



Divorce, Italian style

Judith Harris (April 24, 2015)



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ROME -- With scarcely a whisper, Italy radically simplified divorce proceedings this week. From a required three years of separation before a fractured couple seeking a divorce could face a judge, the Chamber of Deputies this week dropped the obligatory waiting period for a separation to just six months if consensual and one year if not. Although the bill had been pending for no less than a decade, the vote was overwhelmingly in favor, 398 ayes versus only 28 nays, and just six abstentions.



For a country with strong religious and family traditions, the change – tucked into the back pages in the media – is radical. At present just one out of 100 marriages fails, making Italy's divorce rate (albeit the latest available statistics date from 2012) the second lowest in the European Union. Four times as many Swedes divorce, and twice as many in Poland and Spain, like Italy primarily Catholic countries.

Premier Matteo Renzi, who is battling with the problems of migrants dying in the seas and a stalled new law to govern elections, was crowing because at least one of his promised reforms is actually coming to pass. "Another commitment maintained," he wrote in a tweet April 24. "Moving forward, this is doing the right thing." Former Premier Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) was on the same wave length and social network: "These are the politics of doing, not just talking," was his tweet. Despite his enthusiasm, among the thin ranks of the opponents, who included the obstreperous young conservative Giorgia Meloni, were a few of his own deputies.

Italy's first ever law permitting divorce was passed in 1970 following a secret meeting between Socialist (PSI) leader Francesco De Martino and Communist (PCI) leader Enrico Berlinguer. At that time De Martino was deputy premier in a center-left coalition with the anti-divorce Christian Democrats (DC). With its circa 15% of the vote in Parliament, and with support from their fellow Center-left coalition parties in Parliament (Social Democrats and Republicans) divorce bill would not have passed without the contribution of the opposition PCI with its 25% of the members of Parliament.

The new law ratifies what everyone knows, on two levels. The first is that, despite the popularity of Pope Francis, the Catholic Church in Italy and its social teachings command far less authority than in the past, particularly among the young, whose attendance at mass continues to decline, parish priests admit. As the vote shows, almost no attention was paid to the warning by *Famiglia Cristiana*, the magazine published by the Italian Council of Bishops, that the new law is "an attack on the family and on the children, who are left ever less protected and the victims of irresponsibility."

The second is the changing nature of the once mythical Italian family, part of whose remaining strength is that, with almost 44% of young Italians unemployed, most are obliged to live at home with *La Mamma* and *Il Papa*. Only Greece and Romania have a higher number of young unemployed. As a result, as new statistics show, 46.6% of Italians between the ages of 25 and 34 still live with their parents – substantially more than in France (11.5%) and Spain (37.2%).

Residual family ties are being celebrated this week with the opening of actor-director Nani Moretti's new film, "*Mia Madre*" (My Mother). Attending its first night, I was initially put off by the rank sentimentality of Moretti's version of the perfect mother, a tubby retired Latin teacher much beloved of her former students, who called her "the mother of us all."

When I asked if this versions of *La Mamma italiana* corresponds to today's truth, one older woman replied, "To the extent that we mothers were forced to conform to the stereotype, whether we wanted to or not." Said another: "In his film Moretti intimates that the special relationship between mother and son comes at the expense of the daughter." Moretti shows this is by having the daughter smash her mother's car into a wall. (Honestly, I'd not realized this was the point.)



Italian family ties remain strong, however. Take a bus, and half the passengers are speaking on mobile phones. To whom? To La Mamma, even if to say only that, "I can't really talk now, I'll phone tomorrow." And to say, "I'm bringing lasagna."

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