

Remembering Father Riccardo Lombardi

Legacy of a Forgotten Prophet

Carlos García Andrade, C.M.F.

Among the many twentieth century giants who helped open the Church onto new horizons was the Italian Jesuit, Riccardo Lombardi, founder of the Promoting Group of the Movement for a Better World. On September ninth of this year (2019), the Promoting Group, together with the Community of Sant'Egidio Community and the Focolare Movement, organized a day-long gathering to pay tribute to his life and legacy.

Father Lombardi's work unfolded primarily during the period from 1940 to 1970, in a time when Italy was reeling from the moral and material decay caused by World War II. Lombardi's work was emblematic of Pope Pius XII's call during that era: to rebuild and regenerate Europe's civil, economic and spiritual fabric torn apart by the war. With zeal, Lombardi plunged himself wholeheartedly into this mission through his preaching, which was his preferred instrument in this effort. Lombardi preached to millions across Italy, Europe, and beyond, with such ardor that he came to be called, "God's microphone". He spoke of the ideal of a living Church as community and a return to a Gospel lifestyle as the salvific pathway for the Church and society.

After Pope Pius' death, times began to change in an era that was also marked by the opening of Vatican II. This brave, ardent man who had paved the way regarding many aspects of the Council, wanted to carry everything forward with his characteristic enterprising and industrious style. But he came to be considered "an uncomfortable presence", one which eventually resulted in his being pushed to the background, marginalized, and forgotten during those later years.

The day-long gathering in tribute to the founder began with Andrea Riccardi's historical overview which focused on Father Lombardi's relationship with three popes: Pius XII, John XXIII and Paul VI. Maria Voce, president of the Focolare, spoke of the close relationship between Chiara Lubich and Fr. Lombardi, who at one point had even proposed the possibility of a fusion of the two works in the Church (Focolare and the Promoting Group), and theologian Serena Noceti concluded the morning by presenting Lombardi's ecclesiological vision.

The afternoon included reflections by Modena (Italy) professor and historian, Gianni La Bella, Rev. Federico Lombardi (relative of the Jesuit founder) and Fr. Luc Lysy, Belgian

member of the Movement for a Better World, who spoke passionately on the version of Ignatian exercises developed by Fr. Riccardo for use in a more communitarian context. Father Ignazio Gonzalez Llopis, current general director of the Lombardi Movement, opened and closed the gathering. It was a day that offered a tantalizing first glance into the life of this man who was so central to the twentieth century mission of the Church.