

The Italian Street

Dear Parishioners,

One can remain in a monastery this close to beautiful Italy only so long before the allure of unlimited pasta draws one out from the sainted cloister. And so it was. For a blessed week I threw myself into the top of the fabled boot and was duly immersed in culture, cuisine and Catholicism.

Yet the "Italian Street," if one might thus call it, is a complex reality. I had resolved to go about the entire time in my cassock, remaining in the North, resisting the draw of the Eternal City.

The Italians, like the French, have been harmed by secularism, but retain a warmth (or should I say, *heat*) for the Church. There is still an openness and friendly love for priests that brings out smiles conveys the message: "Yes, Padre, you might think I'm ignoring you, but I see you out of the corner of my eye, so you'd better be on your toes! If you pass the test I'll buy you a limoncello later."

As the joke goes, an Italian atheist maintains that there is no God, and the Madonna is His Mother! There is a Catholic exuberance in Italy that cannot be satisfactorily ignored. The streets are full of churches, sometimes one across from the other. There are little shrines to Our Lady on corners, on walls, on pillars, everywhere. And all have fresh flowers before them or perhaps a burning candle in testimony to some anonymous person's Faith. There are always people at Mass and the Sunday I was there the church was packed. So it is rather clear to all that an atheist in Italy is really just an old grouch, who perhaps has bunions and blames God for it.

Besides food, art, music, architecture and religion, they have also perfected cynicism, which at times is directed at the Church. So I knew I was taking a risk wandering about as I did. One such cynic hurled a gratuitous barb at me as I ambled about admiring the elegant *palazzi* of Florence. He actually stopped in front of me to do so. I was taken aback and wanted to be sure I understood, asking, "Signore, tu m'insulti?" (*Sir, are you insulting me?*). To which he replied, "Si." And then we moved on, almost in a friendly manner. No yelling, just a jab at the priest. It was that straightforward and uncomplicated. Plus it was time to get an espresso since it was after lunch.

Yet another man crazily yelled out above the din as I walked along, "Death to the Catholic Church! Long live Giordano Bruno!" It was a rather puzzling exclamation, since Bruno is long dead (he was a heretic by the way, so think it through a bit) and the Catholic Church lives on and on.



The Taking Down from the Cross,
Ducal Palace in City of Mantua

But shortly thereafter on the same busy street a man stopped me in the midst of the hustle and bustle and pulled me to the side. There was no stiletto awaiting me, but at first I was expecting something unpleasant. No, he just wanted to confess, right there in the street! The mean old cynics are mixed right in with those who have genuine devotion.

Another man beckoned to me in Genoa and told me how much he loved God, the Church and his priest. He was hurting since his father died recently and untimely. He showed me the photo of the handsome man which he carried close to his heart. I blessed him and we went our ways.

In a parking garage as I left the city of Venice I saw another young man feverishly digging in a garbage can. There were other people about so we could easily have missed each other. Yet we both looked up at the same time and our eyes locked. He was Italian. And he could not ignore a priest walking by, especially since I stopped and said, holding my thumbs to my first two fingers and shaking them up and down, "Amico, ma che fai!?" (*My friend, whatever are you doing!?*). He was desperate, caught in a complex web of problems of his own making, reduced to eating garbage because he could not ignore the fundamental urge of his body simply to eat. He was a Catholic. He has a name, it is Antonio. He believes in Jesus but his life is a disaster. Yet there was a brief moment of hope. He bowed his head as I gave him a blessing. We parted ways with his fear filled eyes burned into my heart. We think we ourselves could never end up in a such a state. I wonder.

As I entered the Cathedral of Genoa, the hometown of Christopher Columbus, an elderly, well dressed man with the typical Italian balding pattern and sporting an elegant ascot stopped me on the steps. I presume he had been in the church to pray and perhaps light a candle. But he was twisted by that horrible cynicism which stopped me in the street earlier in the week. He did not greet me so much as go off on a tirade about the "spazzatura" ruining his fair city. It's an ugly word, and as he said it he pointed to the poor and downtrodden sitting on the church steps eating *focaccia*, which especially enraged him for some odd reason. They needed a "crack on the head!" as he said; but scoffing, added that the *clergy* would do nothing about it at all ("*Voi non fate nulla!*"); as if I were the one who should go clunk their coconuts right in front of the House of God! He was so extreme and dramatic that he was almost charming in a sit-com sort of way. But I made my exit quickly! continued...



