

An Educated Man's Journal Entry Commenting on the Execution of Domenico Scandella

June, 1600

Montereale, a small village in Friuli

These past two weeks, I have been in the town of Montereale, a small village between Venice and the Alps in the Friuli. I know it is a very strange place for me to have visited, but just recently, one of the men of this village was executed as a relapsed heresiarch. While I was in Venice, I had heard that this man had been known for saying the most fantastical, heretical things, so I endeavored to spend a small amount of time in this little village to learn more about the things he said. It took me most of these two weeks, but I finally realized that the man, Domenico Scandella was the same as a man Menocchio who I had seen occasionally in my bookshop over the past fifty years.

Menocchio was always a strange man. He did once buy one of my cheapest books, but usually, when he visited every few years, he would examine my books without purchasing any. He was clearly a peasant, although he was certainly better off as a miller than he would have been as a farmer. It always surprised me that a poor miller such as Menocchio might think to visit a bookshop during his short visits to Venice. He was also far more educated than I would normally expect for a peasant, so perhaps he felt that his limited education meant he ought to read whenever possible.

He certainly seemed to feel that even though his education was quite limited, it was sufficient to allow him to speak on many topics that even someone as educated as I am ought not to speak about. Questions of the Church should only be answered by the Church; believers are supposed to believe. To be honest, it always bothered me that a peasant such as Menocchio might dare to question the Church and might dare to think himself capable to discuss difficult theological questions. He seemed to think himself to be incredibly smart and insightful, but he was always entirely unaware of the events happening to the north. He seemed to think the Lutherans would support his strange opinions without realizing how unusual his thoughts were or how problematic they would be to the Church.

I remember once, it must have been twenty years ago at least, Menocchio came to my bookshop and began to speak about how he had determined that Christ is only a man. I told him that such heresies were not welcome in my bookshop. He told me then that if I had the *Rosario della gloriosa Vergine Maria*, he could show me proof. I did not have that book and I did not think it would prove his point, even if I did have it. I regret that I could not take that chance to help Menocchio recover from his heresies.

Remembering this, I suppose I should not be entirely surprised that he was eventually convicted of heresy. He ought to have known to stay in his place or at least to have known not to speak to anyone about his strange beliefs.

Once I began to speak to the peasants in Montereale, I discovered that they were

very willing to speak with me about Domenico Scandella and his heresies. I began to understand that most of the peasants quite liked and respected him as he was one of the few educated men in the village and was reasonably friendly, as any miller must be. One peasant named Bartolomeo explained to me, "except for the opinions that he has, he is a respectable person" (Del Col, 14). Even though most of the peasants liked and respected Scandella, they all seemed to agree that he had always been a heretic, even after his first trial, when he claimed to repent. A few of the peasants told me that they had long feared that he would get the whole village into trouble with the Church or that he might mention them in his trial. Since everyone in the village had heard about Scandella's opinions at some point in time and no one had been able to stop him speaking about his ideas, they feared that the Church might believe that they, too, were heretics.

Shortly after I arrived in Montereale, I spoke with Domenico Melchiori, a cobbler in the village. This Domenico told me that he had heard many of Scandella's heresies directly, while on journeys to other villages. He said that once, Scandella said to him that Christ "was born from St. Joseph and that he is merely a man like us" (Del Col, 16). Not only, then, did Scandella not believe in the virginity of the Madonna, but he also did not believe in the divinity of Christ. Even though the cobbler had tried to avoid conversations about Scandella's unusual beliefs, he was not able to stop Scandella from sharing his ideas. Furthermore, Domenico told me that Scandella "believe[d] in neither

prelates nor the Church" (Del Col, 16). The idea of a peasant not respecting the authority of the Church is incredibly shocking and disturbing. Of course the Church would need to punish a peasant who did not respect its authority; otherwise, the other peasants might attempt to alter the order of nature.

A few days later, I was speaking with Ser Giulio. Ser Giulio explained that Scandella had claimed that "to blaspheme is not a sin" and further that his calling in life was "to blaspheme" (Del Col, 12-13). Ser Giulio clearly despised Scandella's willingness to disrespect the Church. He even explained that while he had loved Scandella, Scandella's discussion of religion had caused them to have a falling out. If Scandella had not believed that he could blaspheme against the Church without censure, he would not have spoken so much about his ideas. Perhaps then he would have been spared his most tragic execution and even lived a better, more Catholic life.

Another peasant, Ser Giovanni Povoledo, shared that Scandella also believed in the strangest, most fantastical story of creation of the world. He claimed that Scandella believed that the world began as nothing and from that nothing, it "coagulated like a cheese" (Del Col, 9). Then, "a great number of worms," which were the angels, appeared in the cheese, but God was only "the most powerful and wise" one of these worms (Del Col, 9). Scandella was a peasant, yet he thought such a strange idea from his own mind might describe the true state of the world. It does not surprise me that the Inquisitors found Scandella's heresies to be far too unusual.

As I spoke to the villagers, I heard many other crazy ideas of his as well. Villagers told me that Scandella believed that all men would be saved, whether they are Catholics, Lutherans, or Turks. Such an idea must have allowed him to feel secure in his own wrong beliefs. Other villagers explained that he had always believed that the Church was not a good authority. Since he believed that the Bible was designed by men, it was a flawed source of authority. Furthermore, they told me that he claimed that a confession made to trees or plants is as valuable as confession made to a priest. If this were true, then there would be no reason to have the Church at all.

I suppose it is unsurprising that Menocchio was executed. The Church has feared that the Lutherans or other heretics might infect the minds of the Catholics and especially the weak-minded peasants. Even though he was not a true Lutheran, Menocchio was far too powerful and respected within his community to not pose a risk to the minds of the villagers.

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