation following the Korean conflict. La Pira succeeded in gathering 24 representatives of consular representations based in Florence – with the only exception of representatives of communist countries – with the support of the Standing Committee of International Conferences of the Lay Apostolate, chaired by Vittorino Veronese, one of the figures who were more sensitive to the importance of international issues (Giovannoni 2007; Vecchio 1993: 315-6). That meeting was called again every year until 1956 without the official support of Palazzo Chigi, which, while limiting itself publicly to the formula “neither support nor discourage”,<sup>2</sup> continued to finance these events.<sup>3</sup>

The Conferences for Peace and Christian Civilisation introduced fundamental issues into the public debate, such as the impossibility of war, the historical and political rise of newly independent countries, competitive coexistence, and disarmament (Ballini 2005: 22-46; La Pira 1971). The meetings were joined by the Convention of Mayors of the World’s Capitals between 2 and 5 October 1955, which introduced La Pira to non-European worlds and cultures and led him to new reflections which he later developed during the meetings of the World Federation of United Cities (De Giuseppe 2022). Moreover, these events paved the way for a series of contacts with the Arab world, leading La Pira to establish new contacts with the leaders of the countries of the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East.

In the summer of 1956, La Pira had his first contacts with Nasser during the Suez crisis, taking advantage of his acquaintance with Taha Hussein, former Egyptian Minister of Education and a regular attendee of the Conferences for Peace and Christian Civilisation (Bagnato 2022a: XLIX; Giovannoni 2008:

164, 166). La Pira succeeded in establishing direct relations with the Egyptian leader, with whom he maintained a constant epistolary relationship. Besides expressing solidarity for the process of rebirth of the Arab world, during the preparations for the First Mediterranean Colloquium, La Pira stressed the need for Nasser to “find the fundamental links of unity between the world of Arab and Muslim civilisation and the world of Christian civilisation” (Merli and Sparisci 1995: 151-4). Moreover, La Pira also sought contacts with other leading figures in the Arab world, including Jordan’s leader King Hussein and the Moroccan Sultan Muhammad V (De Siervo and Giovannoni 1988: 376-7; Merli and Sparisci 1995: 151-4). It was the latter who exerted a decisive influence in organising the Mediterranean Colloquia. In early 1957, the Sultan paid a private visit to Italy and met with the President of the Republic Gronchi, the Prime Minister Antonio Segni, and the Foreign Minister, Martino. He was also welcomed by La Pira at Palazzo Vecchio and formed a personal relationship with him that would bind Florence and Rabat for a long time. It was on that occasion that the Moroccan Sultan launched the idea of a meeting between European and African states to create a direct channel of dialogue between the two continents, identifying Italy as the most suitable interlocutor to launch the project and envisioning that a peaceful solution of the Algerian conflict might arise from that meeting (Bagnato 2022a: L; La Pira 1979: 260).

Other contacts with Morocco were carried on through correspondence between La Pira and Ben Hima, Morocco’s ambassador to Italy, as well as through a series of journeys: the visits of the mayor of Florence and Mattei to Rabat during summer 1957 and, soon after that, the Crown Prince Moulay el Hassan’s arrival in Florence in September to participate in the Verna celebrations (Bagnato 2005b: 297-332; Giovannoni 2006: 85; La Pira 1979). This exchange was fruitful in shaping the idea of organising a meeting, gathering delegations from the Arab-Muslim, Christian and Jewish worlds, a natural and further evolution of the Conferences for Peace and Christian civilisation held until 1956. La Pira announced the organisation of the First Mediterranean Colloquium on 25 December 1957, during a long trip that the mayor of Florence made to the Middle East (Bagnato 2022a: L). Travelling from the Holy Land to North Africa and visiting places and leaders, La Pira conceived the perspective for continuous and fruitful confrontation and dialogue among the peoples of the three monotheistic religions as the only chance to eradicate the economic, political and religious roots of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern conflicts. The Mediterranean peoples had, in La Pira’s view, a common mission

of civilisation and peace, a responsibility for the historical revival and pacification of the area. Italy, and in particular the Tuscan capital, could represent the crucial theatre of this both religious and political design. As La Pira wrote several times, Italy could draw the Mediterranean nations to itself and make the Mediterranean like “the great lake of Tiberias” (Giovannoni 2006: 65-78). This was a historical hypothesis, supported by the evolution of Italian politics and the behaviour of its protagonists (Fanfani 1978: 118-24). And it was precisely to the latter, so very sensitive to La Pira’s ideals, that the Florentine mayor turned on several occasions when organising the Mediterranean Colloquia between 1958 and 1964.

