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Facing the Artificial Selection of the Humankind: Catholic Physicians and the Catholic Way to Eugenics

The paper intends to explore the relations, approaches and attitudes of Italian and European catholic physicians towards eugenic studies and policies between 19th and 20th centuries. From the Eighties of the 19th century to the Fifties of the 20th century eugenics became a significant medical and scientific issue, involving also the catholic physicians. Coined in 1883 by Francis Galton, the term “Eugenics” indicates the scientific field finalized to the biological improvement of the humankind. The eugenics had a widespread diffusion in all over the world (Europe, USA, Latin America, Australia) involving several scientists, physicians, intellectuals, politicians. The debate about eugenics involved not only medicine and biology, but also other disciplines, such as human sciences, and, in general, the fields of politics, culture, society and economics. The eugenics studies and policies produced strong debates and resistances, especially within the Catholics. Their opposition were scientific, medical, political, cultural and, of course, theological: they criticized the lack of certain scientific basis in some eugenic hypotheses and they defended the human freedom from the public interventions of the governments, in order to preserve the social, cultural, moral, and political influence of the Catholicism. Catholics opposed mostly towards the Nordic current of eugenics, spread in the Anglo-Saxon, German and Scandinavian world, characterized by the idea of the need of an artificial selection of the humankind through strong interventions (such as sterilization, abortion, birth control, etc.). A Latin current of eugenics, however, based mostly education, prevention and demographic increase, and spread in catholic States in Europe and Latin America, obtained consideration in some part of the catholic movement, for example the Franciscan physician Agostino Gemelli, a key figure of the catholic science in 20th century. Rejecting and reproving the Nordic eugenics policies, Gemelli and other catholic physicians, scientists, theologians and intellectuals (such as the Belgian Valère Fallon, the German Joseph Muckermann, the French Jean Viollet, etc.) approved and, in some case, embraced the Latin eugenics, stating that the Catholic morals represented the best and most effective eugenic principle (importance to family and marriage, abstinence, etc.). In this process, a Catholic medicine and its medical, biological, and scientific argumentations played a key role. Among Catholics several attitudes and approaches towards eugenics spread out, from the opposition to the acceptance. However, the aim was almost the same: claiming the cultural, social, political and also scientific role of the Church

and of Catholicism in an issue that involved many fields and questions (from spirituality and theology to biology and sexuality, from medicine to politics). Catholic physicians tried to build a Catholic way to eugenics, in accordance to the Faith, and consequently to gain a public recognized role in the eugenic debates. Their works included both specialized medical papers and studies for the intellectual and scientific debates, and popular books and pamphlets, for the moral and medical education. The paper wants to examine the role and the contributions of Catholic physicians in building a scientific and medical opposition to the Nordic eugenics and, at the same time, in shaping a catholic approach towards eugenics.

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