

Emilio Tresalti (Rome, 1935 - 2021). *In memoriam*

A testimony

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Others - hopefully - will be able to produce a more specifically biographic profile of Prof. Emilio Tresalti, a person who was well known within the world of Secular Institutes and beyond. Here, I shall merely provide a testimony, divided into four parts, that I hope will give a reliable overview of his rich contribution as a consecrated lay person.

1) *A firm, passionate vocational choice*

For Emilio's biography, one date really stands out: 25 October 1959. This was the day he took his first vows in the Secular Institute "Militēs Christi", canonically subject to the Ambrosian diocese (1952) and headed by Prof. Giuseppe Lazzati (Milan, 1909 - 1986: now Venerable).

Aged twenty-four, Emilio had long been involved with youth Catholic Action (*GIAC*) and had recently earned a degree in medicine and surgery from the University of Rome. It was in this youth association that he met Armando Oberti (Vailate 1926 - Rome 2012), who had moved from Milan to Rome for work. Armando was the person who put him into contact with the Institute in Milan (notably, in 1976, Armando Oberti replaced Lazzati at the head of the Institute, holding that role until 1991).

Along with a girls' youth movement (*Gioventù Femminile*), *GIAC* was a true reservoir for Secular Institutes, which was a new vocational form recognised by Pope Pius XII with the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* (2 February 1947) and was subsequently integrated in 1948 with the key "Motu Proprio" *Primo feliciter*.

At the time, Tresalti was like many other young believers and chose the prudent support of a spiritual director (Jesuit father) for his Christian journey and he was immediately drawn to such a vocation. Thus, as still a very young man, he felt he was ready as soon as his four-year preparation period ended to say his "I am here!" in response to the Lord's call.

As far I know, he never had second thoughts about his decision. His character had been well forged as a young person, such that once he identified a goal, he pursued it without hesitation. This was true both for his choice of professional career (as a doctor) and his vocation.

Such a crystal clear vision, in one only 24, of a new vocation that was quite "unusual" (especially the male version) even in the eyes of many Christians at the time (...and, *mutatis mutandis*, these days), leads me to a few thoughts.

In the 1950s, *GIAC* was numerically strong and, although it was probably a little too rigid in cultural and moral terms if one is being honest, it was undoubtedly an environment able to mobilise many people in generous commitment and a demanding vision of Christian life.

Emilio found it to be a perfect setting for incubating his vocational choice, which would later flourish fully. Like him, many young men and women from Catholic Action had the courage to make radical choices - such as secular consecration - while still relatively young. Today - and allow me a brief digression - things have changed quite substantially. A fear of making decisions, a widespread sense of uncertainty, and a growth in insecurity/psychological fragility lead people to delay vocational decisions, including for Secular Institutes. This was not the case for Emilio's generation. They often made decisions at an age of youthful maturity, allowing them to bring a freshness of enthusiasm when they said "Here I am" that is hard to match when one makes choices too late in life.

Once he joined the "Milites Christi," Tresalti fully identified with the association, finding an all-encompassing and edifying sense of belonging. It was his home and his family for life. This love for the Institute was not expressed in words, but in his typically essential, industrious style in the various tasks and roles that were asked of him, right up to when he was president (1991-2006) following the leadership of Oberti. Of course, the Institute itself was renamed in 1969 to become "Christ the King".

2) *Unequivocal secularity*

On various occasions, when he was asked what Secular Institutes do (or should do), Tresalti would dryly reply: "Nothing!" Clearly, he would then explain this. But this explanation was not about softening or refuting his original assertion in any way.

In truth, his blunt statement was really about drawing attention to the original and undeniable core of secular consecration: the idea of secularity. As ultimately for every faithful layperson, this is not to be understood merely as a sociological fact, but as a "theological condition" (Paul VI) for a journey to holiness in everyday life (family - for those who have one -, work, social, cultural, recreational, trade union, educational, political and voluntary activities, etc.) in the specific sphere in which one is present and an evangelical presence that is basically divided into two levels (that also interact): acting and being close to people, with rich human relations and a willingness to meet the "other" without infringing one's faith and in the awareness that, at the right time and in the right way, it will be necessary to "make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15); skills to be able to infuse "temporal realities" with a Christian spirit to order them according to God's plan (concretely: the full development of man and society) (See *Lumen gentium* 31).