## **Inauguration of the Mediterranean Colloquia**

The First Mediterranean Colloquium took place in a political context that was potentially encouraging. During the preparation of the meeting, La Pira involved President Gronchi, who was particularly favourable to assigning Italy a stabilising role vis-à-vis geographically close regions such as the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Gronchi 1956: 39-40). Gronchi was given direct responsibility by La Pira, who counted on him to make Italy the guide for the Mediterranean countries, a guide with “a strong social brand [...] and a strong spiritual and religious brand” (Merli and Sparisci 1995: 64-6). Similar and more confidential invitations were addressed to Fanfani, whom La Pira asked to look at Italy’s role in the Mediterranean as a bridge between the Christian West and the Muslim world, proposing Florence as an ideal place to establish “essential metapolitical relations among all the nations of the earth” (Fanfani 1978: 110-16; Selmi and Nerozzi 2003: 116). In this perspective, he counted on the network of relationships established through the previous Colloquia for Peace and Christian Civilisation and on the ties that included Florence in the network of mayors of world cities in an intercultural and interreligious momentum (De Giuseppe 2022: 65). This perspective gave the Mediterranean Colloquia an obvious political dimension, as La Pira was to remember a few years later: “Our Florentine colloquia and conferences (even if, as they argue, ‘private’) [he declared in inaugurating the Third Mediterranean Colloquium] are not only cultural or academic or touristic colloquia, no: they are, albeit indirectly, colloquia and conferences of a political nature (in the non-contingent, but profound and high sense of the term): they are, in a certain sense, colloquia and conferences between ‘leaders of peoples,’ between ‘shepherds of peoples,’ [...] that is, among men who are responsible and committed – in different



ways and at different levels: cultural, political, economic, scientific, technical, spiritual. In the present history of the world: they are talks and conferences therefore destined to introduce some essential leaven into the present historical motion”.<sup>4</sup> The peoples and nations of the Mediterranean, La Pira argued, had a common destiny, since they were “rooted in a land and structured in a history whose essential components [were] destined (like the roots of an oak tree) to permanently influence, in all times and in all places, the history of men”. The colloquia thus represented a “moment of reflection, awareness and action” in this historical dynamic.<sup>5</sup>

Organisation for the First Mediterranean Colloquium began in early 1958 with the help of Joe Golan and Pierre Corval, members of the editorial board of the journal *Études Méditerranéennes*. Originally planned for the summer of 1958, the objectives and themes of the first Florentine meeting devoted to Mediterranean issues were highlighted by La Pira himself in the invitation he addressed to leading figures from the Arab and Christian worlds. The colloquium, intended to be “an effective element of reflection, awareness and action,” called on the Mediterranean nations to become protagonists of a “historic revival” of the region and to assume responsibility for its definitive pacification. The topics under discussion ranged from the relationship between colonisers and colonised, prospects for Arab socialism, and religious pluralism in the Mediterranean as a source of peace or conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Postponed from June to October, the meeting took place in a political context that was extremely relevant considering the expected results. In France in June 1958, General de Gaulle went back to head up the government following the escalation of the Algerian conflict; in September, a constitutional referendum in France set in motion the course that would lead to the birth of the Fifth Republic. La Pira’s expectations of this turn in French politics were high, as he linked a political outcome of the Algerian conflict to de Gaulle’s leadership of the country. As early as July 1957, La Pira had written to de Gaulle, the only person who in his opinion could successfully deal with the Algerian crisis, urging him to exert his influence to resolve what was certainly the most intricate issue and harbinger of consequences for the stabilisation of the entire region. In July 1958, La Pira again addressed de Gaulle, who had welcomed the Florentine initiative with words of hope (Bagnato 2005a: 100, 111-12; Bagnato 2022a: LII).

