

9-22-1970

Interview of Mario Piccoli

Mario Piccoli

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Recommended Citation

Piccoli, M. (1970). Interview of Mario Piccoli. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/missions-history/37>

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Today is September 22, 1970. We are located in the office of the Chairman of the Bible Department at Harding College. This is volume II, No. 1 in the series of recorded interviews for the Harding College Living History of Missions. Today we will be talking to Mario Piccoli, an Italian national from Rome. Translating for us is Dee Bost. I am Joe Hacker.

Hacker: Brother Piccoli, would you please give us a brief historical outline of your conversion and your work for the Lord?

Piccoli: First, of all, I would like to give a little bit of the background for my situation. This way one can better understand the situation of my conversion. During my studies in the Catholic seminary, they do not permit that one study other than that that the Catholic church wishes. You study only what the Catholic Church wants you to study. During twelve or thirteen years of study, we more or less were in blindfolds, so to speak. In this manner, it was hard for us to understand anything except what the Catholic Church wanted us to understand. However, when one becomes a priest, then the individual has full opportunity to read that which he wants, to speak to whomever he wants to, and to discuss whatever argument he wishes. In this manner the individual can truly liberate himself from that which was previously taught him. Since I had seen very many things in Catholicism against the teachings of Christ, I was preoccupied with seeing how things truly were. I can say that I was truly fortunate as I encountered a professor of Greek and Latin. He became a great friend of mine. In fact, each day he came to hear the Mass. Logically we began to discuss these certain problems in the light of the Bible because he knew the Bible very well. In fact, he was a professor of Waldensian theology; therefore, to me it was a light of true help. The discussion continued for many months. Also, this professor, although he was Catholic, he recognized all of the errors of the Catholic Church in the light of the Bible. Studying the Bible, we arrived at the same conclusions. Logically, at the end of our discussions, I asked him, "What can I do to liberate myself or free myself from this false doctrine?" He indicated a single thing, the church of Christ. He had many friends in the Waldensian church and other Protestant churches. He had decided to indicate to me the church of Christ. In fact, he gave me the address of the church at Frascati where there was the American missionary, Charles Hacker. Charles Hacker sent me to Cline and Gerald Paden. In this manner, I began to study with them and to frequent the meetings of the church of Christ. I was still a priest at this time and also wore the habit of the priest. After about two or three months I was baptized. I had to dedicate much time to my study of the Bible. Also, because the Catholic doctrine was in my blood, it was my life. I adopted this system. I tried to completely forget everything about the Catholic doctrine as if I had never known it. This way I began to study the Bible, logically making some comparisons between Catholic doctrine and Christian doctrine. In this manner, it became much more easy for me to understand many things.

Logically, when I left the Catholic Church, I was also followed by certain of the Catholics. They offered many things--a school in which to teach and many other things--if I would not renounce the Catholic religion. Even if I no longer wanted to be a priest, just as long as I would remain a Catholic. I was strong in my decision. To help you to understand how harsh and hard they were, a distant uncle of mine wrote me a letter, the envelope of which was inscribed in black. In Italy, this signifies a letter of mourning or envelope of mourning to signify as if I

had died. This moment more or less was the crucial moment in my life.

Hacker: How did you become a preacher for the church of Christ?

Piccoli: To begin with I was employed by a company that sold books. Then someone, it may have been Gerald Paden, came to me to see about the school at Frascati. Together with other preachers I studied the Bible. After nearly a year, already I had preached the gospel, but I had decided to marry. The Italian government took me and I had to serve in the Army. A priest in Italy does not serve in the Army. But, because I had left the priesthood, I had to serve. They do everything in the hopes that you will return to the Catholic faith. It made no difference. I was willing to do any thing, even wait to be married in order to do my military service, any thing but return to the Catholic faith. I don't like military service. In fact, I ran away for fifteen days. I had gone to the house of Hillard Storey. But the Italian government said I either had to serve or go to prison. Even during this military service I was fortunate, not only because I was able to marry but because nearly all of the military years I spent at a base near Florence. The congregation there is a wonderful congregation. This time I had an opportunity to live in the midst of a Christian environment. Nearly every Sunday, I preached. I put on a jacket of one of the brethren in the church to cover my military uniform.