Village Church on the Ligurian coast

Every single day I was repeatedly approached by people begging. But how is it that some who are evidently civilized are so adept at hurting the priest, or even insulting him to his face, whilst the downtrodden practically come to us on hands and knees? I suppose the old bunioned cynic would scoff that the beggar just wants money (perhaps because that is what they themselves love) and sees an easy target in the clergy. Yet that in itself is a testimony to the clergy. The beggars see *hope* in the priest, even should it be through the confused lenses of their untidy lives.



Italian deli at its best

And so I took the time to talk to each person who held out a hand. Some were quite dirty, some were horribly deformed, many were immigrants. But did you know that they all have names? They came from somewhere and have fears and hopes just like us, mingled with a torrent of complex problems that have landed them in their humiliating state? They are largely ignored and many told me that they are stung by the indifference of the throngs of people marching by with selfie sticks, Gucci handbags and touristic determination to get to the next attraction engraved grimly on their faces. Meanwhile Christ is languishing in the streets. Better to be a *pilgrim* than just a tourist...

In the train station a gypsy girl with dark brown eyes and braided hair came up to me and we began to talk. The gypsies are despised in Europe. They are nomads and are quite discombobulating to the cultured classes. But there is also a gypsy *Saint*. (A cynic responded, "*That's right, just ONE!*"). Anyhow, the Saint was a man who was killed by the leftists in 1930s Spain. His crime? He defended a Catholic priest. This particular gypsy beggar girl had two babies and a husband. And then she even asked me how I was doing. The cynics don't do that, except to find out if you spent too much on your shoes or something so they can judge the priest for being a phony. But my gypsy was Christian, a Romanian Orthodox. I offered her a priestly blessing which she readily accepted, and with bowed head.

In the same train station an elderly man then approached me, begging. A few steps away stood protectively a burly Italian police officer who looked like Luca Brasi. I nodded to him as if to say "*I'm ok, officer, thank you.*" The beggar was named Mahomet. He told me he was a Muslim from North Africa. He had great worry in his eyes and written in the lines of his face. He had a family, had been a laborer but was now unemployed. He felt himself despised in Italy and he was hungry. We talked, and for quite some time. Before we departed ways I offered him a blessing. He looked at me with uncertainty. I then stated forthrightly, "*I am a Catholic priest. I am willing to call down God's blessing upon you. But you must understand who I am and what I am offering you. And you must say yes freely.*" His hesitation changed to resolution, he bowed his head, and said, "*Yes, please bless me.*" Then, laying my hands upon his head, and invoking the Name of the Holy Trinity and through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, I imposed a Christian blessing upon this Muslim man in the midst of the packed train station of Florence. There was a pause, and as we parted ways he thanked me.

It happened. The encounter left me marveling at the movement of unexpected grace. Mahomet of North Africa does not know Francis M. de Rosa (with his many and admitted faults). To him I was just an anonymous priest, a man not even of his own kind. But there was a recognition that the priest represented a bit of hope right then and there. This is the power of the Gospel and this is the only true answer to the Muslim situation in Europe. We must show these strange newcomers the greatness of our Holy Religion and we must do so with supreme love and confidence. They too must find Jesus Christ. They too are called to the family of the Holy Catholic Church. On a large scale it is a very complicated matter, of course, and I do not want to be naïve or simplistic. Yet before me for those few moments there stood just a frightened fellow human being, whom age and fatigue and cruel circumstance had ground down to the point where he was forced to beg for bread to eat, in public, before all the passers by in the grungy train station of Florence.

In truth he needed more than the few coins I spared. He needed someone to look him in the eyes and ask his *name*. And in God's Providence I myself needed to do so to encounter our common humanity that groans beneath the weight the woes of life in this Valley of Tears.



Frescoes in the Gonzaga palace of Mantua

--Father Francis de Rosa