On the Italian side, postponing the meeting made it possible to wait for the results of the Italian political elections that marked the rise of Amintore Fanfani to the government and to the head of the Foreign Ministry (Formigoni

2010: 78-102).<sup>7</sup> While in the early stage of the organisation La Pira had found few sensitive interlocutors among a governing class “lacking in creative imagination” (he was referring to Foreign Minister Martino, an expression of the Liberal Party and the pro-Atlantist political circles opposed to opening to the Left) (Merli and Sparisci 1995: 63), after the elections for the third legislature, new prospects appeared to open up. Fanfani shared La Pira’s momentum and in the inaugural speech of his second cabinet in July 1958 he strongly emphasised Italy’s policy of friendship towards Arab and Mediterranean countries as well as towards Israel (Fanfani 1959: 223-59).

Further evidence of this Italian dynamism was the resourcefulness shown by a state-owned industry, ENI, which in those years, through Mattei, appeared to put government activism into practice in the area of energy supply and co-operation with Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries. In March 1957, an agreement between ENI and Iran for the extraction of oil was signed in Tehran, while already for some months Mattei had been establishing friendly relations with the government of Rabat for the exploration and exploitation of the oil basins in the territory (Bagnato 2004; Tonini 2004).

In organising the event, La Pira was therefore able to count on the facilities that the new government, the Quirinal and a significant part of ENI would provide in Italy; however, he could not avoid the inevitable political tensions and criticism. Despite the reassurances La Pira had obtained from his contacts, and notably from de Gaulle, observers inside and outside the country – particularly the French ambassador in Rome, Gaston Palewski, and the French Foreign Minister – were very concerned: the Algerian question was on the agenda at the Florentine meeting, and some representatives of the National Liberation Front (NLF) like Ahmed Boumendjel and Adda Bouguettat, who had announced the creation of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic on 19 September, had confirmed they would be present. French fears were also linked to the decision to involve Golan and Corval, from the Études Méditerranéennes group, in selecting the guests for the meeting. That group was an expression of left-wing circles of French Catholicism, but also of Maghrebi politicians, such as the Tunisian Bechir Ben Yahmed and the Moroccan Mehdi Ben Barka, who were all well-known supporters of Algerian independence (Bagnato 2004: 209; Cresti and Gregni 2003: 78-81).

The presence of delegations from the United Arab Republic (UAR) and Israel completed the picture of a meeting that promised to be full of tensions but which, in La Pira’s intentions, was to represent “the first generous, Christian

attempt at concord and peace among the nations of the Mediterranean”.<sup>8</sup> It was the Algerian affair that was at centre stage of the discussions that preceded and followed the meeting (Bagnato 2005a: 114-16). Up to that point, the Italian government had been careful to avoid any criticism of the French position or of meddling in its foreign policy. In fact, the French government had on several occasions expressed absolute denial of any form of mediation on the part of Western partners, considering the Algerian issue a purely internal affair (Bagnato 2016: 113-25; Mourlane 2001: 425-49). Even when Gronchi proposed a possible mediation in May 1957 during official talks with French Foreign Minister Christiane Pineau, and President of the Republic René Coty, de Gaulle had reiterated his opposition to internationalising the issue.<sup>9</sup> After admission to the UN, Italy had to face the Algerian dilemma, trying to find a useful line to hold together solidarity with an ally, on the one hand, and the need to maintain the consensus of the countries of the Afro-Asian group at the General Assembly, on the other. When this latter proposed the item on the agenda of the UN General Assembly, the Italian delegation in New York maintained a line of sympathetic understanding of French interests, avoiding the opening of any debate that was certainly amplified by the anti-colonialist spirit of a growing portion of the UN members.<sup>10</sup> Foreign Minister Martino, between 1956 and 1957, had repeatedly considered the possibility of an autonomous initiative by the Italian delegation;<sup>11</sup> after the item was put on the agenda despite French protests, the Italian delegation joined the draft resolution presented by a group of countries, mostly Latin American ones, which expressed hope for a peaceful solution to the question.<sup>12</sup> Attilio Piccioni, as a member of the Italian delegation at the UN, also maintained the same line of mediation, and, during the debate at the First Commission of the UN General Assembly, stressed the goodwill shown by France during the discussion and the importance of a negotiated solution for the maintenance of peace in the Mediterranean (Villani 2007).<sup>13</sup>

