

Reaching “Rachel” in Italy: The Context of our Apostolate

Italy is Europe’s most rapidly aging nation. We currently have a mere 1.4 birthrate – among the lowest in the world. Third children are rarely seen, and there are many single-child families. The median age at which an Italian woman bears her first child is 31.5 (compared with age 25 in the United States). Notwithstanding the fact that summer vacation homes on our coast are at near 100% capacity, daily living quarters are tight and young families who have recently purchased mortgages are experiencing the same financial alarm as those in the United States. There is a widespread attitude of scarcity, much cynicism, skepticism and fear of the future. Despite an adoration of the child, there is great fear of marrying and having children, all fueled by a sense of *precarietà* (uncertainty). Italy’s poverty of the 1950’s is still close enough that the temptations of today’s materialism and consumerism are overwhelming for many.

Abortion was legalized by popular referendum in 1978. Now known as “Law 194,” the actual statute bears a rather Orwellian name: “Norms for the Societal Protection of Motherhood and on the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy.” Since that time this nation has suffered five million legal abortions - the combined populations of Rome and Milan. Surely a fair number of clandestine abortions are practiced by those who don’t want a “voluntary interruption of pregnancy” (IVG) on their socialized medical records. In our work we have already encountered clandestine abortions not reflected in Italy’s official abortion statistics.



Legal abortions are all practiced in hospitals, fully paid for by the state, and, unlike many other services, requiring no co-payment. Most abortion-performing hospitals carry beautiful Catholic names: Most Holy Annunciation, Holy Spirit, etc. Theoretically, the law requires that a state-sponsored counseling center meet with the abortion-inclined woman to make every attempt to remove the obstacles to motherhood that would lead her to abort. In practice, the *colloquio* (counseling appointment) required for a first trimester abortion is often conducted in such a way as to simply set the date for the procedure. Strangely, a second trimester (“therapeutic”) IVG requires no such pre-abortion counseling.

During my first year in Italy in 2008, I was eager to learn more about the actual abortion experience here, so after reading two slim books of abortion testimonies, I visited the “IVG” unit at one of Rome’s most respected hospitals – famous, ironically, for its labor and delivery care. Located in the basement of the Hospital of St. Camillus (founder of an order of brothers who to this day practice healing ministries) is the “Day Hospital for the Implementation of Law 194”. Dante might have more fittingly named the stark and dreary, but remarkably efficient unit, “Abandon all hope, you who enter here.”



I prayed, observed, and spoke with 2 of the 14 women who arrived at 8am, followed by another group of at least 10 who arrived at 9:30am for 2nd trimester sonogram before a “therapeutic” abortion could be scheduled. Many Italians, upon hearing the word abortion, immediately assert that it’s foreigners and couples with deformed children having the procedure. Yet even in the metropolis of Rome, I saw a waiting hall filled with an average mix of native Italians and immigrants. Ten of the 14 women were accompanied by a male, and 2 teens by a mother.

The abortion debate here was re-opened quite dramatically in December 2007, the month after I arrived to live here with my Italian husband. Italy had just successfully advocated at the United Nations for a worldwide moratorium on use of the death penalty. A politician named Giuliano Ferrara, son of one of Italy’s most well-known communists, seized the moment to propose a “moratorium” on abortion practice here in Italy. (Most Italians, including Ferrara, are strongly against the death penalty.) The manner in which Ferrara made his proposal struck a nerve and opened public conversation on a topic shrouded in silence for 30 years. (In fact, he did not propose a true moratorium on abortion, but rather a series of measures to support motherhood and adoption, and to more authentically implement the informed consent requirement of the current law.)



The motto of this movement, in which many women had visible roles, was “Abortion? No thanks!” His efforts to re-examine Italian abortion practice piqued the conscience of a country that prides itself as being quite pacifist and in favor of human life. Ferrara – who wrote publicly and contritely about his own participation in several abortions during his youth, and about his own congenital handicap that today would lead many to abort - eventually proposed candidates and a platform in April’s elections. He won five million votes – ironically, the number of children legally aborted under the law which he challenged.

The campaign’s influence stretched far beyond the few votes it garnered. Over many months, Ferrara’s small but influential daily tablet produced a broad array of well-written articles examining various facets of this issue, offering penetrating analyses of Italy’s contemporary social, cultural and family life.

Two years later, in November 2009, Italy’s Food and Drug Administration gave full approval to use of the so-called abortion pill, RU-486. While its frequency of use varies widely from region to region, so-called “medical (non-surgical) abortion” has not taken off as the simpler, more private solution that many in the abortion rights movement and public health system had hoped for.



In short, since 2007 there has been much discussion in Italy of the “issue” and “practice” of abortion, yet the human face of this drama and this tragedy remains largely hidden.