Following Giuseppe Lazzati's approach, Tresalti believed Secular Institutes were not required to undertake their own apostolic, charitable initiatives, but to focus on the human, Christian and vocational formation of members such that each one could grow in the awareness and willingness to work "in the world" as a testimony of the Lord and to "infuse" these spheres of daily life - as above - with a Christian spirit.

He had extensive knowledge of Secular Institutes and he was right to come down hard on any hesitation as to the correct interpretation of secularity, since the danger was that it could lead Secular Institutes to start to mirror the methods of operating and communicating of religious life. Such a risk is persistent and relates to a delicate issue that was evident even in the birth of Secular Institutes: their pluralism. This is a legitimate issue, to some degree, since every Institute has its own "gifts" and sensitivities, but it can become misleading when the qualifying dimension of secularity is watered down or lost.

During countless meetings with Secular Institutes in Italy and abroad, Tresalti would focus on this aspect, firm in the belief that the very credibility of such vocational forms would be won or lost around this secular dimension.

Such an issue clearly had an institutional side, but it also had a personal one. This is, in other words, the practical manner in which a consecrated layperson lives life on a daily basis. I see Emilio as providing an important testimony on this front for various aspects.

First, there is the sphere of personal relations. He was certainly not some "cuddly bear" (of course, each person has their own style and personality). He was reserved and favoured frank, "adult" relationships that assumed the truthfulness of the words exchanged. Among friends, he could be more open - to some degree - in talking about his own experience, life in the Church and

being part of a Secular Institute. He had an exquisite sense of hospitality. He loved to invite people to lunch or dinner, perhaps to explore some specific question about the Institute they belonged to or simply to enjoy a more relaxed climate of friendship. He was also an excellent cook and continued to cook for as long as he could.

Overall, Tresalti's testimony provides us with a typically secular way of *being in* and *living in* the world. The signs of his active, responsible presence in history with a mature and dynamic secularity can be seen in his love of his profession (physician, hospital CEO, teacher), the diversity of his interests (especially art and music), his love for learning about cultures and biblical theology (particularly reading original texts in foreign languages), his desire to experience different things and the "other" (within and outside the Church) beyond Italy's borders and his determination to remain up-to-date with change, including in technology, to be able to communicate better with friends in Italy and abroad.

Emilio avoid devotional exhibitionism, which is also found in Secular Institutes. His profound but reserved spirituality, like his whole personality, meant he avoided external manifestations of religious emotionalism or apostolic activism. He was fully aware of the urgent need for evangelic testimony in the world, but particularly for the secular West, he firmly believed it needed to take respectful forms based on dialogue, starting from a recognition of the desires, hopes and wounds that are found in the heart of any thoughtful man or woman.

He also felt the "serious case" of faith in the post-modern world fully impacted the "anthropological question". He saw Secular Institutes as having particular importance on this front. However, in order for them to tackle this task, Secular Institutes - in Tresalti's view - had to focus on high quality formation for their members such that each member could grow fully as a human and Christian. This was (is) the challenge that must be accepted.

3) *Strong character, decisive leadership*

Anyone who had dealings with Tresalti realised he was a strong, resolute and no-nonsense person. He was a definite leader, successfully holding both professional and ecclesial roles (particularly in Secular Institutes).

On the professional front, his important roles and service at the Agostino Gemelli hospital in Rome, linked to the Catholic University's Medicine faculty are well known. He began there in 1969 and soon rose to deputy hospital director, holding the position until 1976, and then eventually to hospital director in 1980. He also taught at the aforementioned Faculty of Medicine: hygiene and healthcare management, 1980-99; Immunoprophylaxis and Immunotherapy, 1996-98.

During his time as hospital director, he had to manage the complex matter of the globally most covered medical story: the emergency surgery and subsequent recovery in hospital of Pope John Paul II following the assassination attempt on 18 May 1981 on St Peter's Square. For many weeks, Tresalti was at the centre of a local and international media frenzy as he provided a daily update on the Pope's condition and handled the related press conferences. This was a tough situation to manage, with a heavy emotional side, as he had to literally deal with the whole world watching. He acted with great professionalism and balance, earning widespread praise. Once the Pope was fully recovered, he had a private audience with him, along with his mother. He was rightly proud of that day and had pictures commemorating it on his walls.