Fanfani's arrival at the head of government and of the Foreign Ministry also gave a decisive impulse to Italian foreign policy in the Mediterranean area and, certainly, furthered La Pira's goal of assigning the colloquia as much resonance as possible. However, at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs caution continued to be suggested in relations with the Quai d'Orsay on any issue concerning anti-colonialism. Preparing for Fanfani's visit to Paris in the summer of 1958, the Italian Foreign Ministry recommended caution, while recognising the need for consultation between Rome and Paris on Mediterranean and African affairs that directly affected Italy's security and development.<sup>14</sup>

Although not an official initiative of the Italian government, the First Mediterranean Colloquium was encouraged by the activism of some Italian embassies, and especially by the physical presence of Fanfani, President Gronchi, the Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Alberto Folchi, the Director general of Political Affairs at Palazzo Chigi Carlo Alberto Straneo, and the former Prime Minister Adone Zoli.<sup>15</sup> The institutional deployment urged by La Pira “for the prestige of Italy and for the peace of nations”, gave the meeting a clear political importance.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the group of Études Méditerranéennes, special guests of the colloquium included some of the best-known scholars from the Arab world, as well as political and diplomatic figures: professors of the Collège de France like Jacques Berque, Charles-André Julien, Louis Masignon; some political representatives like Senator Edgar Pisani and the General Secretary of the Congrès des peuples contre l’impérialisme, Jean Rous; Jean Amrouche, poet and writer of Berber origin; Jesuit Father Jean Daniélou, already present at the Conferences for Peace and Christian Civilisation and an exponent of the Council renewal current; the consul in Florence, Jean-Félix Charvet (Bagnato 2005a: 116; Billion and Prevel 1986: 122 Cresti and Gregni 2003: 78-81; De Giuseppe 2022: 31).

The First Colloquium opened on 3 October 1958 and, contrary to plans, La Pira was unable to attend due to health problems. As expected, the discussion focused on the question of Algerian independence, which some representatives especially dealt with, including, amongst others, Velio Spano, Communist deputy and vice president of the World Peace Council, and Ahmed Boumendjel, leader of the Algerian NLF. The presence of the latter and of Adda Bouguettat provoked the reactions of French delegates, particularly the French consul in Florence, who left the meeting, while Robert Buron, Minister of Public Works and Transport, and Roland Pré, President of the Mines Office of Overseas France, decided not to attend the meeting under pressure from the Quai d’Orsay. Likewise, Israeli delegates, angered by the presence of UAR representatives, also left the meeting (Bagnato 2022a: LIV; Bagnato 2005a: 117).<sup>17</sup>

The Quai d’Orsay’s reactions to the First Colloquium were extremely negative. French diplomacy regarded it as a mere tool of Fanfanian policy and harshly attacked the Italian government for meddling in French internal affairs (Bagnato 2005a: 117-20; Cresti and Gregni 2003: 81-3). However, some studies have pointed out that the first Florentine colloquium created the opportunity for contact between de Gaulle and representatives of the NLF, with whom the Élysée had been trying for some months to create a confidential

channel of communication (Bagnato 2022a: LV-LVIII; Bagnato 2012). The Italian government hastened to respond to the accusations: on 29 October in the Chamber of Deputies, Fanfani, closing the debate on the Foreign Affairs budget, declared that the Italian government looked upon the talks as a meeting “solicited by authoritative exponents of friendly peoples, including the French,” and certainly “appreciated and encouraged by foreign governments as a natural and indispensable moment of the desired future political meetings on other planes”.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Fanfani rejected accusations that he had acted in the shadow in preparing the meeting and recalled that the French delegates, as well as the Israeli ones, were also aware of the contents of the meeting and the various delegations invited. Moreover, Fanfani gave wide assurances that relations with Paris remained outstanding and that after the Florence meeting, he had personally obtained reassurances from de Gaulle regarding peaceful relations between Rome and Paris (Bagnato 2005a: 121-2; Cresti and Gregni 2003: 83-5). This stance was confirmed by the position held by the Italian delegation during discussions at the UN on the Algerian issue immediately after the First Mediterranean Colloquium.<sup>19</sup> Even afterwards – during de Gaulle’s visit to Italy in June 1959, and one month later addressing the Algerian issue at the UN General Assembly – Italy was to maintain a conciliatory approach towards Paris (Bagnato 2005a: 123).

