

# THE ITALIAN STREET

*Posted on April 1, 2022 by Father Francis M. de Rosa*





Several years past I was granted a summer sabbatical in beautiful, sunny Provence. My base was a traditionalist Benedictine monastery where I was privileged to engage in a deep study of the ancient Roman liturgy.

My stay was accentuated by a somewhat fitting element of penance as well, for I happened to be there during a Mediterranean heat wave dubbed "Lucifer." The unrelenting sun and soaring temperatures resulted in actual forest fires breaking out in the countryside very near to where I would take my daily strolls. My assigned monastic cell had no American-style air conditioning and it was necessary to close the heavy wooden shutters all day in a desperate attempt to stop the withering radiation from heating up the room to cooking temperature. It helped somewhat, I suppose, but the long-term effect was that I ended up baked like a clerical baguette in a monastic oven.

The Benedictines deserve great respect for their penitential lives dedicated to night and day Divine Worship under such hard-living conditions. That said, in short time I was on the road, zipping past Nice and heading Eastward. I broke for a brief visit to the magnificent Principality of Monaco. Pushing on, I was soon safely immersed in the cool sea breezes, culture, cuisine and Catholicism of Italy.

The "Italian Street," if one might so call it, is a complex, somewhat tricky reality. This is uniquely the case for an American priest resolved to go about the entire time donning a cassock in public.

Many Italians, like the French, have been diminished by secularism. Yet there does seem to endure a particular warmth (or should I say, heat) for the Church. In *bella Italia* there is still a great deal of openness and friendly love for priests that brings out smiles. Still others appear indifferent but convey a not so subtle message: "*Padre, you might think I'm ignoring you, but I am watching you out of the corner of my eye, so you'd better be on your toes! And if you pass the test I'll buy you a limoncello, d'accordo?*"

Different than in reserved and sophisticated France, there is a Catholic exuberance in Italy that amicably endures. The towns are absolutely full of churches, sometimes one next to the other. There are charming 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, despite the statistics, and on my particular Sunday in the North that week the seaside church was happily packed.

It is tempting to conclude that an atheist in Italy is really just smarting in the face of the hardships of life.

That is a danger for all of us of course. A deceased and famous Italian journalist claimed in life to be a "Catholic atheist." Towards the end of her earthly tenure she was granted an hours long interview with Pope Benedict XVI. Emerging, she proclaimed him to be the greatest man in Europe. She died, if my sources are correct, with the Last Rites and bequeathed her library to the Gregorian University in Rome. As the saying goes, an Italian atheist maintains that there is no God, and the Madonna is His Mother!

Besides food, art, music, architecture and religion, the wonderful Italians have also perfected cynicism. It is almost an attitudinal art form, especially when at times it is directed at Holy Mother Church and the clergy. If one can stay ahead of this it keeps the conversation exciting. If not, it cuts to the heart.

Therefore, I knew it was taking a risk wandering about as I did. One such street cynic levelled a gratuitous barb at me as I ambled about admiring the elegant palazzi of Florence. He actually stopped square in front of me to score his point with maximal acidic effect. I was taken aback and wanted to be sure I understood, asking, "*Signore, tu m'insulti?*" (*Sir, are you insulting me?*). To which he hissed, "*Per forza*" (*Of course!*). There was no yelling, just an opportune jab at a priest. It really was that straightforward and uncomplicated.

But I quickly got on top of it, made a mental note of his gratuitous rudeness to a complete stranger, and we parted ways, almost in a business-like manner. I would go further and say that his brazenness was of the kind that quarrelsome family members exhibit. There is, after all, a great deal of operatic yelling in Italy. If a German were to do such a thing one might – well, let's leave that to the reader's imagination to decide. At any rate, I intuitively grasped that peculiar reality and saw no reason to engage. Plus, it was time to get an espresso since it was after lunch. There was no time to waste!

Yet another man crazily yelled out above the din as I walked along, "*Morte alla Chiesa Cattolica! Viva Giordano Bruno!*" I perceived this to be a rather perplexing exclamation, since Bruno is long dead (he was a heretic by the way, so think the details through a bit) and the Catholic Church lives on and on.

Shortly thereafter on the same busy street a man with slick hair pulled back in a pony tail and looking like Di Niro's character in [The Mission](#) materialized in the midst of the hustle and bustle of a teeming crowd, grabbed my arm and yanked me to the side away from the thrall mob of tourists. I was a dead man this time for sure! But there was no stiletto between the ribs awaiting me. Rather, he just wanted to confess, right there in the street! You see, the mean old cynics are mixed right in with those who have genuine devotion. He quickly cancelled out his compadre's brutishness.

In Genoa a man beckoned from a doorway set in a grungy back alley down which I had taken a wrong turn. He told me straight off how much he loved God, the Church and his parish priest. He was hurting terribly since his father had recently died an untimely death. He showed me the photo of his handsome family patriarch which he carried close to his heart. Italians know how to grieve a death. I blessed him and we went our ways.

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 presumed he had been in the church to pray and perhaps light a candle. But he was tainted by that biting cynicism which kept lunging intermittently at me during that 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!" he said. Scoffing, he added that the clergy would do nothing about it at all (*Voi non fate nulla!*)

There you have it: It was my fault and if I were serious about the spectacle on the church steps, not to mention the Gospel, I should go clunk their coconuts immediately! He was so extreme and dramatic that he was almost charming in a sit-com sort of way. I managed to say something reassuring, slipped inside the cathedral and found a glorious side altar where a kindly sacristan set me up for Mass.

In a parking garage as I left the city of Venice I spotted a 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 partly of his own making, reduced to eating garbage because he could not ignore the elemental urge of his body simply to eat. He was a Catholic. He has a worthy 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 though...



Every single day I was repeatedly approached by people begging. Now how is it that some who are evidently cultured are so adept at hurting a priest, 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.

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 etched grimly on their faces to get to the next cultural marvel. Meanwhile Christ is languishing in the streets. How much more sublime it is to be a *pilgrim* rather than just a tourist.

In the train station of Florence a gypsy girl with dark brown eyes and braided hair came up to me and we began to talk. The gypsies are often despised in Europe. They are nomads and are quite discomfiting to the comfortable classes. But a gypsy has also been raised to the altars, Blessed

Ceferino Giménez Malla.

A cynic bellowed, *"That's right, just one!"*

Thank you, sir, for that contribution. Permit me to continue: the holy gypsy defended a Catholic priest who was being maltreated, which was not quite the fashionable thing to do in 1930's Catalonia. He was subsequently awarded the palm of martyrdom by his leftist interlocutors.

Now the particular gypsy beggar girl with whom I was chatting had two babies, a husband and a name. And then, with genuine humanity, 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. She was a Romanian Orthodox. I offered her a priestly blessing which she readily accepted, and with bowed head.

In the same train station an elderly bearded man in a beige tunic 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, grazie tanto."* 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, was weakening with age, 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 hostile 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 weighty woes of life in this Valley of Tears.

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*Father Francis M. de Rosa is a priest of the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia. A graduate of Niagara University, the Ateneo della Santa Croce in Rome and Mount Saint Mary's Seminary in Maryland. He also holds a Licentiate in Sacred Theology from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C. He has published articles on bioethics in the Linacre Quarterly and the National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly. He was ordained in 1997 and is the pastor of St. Elizabeth Catholic Church in Colonial Beach, Virginia and St. Anthony of Padua Mission in King George, Virginia.*

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*Featured image: "Italian Street," by Dmitri Danish; painted in 2021.*



