

Italian Church in a Political Quandary

Judith Harris (March 01, 2011)



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It was a formal diplomatic event, all tea and sympathy and polite shaking of hands, but the bitter after-taste lingers. On February 18 Italian President Giorgio Napolitano and select members of the government met in the Italian Embassy to the [Holy See](#) [2] with a delegation from the Vatican to honor the anniversary of the signing of the [Concordat](#) [3]. The treaty of 1929, formally called the [Lateran Pacts](#) [4] because signed in the Basilica of St. John Lateran, put a belated but definitive end to the so-called “Roman Question” that had been left dangling ever since 1870, when Rome fell and the Vatican lost its temporal powers to the newly united Italy. For Italy the Duce signed the peace treaty on behalf of [King Victor Emmanuel III](#) [5]; for the Holy See, Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro



Gasparri signed on behalf of Pope Pius XI.

Marking the anniversary celebration was a not particularly veiled sense of embarrassment in the Vatican delegation, headed by an extremely formal [Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco](#) [6], over the presence of Premier Silvio Berlusconi as head of the government.

Fact is, the Vatican is in a quandary. Italian bishops may not necessarily read every detail of the bungabunga phone taps filling the newspapers, but they know full well that Premier Berlusconi faces a judiciary trial on April 6 over his interference with Milanese police when a young woman—a very young and unscrupulous woman who has allegedly benefited from expensive gifts of jewelry and cash traceable to the Premier—was arrested on charges of theft.

But at the same time most of the bishops do not trust the leftist politicians who might be an alternative to Berlusconi, like the openly gay [Nichi Vendola](#) [7] or the old-style cigar-chomping [Pietro Bersani](#) [8]. Even more importantly, they also know very well the advantages Berlusconi offers to the Italian Church. His government has backed “Family Day,” where abortion has been denounced. He has given assurances that his government will block efforts to give individuals the right to die (known here as the “biological testament”). He has hinted that more funds could be forthcoming for the nation’s economically troubled Catholic schools, whose enrollments have dropped by 20%, by an official estimate, due to the recession and families’ inability to pay tuition.

As a result, as Religion News Service Rome correspondent Francis X. Rocca wrote, “the most eloquent statement by church leaders so far may have been silence,” and at the Feb. 18 ceremony commemorating the treaties, [“Bertone and Berlusconi were both present but reportedly did not speak.”](#) [9]

Officially the Vatican has been trying to maintain an even keel, equidistant, but it is not easy. Mons. Giuseppe Anfosso has called for Berlusconi to “take a step backward, resign and clarify the situation in the proper places.” Local Catholic reaction to the sex scandals has increased dramatically, and in recent issues [Famiglia Cristiana](#) [10], the foremost Catholic magazine in Italy with one of the country’s largest circulations, has taken the bull by the horns. One of its January backgrounders was headlined, [“Le notti di Arcore.”](#) [11] The Nights at Arcore (Arcore is the popular name for the villa in Milan where Berlusconi lives). From its lead item:

“The head of state [President Napolitano] says that he is ‘troubled.’ The daily newspaper of the Italian bishops speaks of an ‘overwhelming’ affair. If what the magistrates have stated in their request to the Chamber of Deputies to authorize a search of the office of Berlusconi’s colleague [his paymaster], the picture would be squalid and desolating. The investigation that began with the ‘Ruby case’ that involves the President of the Council of Ministers is shattering the political offices and the entire country, and has been heard world wide.”

This was the magazine which, as long ago as last October, appealed to Berlusconi to observe more self-control. In mid-February an editorial writer Giorgio Vecchiato commented that the real news was not so much that Berlusconi would have to face trial April 6 on charges of abuse of office and for his relationship with an underage prostitute, but that the three-man court required to pass sentence would be composed entirely of women. “It makes one think of nemesis,” Vecchiato opined. “You, Berlusconi, made use of women, and in a bad way, and now it is women who will pass judgment on you.... We await justice, without prejudices on being conditioned.”

Reactions in the parishes has also invested those Catholics who still defend the Premier, like [Roberto Formigoni](#) [12] of Milan, who said, “Let he who is without guilt cast the first stone.” One outraged [Famiglia Cristiana](#) reader wrote in accusing Formigoni of misusing the Bible and of a “dangerous kind of moralizing.... As a Catholic I find myself faced with a scandal. How can all this be put down as nothing but gossip?” And in case anyone missed the point, a Catholic survey team shows that three out of four (73.4%) of those interviewed would like to see Berlusconi resign—now. And this is their opinion even if, they add, not all of the goings-on reported are criminal offenses.



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