At Palazzo Chigi the Florentine colloquium received good consensus, despite the fact that the journal *Esteri*, notoriously close to the position of the Foreign Ministry, downplayed the meeting assigning it its proper proportions and indicating it as “the meritorious initiative of a private citizen” (Ansaldo 1958: 9-11). The attitude of equidistance taken by the journal and, indirectly, by Italian diplomacy, was more formal than real, similar to the approach at the Conferences for Peace and Christian Civilisation. On 11 October 1958, the Director General of Political Affairs, Straneo, who was present at the opening of the First Mediterranean Colloquium, wrote to La Pira in a friendly tone. In addition to recalling the difficulties Palazzo Chigi had had to manage, in order to appease French irritations at the end of the meeting, Straneo hoped that the following colloquium would be convened precisely in Florence, an ideal city for “creating that atmosphere of tolerance and mutual cooperation necessary for the work of the meeting”.<sup>20</sup> The Italian government at the time positively evaluated the colloquium, which corresponded to Fanfani’s foreign policy view and had given consideration, not without difficulty and discontent, to the anti-colonialist demands of the Mediterranean countries. It was understandable,

then, that the government's attempt to be neutral on the initiative, indicated from the outset as an unofficial event, did not convince French diplomatic circles. It was true indeed that there were close links between the mayor's initiatives and Fanfani's policies. In the aftermath of the colloquium and referring to the events that troubled France in the closing months of 1958, La Pira wrote to Fanfani: "Whenever France fails, it becomes more imperious for Italy (and for you personally) to exercise a political mandate on a scale not only of the Mediterranean, but of the world" (Merli and Sparisci, 1995: 80-5; Selmi and Nerozzi, 2003: 231-3).<sup>21</sup> Fanfani, according to La Pira, was endowed with a special geographical vocation that naturally led him to assume the role of leading the nation. He did not shy away from this line, and even in his report to the Christian Democrat Party's National Council on 15 November 1958, affirmed the need for "loyal international cooperation" and "expanding the area of democracy and prosperity, with particular reference to the Mediterranean area."<sup>22</sup>

## **Widening the Horizon: Conflicts and Decolonisation in Africa (1960-4)**

Comments and reactions to the first Florentine colloquium were intertwined with preparations for the new initiatives, which La Pira organised paying greater attention to political-diplomatic dynamics (Bagnato 2022a: LVIII). At the second meeting, dedicated to "The Mediterranean and its Future," La Pira initially would have liked to involve the communist countries as well, in the wake of the Vatican Ostpolitik inaugurated by Pope John XXIII (Selmi and Nerozzi 2003: 236-8) and following the opening to socialist countries that Italy, like other Western countries, had also initiated in the second half of the 1950s (Bagnato 2003).<sup>23</sup> On that occasion, too, the Sicilian professor contacted Joe Golan, who, through the channels used for the preparation of the First Mediterranean Colloquium, worked to gain new support for the Florentine initiatives.<sup>24</sup> At that stage, La Pira could not count on the favourable presence of Fanfani, who had left the party secretariat and who, since February 1959, was no longer head of the executive. Although his main political referent was temporarily out of the picture, La Pira did not hesitate to address the new government. On 1 June 1960, he wrote to Prime Minister, Fernando Tambroni, asking him for a "wise and prudent" contribution from the government, since the occasion, although not of an official nature, presented "a singular interest" for the country. To facilitate the arrival of the foreign guests, La Pira asked the head of government

to intercede with the ambassadors of Israel, the UAR and France. In making these requests, La Pira said the three countries concerned had also willingly accepted the “discreet and silent” mediation of Palazzo Vecchio in the past.<sup>25</sup> Similar tones were used in the letter sent by La Pira to the new Foreign Minister, Antonio Segni, in which La Pira pointed out the political importance of the appointment: “in this particular moment of international life, mediating events of this kind have a very strong capacity of attraction. It is, it seems to me, an important thing that Italy [Florence] is the venue for these events”.<sup>26</sup>

The Foreign Minister agreed on the “usefulness” of the colloquia and the “considerable and effective interest” they had engendered. However, Segni emphasised the need for the meetings to continue on a private or, rather, “non-governmental” level, so that all participants could be assured “that they were in a meeting to which those present [had] been invited in their personal capacity, without any of them being considered as the official representative of their own country or government”. It was that choice, according to the Minister, that had bestowed so much success and international resonance on the conferences. In his view, it would have been inappropriate, therefore, “to make them appear as officially supported by the Italian government or to associate them with events taking place under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs”.<sup>27</sup> The Italian government thus continued to support the meetings, albeit avoiding exposing that line of mediation and contact to the judgement, certainly not benevolent, of some (Villani 2005).