However, in 1995, as soon as he was eligible to retire, the sixty-something Tresalti chose to leave his prestigious position at the Gemelli hospital, although this did arouse some regret and dismay among hospital staff, particularly the team that had worked closest with him. His decision to

leave was not easy, but he was convinced because, in true Tresalti style, there was a sole reason. He had already been the head of the Secular Institute "Christ the King" for four years and the Institute was heading into a period of growth, particularly beyond Italian borders and this made it hard - impossible in his view - to jointly manage both the Institute and the Hospital with suitable seriousness and responsibility.

Personally, I always saw Emilio's choice as "heroic", filled with Christian courage and real love - beyond mere words - for the Institute. Leaving the hospital would mean stepping away from the limelight, from prestige and - why pretend otherwise - from power (in the "good", light sense).

Throughout his presidency, as a member of the General Council and Representative for Ongoing Formation, I was able to see "first hand" how Tresalti went about the role of President. He placed great emphasis on a collegial approach to meetings, creating a serene climate with plenty of time such that each person could speak calmly, perhaps more than once. After a topic had been thoroughly "explored", he certainly did not lack the courage to make clear decisions. This was particularly the case when a decision was especially burdensome. A good example of this was having to sell various Institute properties to produce funds to invest in essential refurbishment work for the San Salvatore Hermitage above Erba - used for spiritual meetings and very dear to Prof. Lazzati - to ensure its regulatory compliance. In all honesty, there were times when certain decisions about organisational and operational matters were not fully understood. But in such cases time and - most importantly - the spirit of fraternity would slowly win out, despite differences in opinion.

Long before Emilio took on the presidency of the Institute, his leadership was given room in another important ecclesial setting: the World Conference Of Secular Institutes (*CMIS*). He was General Secretary from 1972 to 1980 and President from 1996 to 2000. In these roles his fundamental abilities as an organiser, first, and a manager, second, were evident. That body, despite being relatively small in terms of numbers, had people from different cultural and language backgrounds, making it important to find common aspects that people could work on. It was a role in which he had to manage relations with the relevant Vatican Congregation, to establish relations with the various Institutes that belonged to the Conference, to explore specific aspects of the vocational experience in greater detail, and promote the periodic international study conventions and the elective assemblies. There is no doubt that during his time at *CMIS* Tresalti proved himself to be one of the most authoritative and representative figures in the world of Secular Institutes. He was partly responsible, among other aspects and from within the world conference, for creating various national and continental conferences, such as the Asian one. Clearly, he was regularly invited to take part in meetings and assemblies of Secular Institutes around the world. The last one he attended was in September 2018 in Vietnam, as a speaker at the Asian Conference of Secular Institutes. It was a physically trying journey for him as he was no longer so strong and would not attempt such journeys alone.

Finally, his authoritativeness was even recognised by the Congregation for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, holding the role of advisor from 1991 to 2014.

4) *Sense of worldliness*

This was part of the very essence of Tresalti's being as he rejected any form of cultural, ecclesial or spiritual provincialism. Over the years, this defining feature only became more pronounced. He saw inter-culturalism as a source of wealth and integration for individual cultures

and experiences. For Emilio, this was true both in the civil sphere and in the religious one - clearly also for Secular Institutes.

As a young man, his leaving Rome - a city that, by its very universal nature, tends to reduce the risk of provincialism - initially took two directions: on the one side, coming into contact in the mid-1950s with *Milites Christi*, which was part of the Ambrosian social, ecclesial and cultural tradition; on the other side, he began working as a doctor at an ANIC plant (ENI group) in Gela in Sicily, which proved to be far from easy since the creation of such an industry in that area offered enormous opportunity for local economic development, but also soon caught the attention of underworld groups (Tresalti was subject to various forms of intimidation and eventually agreed to leave his role to take up a position as a consultant for internal and occupational medicine at the Santa Barbara Hospital in Gela).

