

The Church, the State, and Italy's Budget

Judith Harris (December 10, 2008)



Last Friday's battle between Church and State, fought over government funding for private schools, lasted a mere six hours. The score: Church 1, State 0. But then, scoreboards do not always tell the whole story.

Desperate to save money, in a Senate debate over the 2009 budget last Friday the Italian government revealed plans to slash its E 537 million (\$692 million) annual subsidy to the country's 13,000 private schools, of which roughly half are Catholic with over half a million students—especially in elementary schools—and 41,000 teachers. The planned cut was to be of E 134 million (\$172.6 million) distributed over the coming three years..



During the past three years about one-third of the subsidy had already been eliminated.

The Church reaction was uncommonly swift. That same morning Monsignor Bruno Stenco, who heads the Italian bishops conference (CEI) schools sector, said that already state subsidies pay for less than half their teachers, and warned that, should these new cuts go through, “the federations of Catholic schools will mobilize countrywide.” The possibility that the clergy would circulate petitions was also aired.

Pope Benedict XVI moved with similar rapidity; speaking Friday the pontiff pointedly urged “the adoption of measures in aid of parents in their inalienable right to educate their children according to their own ethical and religious convictions.”

No less swiftly, budget hatchet man Giulio Tremonti, 61, who is Minister of the Economy and Finance, backed down, announcing that an amendment to the schools budget would restore some E. 120 million (\$155 million). Supposedly, the amendment had been written before the loud Catholic protest, but this did little to silence Government critics.

“When the Vatican whistles, Tremonti comes running,” sneered Paolo Ferrero, 48, a former cabinet minister under Romano Prodi and head of Rifondazione Comunista.

Watching on the sidelines were irate public school and university students and teachers, fresh from huge piazza demonstrations all over Italy, themselves battling (and losing) similarly radical cuts in the budgets for public schools, from elementary up to and including university research institutes.

In an interview with the daily La Repubblica, Rome University Physics Professor Carlo Bernardini complained that, while Education Minister Mariastella Gelmini will chat with students on Youtube, she has been deaf to their requests for a real discussion even as she “opens a dialogue with the bishops.”

The students themselves seem to be floundering, frustrated at their failure to score their own points, and with few organizational skills. ([On this, Italian readers see Sabina Guzzanti's blog report from Senigallia](#) [2]) At a Rome dinner party last week an Italian professor was shouting at a graduate student over what is to be done.

It is plain that the government headed by media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, already looking ahead to his campaign to become Italian President to succeed Giorgio Napolitano, has no interest in clashing with the Vatican, no matter how bleak the Italian economy and the Government's budget loom.

In addition, 300,000 Italian children attend Catholic elementary schools, the Church's strongest educational card in Italy. Public school facilities, whose income is being hacked away by Tremonti, could simply not handle the arrival of hundreds of thousands of young children whose parents could not afford to pay higher school fees for religious school.

Yet the situation is not altogether clear, for commentators here say that the details of the restoration of the budget cuts have been left vague, and that whether it will go to private or to public schools is not yet clear.



What is clear is that, when the reaction against Berlusconi Government measures arrives with sufficient authority, the Government reacts. In the same way, when Culture Minister Sandro Bondi appointed businessman Mario Resca to head a new development office that would oversee all Italian public museums, historic buildings, libraries and archaeological sites, some 6,000 worldwide museum directors and prestigious art historians signed an on-line petition. Spearheading the protest was University of Pisa archaeologist Salvatore Settis, who is chairman of an advisory council for the Culture Ministry. Resca's appointment, mocked as "cultural McNuggets" because he had headed McDonalds Italia for twelve years, is certain to go through at this point, but his purview appears significantly reduced, and he will have little authority over museums and their programs of loans, a sensitive issue.

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