After military service, the brethren, logically, wanted me to continue preaching. At first, I was with the Via Sannio congregation at Rome, then with Gerald Paden. We went to work in one of the zones in Rome.

However, for me as with other Italian preachers, especially for us ex-priests, there is a very delicate problem. The Catholics said that I preached for the church of Christ because I was being paid to. Of course, this fact didn't please me at all. For this reason, I searched for a way to work in the public and then preach. First, I tried to establish a card and book shop, but it didn't go very well. Then I applied at Gillette Company. I was accepted in 1963. I continued to work for Gillette for more than five years. Each Sunday I had this Bible study, also the sermon. I also prepared lessons to transmit on the radio. However, this didn't continue very long because of problems with the station. I also preached in the public square. In this manner I was able to demonstrate not only to myself but to others that one could preach without money or without being supported. In fact, there is a brother Pouney who preaches at Padova. Brother Pouney was talking to several of the people that were listening to me preach. These men said to Brother Pouney responded, "Tomorrow morning he goes to sell razor blades." This to him was a real joy. However, within me there remained a grave problem. I had very very little time for the church. I felt that I needed and that I wanted to preach more for the church. I had to choose to either continue with Gillette--and I was paid very well--but in this manner I was able to give very little time to the church, or I could leave Gillette Company and give all my time to preaching the gospel. Even though in this aspect my economic situation was less certain. Many of my friends in the church advised me against leaving Gillette. When the church at Little Rock wrote to me about support, I accepted. I didn't listen to even one of my friends' voices or advice in the matter.

So it had been two years that I have given all my time to working with the church. At this time I am working with the congregation at Via Messala Corvino in Rome. However, this is only on Sunday and sometimes at the Bible study during the week. When I am called to, I go many times throughout Italy to hold gospel meetings, whether it be in buildings, meeting places, or in the public square. Every two years, I go to the Bible school at Florence and teach for one term. Now I am part

of the committee that plans the program for the year.

The major part of my time, I dedicate to the Bible correspondence course. The Bible correspondence course at Rome is for all the city. We have various congregations in Rome. In fact, we have divided Rome into six sections or six zones and the Bible correspondence course is for these six zones. The Bible correspondence course seems to be our only contact with the public in teaching them the Bible. Therefore, I dedicate myself to the Bible correspondence course, searching to develop it not only from the scholastic viewpoint but I try to contact directly each member of the Bible correspondence course by means of letter. Then when the students have finished the Bible correspondence course, the office passes the lessons to the worker or workers in that particular zone and these preachers call personally on the individuals. Sometimes I myself go. However, with all the letters that I have to write, it leaves me very little time. This is more or less the work that I am involved in in the work in Rome.

Hacker: Do you find any conflicts or any problems now with your being supported from the United States?

Piccoli: Maybe yes and maybe no. If there are any, I am not aware of them at this time. Maybe because I have shown to the people that one can preach without being supported. Unfortunately those who do not know the gospel do not understand I Corinthians 9.

Hacker: Who pays for your Bible correspondence courses?

Piccoli: First of all, I would like to say that we have more than 3000 students. Having this many students, one can see that we do have a lot of problems. A lot of problems present themselves because we do have a lot of students. There are two courses, one of 10 lessons and one of 30 lessons. All of the printed material, not only the lessons but the envelopes for mailing, letterheads, stamps, pamphlets, booklets on treating different arguments, the problem concerns paying for these and paying for all the other expenses of the office--the light, the telephone and all those expenses that are concerned with maintaining an office. At this time, we have very little help from the United States. The congregation at Via Messala Corvino and at Monte Sacro already at this time give a part each month to the support of this. Also, a new congregation at Via Acqua Bullicante is beginning to give a very small part. However, this is still very little in consideration of the needs. Also there is the problem of a need for a secretary and so the expenses grow. The other missionaries have said that they would all cooperate with the expenses, so I have taken this problem upon myself. I have taken the responsibility myself to search for help. In fact, I have already presented this problem to the elders at Sixth and Izard. I am hoping, of course, for a positive answer. I do have a great hope. Between that which the congregations at Rome are able to give and that which perhaps the Sixth and Izard congregation can help us, a part of it the missionaries at Rome will be able to take care of, and perhaps in this manner we arrive at the just plain solution to the problem. I hope very much that we can solve this problem because it is an important one.