In both cases, for Emilio, joining *Milites Christi* in Milan and working in Sicily offered two different forms of contact with other "worlds" unlike Rome. A decade after taking up a position at the Gemelli hospital, he had another experience that would profoundly influence the maturation of his international awareness, especially for the developing world. I am referring to the three-year period from 1977 to 1980 that he worked as a Professor of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine in the Medical Faculty at Somali National University in Mogadishu (Somalia). Later, in 1989, he became the Vice President of the Association for Latin America Studies, an organisation based in Rome and a further sign of his interest in third-world problems. In terms of Tresalti's international dimension, he also held the following advisory posts: Department of Health, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1994-1995; Department for Development Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, 1977-1982.

While he loved Rome, Milan and Italy in general, because it was home to his socio-cultural, vocational and professional roots, over the years he found the country to be increasingly restrictive. Italy was the point of origin for his gaze, but he looked well beyond. This was especially true when considering the future of Secular Institutes.

For him personally, "worldliness" as a style and posture necessitated the acquisition of specific skills and attitudes, without which such a perspective might have been unrealistic, even if desired.

First among such skills was learning languages. He spoke excellent English, French and Spanish. Add his native Italian into the mix and he had the basis to communicate with almost anyone in most parts of the world.

Languages were fundamental of course, but not sufficient. Emilio was fond of saying that one needed a sort of "ecology" of personal attitudes to really connect with other cultures and the people from those cultures. He was fiercely against the (presumption) one culture is superior to others, especially Western culture over others. In this sense - and this is a slight digression - he was certainly not soft in his judgements of many Catholic approaches to evangelisation and missions down the centuries, with only the odd exception (notably, Jesuit Matteo Ricci in China), seeing them as little more than a "transplantation" of Western ideas, under rigorous Roman doctrinal, moral and liturgical control, into other contexts. The challenge was (and is) to achieve a wise inculturation of the Gospel into the socio-cultural practices of the place in which it is proclaimed.

Tresalti believed the best anti-dote to the mental and interior approaches generated by a superiority complex, typical in the West (and of westerners), was to create authentic empathetic relations with "other" peoples and cultural traditions. This required, on the one hand, the ability to deconstruct the stereotypes and prejudices of one's own way of seeing someone from a different

culture and his/her world, and the ability to be actively willing to listen and discuss, truly trying to walk in the other person's shoes and see reality - including religion and vocations - from his or her perspective. This meant the need to adapt to a different mentality, customs, living spaces, food and so on. Emilio provided an exemplary testimony on this front. He was able to become part of and adapt everywhere, without problems. His wearing - especially in India - local outfits was part of this effort to fit into the local, host culture.

However, such ideas were merely the prelude to another aspect that was especially dear to him: the spread of Secular Institutes. He believed deeply in the universal value of secular consecration, for men and women, as has been proven by the flourishing, albeit still in relatively small numbers of vocations right across the globe. He was also attentive - and this worry is valid first and foremost for the Institute he belonged to - to nourishing such vocations with respect for the aforementioned methodological considerations about relations between different cultures, and the implications of this for the inculturation of a vocational charism such as the one in question. In practice this meant, for example, that a Secular Institute that has its origins in Italy but that has also developed in Africa and Asia must ask its members to be faithful to the core of the vocation (consecration/secularity) but then to interpret it according to different forms, with varied nuances, in relation to the socio-cultural and spiritual sensitivities of the place.

Tresalti was, without a doubt, a leading protagonist in the Secular Institutes movement in the world. He also defended the specific nature of the charism, showing clear concern when, now and then, he found signs that its specific nature might be being changed. This was especially true in cases where people tended to drift towards direct forms of evangelisation or the use of intra-ecclesial ministries in an attempt to better serve the Church. No. For him, in order to contribute to the cause of the Gospel, he was convinced it was necessary to be precisely consecrated lay people in the world. This, sustained by faith, hope and charity, would play a part in building the "city of man on a human scale", as his great teacher in life, the Venerable Giuseppe Lazzati, liked to say. This obviously had (and has) major implications in terms of competence, passion, spirituality, formation, participation and a genuine '*sensus ecclesiae*'.

For his discreet, open and thoughtful Christian testimony, and his generous, tireless service to Secular Institutes, we must be truly grateful to Emilio Tresalti.