With Fanfani’s return to government in July 1960, the climate of understanding that had preceded and accompanied the First Colloquium seemed to return. In the government’s programme, expressed in Parliament on 2 August 1960, Fanfani once again reaffirmed the government’s willingness to cooperate with the Mediterranean and developing countries (Fanfani 1961: 75-103).

The second meeting was definitively set for 1 October 1960, in view of a series of contemporary events, including the Congress of the Christian Democrats in Florence – during which the sensitive issue of opening to the left was discussed – and the Franco-Algerian negotiations, which were not to be disturbed through meetings that might arouse tensions with Paris.<sup>28</sup> La Pira opted for a private meeting, also because of the coincidence of the colloquium with the local elections in Florence, and he was particularly careful about the choice of delegates, to avoid the regrettable episodes of the first meeting.<sup>29</sup> Notwithstanding the best of intentions, the crucial topics were again the Algerian question, now on the way to negotiations towards the Evian peace accords, and

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the latter issue, La Pira and his associates worked with similar eagerness and, on several occasions, took steps in the direction of the UAR and President Nasser, in particular. In a letter to King Hussein of Jordan, the mayor of Florence emphasised the need to push Egypt to change its approach towards the Arab-Israeli issue, as he recognised the country could play a decisive role in resolving the conflict.<sup>30</sup>

The last two meetings, scheduled respectively on 19-24 May 1961, and 19-24 June 1964, framed the problems of the entire African continent in the broader perspective of decolonisation and its effects.<sup>31</sup>

The preparation of the Third Colloquium, entitled “Idea of the Mediterranean and Black Africa,” took place according to the usual patterns. La Pira was supported by the initiatives and contacts of his friend Joe Golan, who succeeded in weaving a network of relationships with a number of “friendly” countries within the UN, but also in Washington, where Kennedy’s arrival in the White House seemed to have brought a flurry of renewed interest in the issues of development and pacification in the Mediterranean and in Africa as a whole. It was in the United States that Golan managed to obtain funding for the Florentine events from the American Council on Mediterranean Civilisation, among whose founding members were several names from American academia and politics, including Eleanor Roosevelt.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, in preparing the meeting, La Pira did not cease to take an interest in the Algerian question, putting forward a number of proposals for direct mediation, including that of sponsoring direct mediation between Ferhat Abbas, leader of the Algerian NLF, and de Gaulle. To that end, La Pira also sought to engage Luise Joxe, Minister of Algerian Affairs, and invited him to the Third Mediterranean Colloquium to try to facilitate a negotiated settlement of the conflict (De Giuseppe 2022: 33). Golan punctually responded to these proposals with great caution, attempting to soothe La Pira’s enthusiasm and direct it towards preparation of the event as the only possible venue for conciliation. Despite these suggestions, La Pira still tried to make a contribution to Algerian peace, always claiming authorship of the first gesture of *détente* between the warring parties.<sup>33</sup> In this perspective, he invited some exponents of the Algerian cause to the third Florentine colloquium, including Boualem Oussedik, Chérif Sahli and Adeldkader Chanderli, a sign of the ties between some Italian political and intellectual circles, as well as on the part of ENI, and some representatives of the Maghreb area who had been supporting Algerian independence (Cresti and Gregni 2003: 90). The decision to broaden invita-



tions to the countries of black Africa helped shift the emphasis from the most sensitive issue affecting relations between Rome and Paris, during the most delicate phase of the negotiations.

The need to give the Florentine meetings a broader and more conscious perspective was also part of the climate of more general interest shown for the newly independent countries by Italian Catholicism and the Holy See during John XXIII's pontificate, as expressed in the encyclicals *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, a valuable legacy to Paul VI's later mission (Tosi 2004: 481-517). Recently independent sub-Saharan African states now shared the geographical and historical space of the Mediterranean with the countries of North Africa and the Near East. "One must indeed be devoid of historical intelligence", La Pira stated during the Third Colloquium, "and laden with deafness and historical blindness not to understand the essential contribution that your peoples are destined to make at all levels of individual and collective life in the world".<sup>34</sup>