Also another particular problem presents itself at Rome. We have few missionaries and few Italian preachers, very few Italian preachers, very few. The Paden family is having economic difficulties and if they are not able to find sufficient support, the Gerald Paden family will have to return to the States. We will lose a very fine man who is already able to speak very well the Italian language. We have been thinking to give this position as secretary to Bobbie Paden. In this

manner we will resolve the problem of the need for a secretary and Gerald will be able to reamain with us at Rome to preach.

Hacker: Tell us about how many people you think you will baptize in one year from your correspondence work.

Piccoli: I am not sure. Last year there were four or five that were baptized. It is a very hard work.

Hacker: Do you have problems in your relationship with American missionaries?

Piccoli: More than any thing else perhaps there could arise a problem in the method of work. One individual might see one method and another individual see it in another way. Speaking of the work that we do together, then we seek to resolve it in the best way. If it is a problem arising in my congregation, then I treat the problem as I think it should be handled. If the problem arises in another congregation, of course, that person preaching there will try to handle it the way he sees best.

Hacker: You are then accepted by the American missionaries with no real difference being made?

Piccoli: Of course, I am accepted as a preacher. There are not problems because it was they who tried to get me to become a preacher. Not only did I want to become a preacher but it was they who searched for my support.

Hacker: What would you recommend that we do to prepare young men to go to Italy?

Piccoli: There are diverse and complex problems in this area. They will need to understand some of the problems they will face. The first problem is that of the language. Now, of course, I understand this problem a bit more. Regarding the preaching the gospel, learning the language is the main problem. Of course, it makes him feel bad whenever an individual comes to Italy and learns the Italian language very well and goes back to the States there and doesn't continue the work in Italy. This is one reason why we hope to do something for Gerald Paden so he will not have to leave. The learning of the language is the first fundamental problem. If it were possible that they could prepare themselves, first of all, very well in the language, if they could study and be well prepared in the language before they came to Italy, then it would probably be about six months after they arrived there that they would be able to preach the gospel very well. Usually it takes two to three years after a preacher arrives there to be able to master the language. In fact, there are some Italians that don't realize or not able to realize the problem of the men that come to Italy. They wonder why a congregation will pay a man so much when he comes to Italy and is not able to speak the language. Why don't they support an Italian that already know the language? Instead, if a man were already prepared in the language, that would be another problem but learning the language would be the primary problem and the time that it takes to learn a language.

Hacker: Our time is finished for the tape and the period. There are many other things I am sure that we could ask.

Piccoli: Is there any thing else you would like to ask?

Hacker: We would like to know about your family? Does your family adjust well to your being a preacher?

Piccoli: My wife is pleased and happy that I am a preacher because she knows how much I want to preach and that I can preach. However, I must say that she was very uncertain when I left Gillette. At this time, many of the Italian preachers were losing their support from America.

Hacker: How are these men now being supported?

Piccoli: Unfortunately they have not found other congregations to support them. Roman Sardi is working for an insurance company. My wife's point of view, at that time, was black because of the uncertainty of support. I can understand why.

Hacker: I think this will be of real value to our students.

Piccoli: You are disposed to ask any questions you might have.

Hacker: I think this is sufficient for now. We wanted you to be in this series. We appreciate very much your taking the time to come and to talk.

Piccoli: Thank you because it was a great occasion for me because I love the work in Italy very much. If there is an occasion to help good missionaries or good men to help them prepare themselves to come and take part in the work, I would be very happy to help.

Hacker: We appreciate this very much and we hope that we can send more people to help in Italy. You showed great courage flying in the airplane today.