Acknowledgement of abortion's potentially long-term effects on individuals and relationships is just beginning to emerge. Since 2010 four excellent books have been published on abortion's effects, including in 2013 the first book on men and abortion, a booklet by a Franciscan priest-psychotherapist and an psychotherapist's analysis of her many clients' past abortions as a major underlying, untreated cause of present distress.

All of this comes at a providential time for us. Observing the current conversation helps us speak more effectively words of hope, both within the Church and to the highly secularized mainstream culture. Our full *Rachel's Vineyard* retreats and ever-increasing website hits (shortly we will reach 10,000 visitors over 4 years) indicate there is healing work to be done.

A bit broader background: Just as the United States experienced dramatic cultural shifts in the 1960's, Italy went through a similar, but perhaps even more dramatic upheaval. It exploded in the Autumn of 1968 and unfolded over a decade which here is simply called "the year of '68." There were not only intense social protests but numerous acts of Communist terrorism.

Given the Catholic Church's historic power and the tightly woven blend of religion and culture here, many Italians experience the Church simply as a bureaucracy, an institution that serves its social function around the time of family feasts (marriages, baptisms and deaths). There are some vibrant extra-parish movements that help bring faith to life, but many of these are viewed with skepticism. Anti-clericalism is much fiercer than anything I've ever experienced in the United States. There is a strong Communist presence and press here, representing up to 45% of the populace in many parts of the country.



We have no real Protestant presence (statistics show more Jehovah's Witnesses than Protestant Christians in Italy), so religious diversity refers either to the Islamic faith practiced by immigrants, or the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses who knock on doors and live more virtuously than most Catholics. Praying before a meal or going beyond an occasional practice of Sunday Mass are telltale signs of *integralismo* (fundamentalism). Advocating for Christian values in matters of human life and sexuality brings great risk of quickly being dismissed as a *bigotto*.



"No more Priests!"

Despite Italy's image as a traditionally Catholic culture, sexual relations outside of marriage are assumed and widely practiced. There is no strong chastity/pre-marital abstinence movement here

as there is in the United States. Notwithstanding the Church's magisterial pronouncements in these matters, many say at the parish level there is near silence on Christian teachings on family and respect for life. As one priest commented, it's much easier to preach on feeding the poor. The Italian National Bishops Conference has no "Pro-life Office." These matters are subsumed amidst a sea of family life matters on which conferences are held, 200-page theological reflections are issued, but few, if any, practical resources are created for local use.

More than 30 years after Italians voted to legalize abortion, the Italian Bishops have yet to make any public statement inviting those who have been personally involved in abortion to seek reconciliation. Church ministries of "post-abortion healing", by now quite well known in the United States (*Rachel's Vineyard, Project Rachel, et al*), are unknown here. The assumption is that the confessional is where a conflicted Italian soul will find her peace. Many women have told us, however, that they have been unable to internalize the shower of grace offered through this sacrament, and they need more extensive assistance to heal the abortion wound in its many dimensions. This confirms my experience during many years in ministry Stateside.



A surprising number of priests have told us they quite rarely hear of abortions in confession, which leads to the big question of how to reach those not approaching the dark solitude of this sacred (but for many, uninviting) box. Abortion grief manifests itself, of course, in ways that do not lead to the confessional. Like Rachel's Vineyard founders Theresa and Kevin Burke, we believe many post-abortive men turn to, or become increasingly dependent on, pornography and prostitution to confine sexual expression to a perceivedly "safer" context which they can control. Domenico says while alcohol and drug addictions are less prevalent here than in the U.S., cigarettes, TV and gambling are the chief ways addiction manifests itself here.

Domenico observes that women's only real social power comes from being sexually attractive. I find the sexual games between men and women to be much more overt here than in the United States. Pornography and street prostitution are also more open than in the United States, and Italian television consistently parades women in highly sexualized attire and behavior.



Beyond women's tight-fitting clothing, tight living quarters combine with extremely lengthy courtships, and a tremendous concern for appearances and family honor, to form a highly sexualized yet socially restrictive environment in which unintended pregnancies often result in abortion. In southern Italian families, 10 or more years of "engagement" is not uncommon. Our region of Puglia has one of Italy's highest abortion rates, with close to half of all pregnancies ending in this manner.

Hopefully the above reflections help you more clearly envision the degree to which this is truly pioneering and much-needed work. It's like when my colleague Vicki Thorn went to her bishop in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the early 1980's and posed the challenge of how the Church can effectively minister to the wounds of this loss which breaks hearts and kills faith, which wounds marriages and weakens families. Italians have now lived in an abortion culture for three decades. Most people assume the Church issues only condemnation after abortion. For three years now the *Rachel's Vineyard Italy Mission* has offered a different response more in keeping with the Good News of hope and healing, life renewed and life transformed by compassionate friendship and the Mercy of God. Our work has just begun, and we hope you join us in this mission!

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In communion with the **universal Church**
Let us open the doors of **Mercy and Reconciliation**
To all those who bear **the wounds of abortion**.



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