The topics discussed, and the resonance that the Florentine colloquia acquired on that occasion, also represented an effective means of raising Italian public awareness on the issue of assistance to developing countries, which in the 1950s had seen the first debates and institutional activity. A decade later, the political-institutional debate on foreign aid entered a new phase thanks to the UN's wide-ranging action in favour of newly independent countries. In 1960, in fact, as many as 16 newly independent African countries were admitted to the UN, which from that moment on became a representative forum for the new emerging realities. Italy closely followed the evolution that was taking place at the UN with its usual interest. As already mentioned, the government in Rome had every interest in establishing good relations with these new political actors, for both political and economic reasons. Attention to the problems of development and multilateral assistance to Third World countries, immediately after the launch of the first United Nations Development Decade in 1961, was evident in the activity carried out within the Economic and Social Council, of which Italy was a member from January 1961, as well as within specific bodies such as the Expanded Technical Assistance Program or the UN Special Fund for Development. Italy was also present, from 1961, on the committee in charge of the implementation of the Declaration on the Independence of Colonial Peoples. However, it struggled in pursuing a policy of "differentiation" from the colonial powers, suffering from the constraint of "Western solidarity". At the same time, between 1960 and 1962, Italy had to deal with the South Tyrol question of "self-determination" and worried about

the support that Austria could gain from the anti-colonial front at the UN (Villani 2007: 145-60).

The third Florentine colloquium in 1961 and its openness to African countries was also welcomed by President Gronchi, by then at the end of his term, and the Prime Minister, Fanfani. However, the Foreign Ministry feared for French reactions over the presence of Algeria's unofficial observer to the UN, Chanderli, in Florence. Thus, the Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, Carlo Russo, asked La Pira for more information about the meeting, given the "political repercussions" of that presence.<sup>35</sup> It was precisely in May 1961, in fact, that Franco-Algerian talks were scheduled to resume in Evian. La Pira attempted to curb French and Italian concerns by directly asking the Italian representative in Paris, Franco Maria Malfatti, to do him "the usual courtesy" and appease the French government's tempers over the intentions of the mayor of Florence.<sup>36</sup> The favour of the Italian diplomatic world was also evidenced by missives from the ambassador to Sudan, Ranieri Tallarigo, who, writing to the mayor to praise his initiative, stressed his efforts "to bring the circles of Sudan closer to his initiatives".<sup>37</sup>

The Florentine meeting in May closed with a final document that was an act of denunciation of the colonial system and a wish for the inclusion of newly independent peoples in the world political-economic order. It was during this colloquium that La Pira forged relations with the Senegalese leader, Leopold Senghor, who then welcomed the Florentine mayor to Dakar in October 1962 and a year later visited Florence. These travels were the best starting point for a dialogue on further cooperation initiatives for the development of African countries that were to be started by the two figures within the fruitful context of the World Federation of United Cities (De Giuseppe 2022: 67-8). Moreover, the contact with Senghor set the stage for the following colloquium, which only took place three years later, in June 1964, in a context that would gradually diminish the interest of Italian politics in the Florentine meetings to some extent. Such a wide interval between the two events was due to a number of reasons, partly related to Italian domestic politics. In May 1962 Antonio Segni, notoriously distant from Gronchi's foreign policy sensitivity, was elected to the presidency of the Republic, and in October Enrico Mattei died in a plane crash. On 21 February 1962, after various complex vicissitudes, Amintore Fanfani succeeded in forming a government with the outside support of the Socialist Party, whose programme contained a renewed push in favour of developing countries and a clear choice in favour of multilateral assistance. For Italy, this opened the phase of the final transition to the centre-left, concretely realised

with the formation of the first Moro government in December 1963, with Giuseppe Saragat at the Foreign Office (Tosi and Giovagnoli 2010).

Other features have to be added to this frame: the judicial events involving La Pira beginning in 1961 on the issue of conscientious objection. Bolstered by the evolution that had developed within the Catholic Church on the issue, as reflected in the more conciliatory tones within the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* by John XXIII (Riccardi 1988: 304-27; 2003: 15-29), La Pira resumed the issues of peace and war, the arms race and the devastating consequences of the nuclear weapon tests for the fate of humanity. As the Mediterranean initiatives in Florence had amply demonstrated, conflicts for La Pira did not represent realistic assumptions: dialogue and cooperation represented the only viable paths, not a utopia but concrete historical assessments (Fanfani 1978; La Pira 1971). While distancing themselves from La Pira's "extreme" positions, Italian governments were making their own contributions, to the issues of arms limitation and non-proliferation, in the appropriate places.<sup>38</sup>

Discussions on pacifism, disarmament and assistance to developing countries also became part of the ongoing and growing interest shown by the Catholic Church after the election of Pope Paul VI, to whom La Pira was linked by a long-standing friendship. The new Pope's appeals and encyclicals appeared in many ways close to La Pira's reflections on the need for peace in the Mediterranean, and in Africa as a whole (Tosi 2003b: 147-67).

