

Don Lorenzo Milani

(Firenze 27 May 1923 - 26 June 1967)

A personal tribute

Basic Education

*(‘Se si perde loro la scuola non è più scuola.
È un ospedale che cura i sani e respinge i malati’)*

Don Milani decided to teach, first in S Donato di Calenzano and then in Barbiana because he found that the majority of the young members of his congregations, typically from working class or peasant background, were unable to read, write and express themselves adequately.



Italian society and schooling have changed profoundly from the post-war years in which Don Milani lived and worked: the number of illiterate men and women has gone from 5.8 million in 1951 to 0.6 million in 2001 and less than 0.2 million in 2021. Italians ought to be proud of this progress but this does not mean - as a number of critics erroneously argue - that Don Milani's fierce criticism of the school system of his time now amounts to a testimony of mere historical interest. Far from it.

Don Milani's message - that a basic educational system shouldn't lose a single pupil and should seek to readmit and sustain any child who finds himself on the edge - is an imperishable and universal imperative that every school system ought to embrace and fulfill. And while it is certainly true that there are no, or few, Barbiana in Italy in 2023, it is equally true that major barriers and inequalities remain in primary education and that these impact heavily in the choices that children and their families make toward secondary and, prospectively, tertiary University education.

University Questions

(Non c'è nulla che sia più ingiusto quanto far parti uguali fra disuguali 1)

In 1970 Cambridge University admitted less than 10% of its students from state schools even though over 90% of young people at the time studied in state secondary schools. The reason for this was that students from private secondary schools were 'better students'. But as Don Milani argues: *'Non c'è nulla che sia più ingiusto quanto far parti uguali fra disuguali'*. The Oxbridge 'fair admission interview' was in fact - and still is to a large extent - a direct acknowledgement of the social disparities that students encountered during their primary and secondary education.

It has taken 50 years to get 50% of state school students into Cambridge and it may take another 50 years before 90% of Cambridge students come from state schools, as one would logically expect: talent is distributed fairly but young people from the poorest background are often unable to put their talent to use and they see themselves regularly overtaken by those who learn from a very early age to put their talent on full display.

A University for all is not a sustainable hypothesis and society needs engineers who know how to build bridges and doctors who know how to treat patients. Universities need to be very rigorous in their teaching and assessment in order to fulfill their social obligations but society must use all the talent it has, not a fraction of it, and remove the social barriers that exclude young people from poor background from access to University.

SCUOLA DI BARBIANA

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Don L Milani's Legacy

Every country in the world would deserve a Don Milani and Italy has been fortunate to have him. Don Milani's legacy embodies the true values of education as the key instrument for empowering individuals - underprivileged ones above all - and enable them to contribute with dignity and responsibility to the progress of society.

Hundred years after his birth, the way to celebrate Don Milani's life and work is to ensure that the educational imperative that he embodied in the humble settings of S Donato in Calenzano and Barbiana will reach out the hearts and minds of anyone with a role in education.

[1] Scuola di Barbiana. Lettera ad una Professoressa. Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1967

*E Gherardi
Collegio A Volta
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