Within this framework, the last of the Mediterranean Colloquia opened in June 1964 on the theme of the "Unity and Equality of the Human Family", which in La Pira's ecumenical idea was to represent a valuable opportunity not only to continue reflection on the resolution of conflicts and crises in the enlarged Mediterranean – and thus he particularly emphasised the historical need to establish fruitful contacts between Israel and the Arab states – but also to return forcefully to the themes of the emancipation of black Africa and the fight against racial discrimination. For the Florentine mayor, the conflict in the Holy Land was the biggest obstacle on the road to peace in the Mediterranean. It was, therefore, La Pira's intention to "situate" the new Mediterranean Colloquium "in the present historical perspective of the Mediterranean and the world" and both in the incipit and in the concluding reflections he insisted on the need to eliminate all legacies of colonial domination and racial discrimination, siding with the Afro-Asian countries in denouncing the South African policy of apartheid and its profound consequences on the continent.<sup>39</sup>

Those reflections came from the several contacts that La Pira had been culti-

vating for some years now and which achieved fruitful outcomes in the meetings of the World Federation of United Cities. In Dakar in February 1964, 32 representatives of the cities of Africa, under the aegis of the Senegalese Foreign Minister Doudou Thiam and President Leopold Senghor, built a network of exchange, discussion and promotion of new initiatives for international cooperation, to which La Pira contributed from then on with great enthusiasm and confidence. In the Fourth Colloquium, the themes of East-West détente also found room, with a view to fulfilling the process of destalinization for all the countries of the Soviet bloc, opening up spaces for cooperation among peoples who shared the idea of belonging to a single human, Christian family. Openness to countries of the socialist bloc also followed the idea of bringing together the mayors of the twin cities in a world congress in Warsaw, expected in September 1964 (De Giuseppe 2022: 33-5).

The Fifth Mediterranean Colloquium, scheduled for the fall of 1965 and devoted to discussing the Arab-Israeli conflict, never happened, as La Pira left office as mayor in February of that year (Giovannoni 2006: 206-8).

## Conclusions

The Mediterranean talks held in Florence between 1958 and 1964 constituted important moments of discussion around a common idea of peace and reconciliation in the Mediterranean. They were the outcome of journeys, meetings and a productive exchange of perspectives between men bound to the idea of unity of the great human family.

Giorgio La Pira, the creator, organiser and conductor of the Mediterranean Colloquia, sensed a propitious moment to launch a prospect for peace: the centrality of the Mediterranean in that phase of the Cold War, Italy's interest in representing a bridge for dialogue between North and South from various perspectives, the will of the many leaders of the Global South, who met in Florence or whom La Pira met on his travels between the Mediterranean, the Middle East and black Africa. With his "alternative diplomacy", La Pira tried to seize moments and paths of history and opportunities offered by politics, directing them towards a goal of peace and cooperation through intercultural and religious dialogue. What emerged was a network of contacts, men and ideas that became a precious baggage not only for Italian foreign policy, but for the Florentine mayor's entire circle of interlocutors.

This horizon enabled the protagonists of that season of Italian foreign policy to make the most of the Florentine appointments as an opportunity and space

for discussion on sensitive issues, especially in the Euro-Atlantic debate. For the countries of the southern shore, they constituted an opportunity to advance a precise political agenda that focused on the internationalisation of national issues to obtain visibility and consensus for their cause through the channels of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy.

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## Notes

- 1 - All quotations in this article are translated by the author.
- 2 - Archivio storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Roma (hereafter ASMAE), Serie Affari Politici 1951-1957 (hereafter AP 1951-1957), pacco (hereafter p.) 1631, fascicolo (hereafter f.) Riunione dei Sindaci a Firenze, DGAP to various embassies, 7 September 1955.
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