

Italy to Gays: Drop Dead

George De Stefano (June 11, 2008)



Italy has been seized by a "fit" of violent homophobia

Italy hates homosexuals.

I know of no other way to express the disheartening, infuriating truth that Italy, a nation with which I have strong historical, familial, and emotional ties, despises people like me. It has become the most anti-gay nation in Western Europe, a sorry distinction that used to belong to Greece.



Italy long has lagged behind Great Britain, France, Germany, Scandinavia and Spain in its treatment of sexual minorities. Other European nations have strong anti-discrimination laws, openly gay or lesbian elected officials (the mayors of both Paris and Berlin are gay men), and have granted various forms of legal recognition to same-sex couples. Italy however rejects even the mildest equality initiatives and instead offers its non-heterosexual citizens a toxic blend of violent repression, religious bigotry and reactionary social policy.

Italian newspapers in May reported a particularly ugly hate crime: the stabbing of a young gay Sicilian by his own father, who declared that it was a “dishonor” to have a gay son. He probably would have preferred to have had a son who was a member of ‘la società onorata’ -- better a mafioso than a frocio.

But, as the Italian gay rights organization Arcigay observed, this crime isn’t just about “a certain southern Italian subculture that is difficult to defeat.”

“It is an entire country that has been seized by a fit of homophobia,” claimed the organization in a press release. The hatred has been “fed in recent years above all by the Catholic hierarchy and sectors of the Italian political and social right-wing.”

Though homophobia is nothing new in Italy, it has markedly worsened since the recent elections that returned Silvio Berlusconi to power in alliance with Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale.

Romano Prodi’s timid, feckless government, cowed by the Vatican and its rightist allies, and by the bigots within its own center-left coalition, did nothing to advance same-sex partner rights. Gays and lesbians have proved among the centrosinistra’s most reliable supporters, a solid left-liberal voting bloc. But Prodi and company evidently felt that pacifying the Vatican and its boss, Josef Ratzinger (I cannot bring myself to call this bloody-minded reactionary “the Pope,” much less “Holy Father”) was a higher priority than taking care of one of its most loyal constituencies.

But as bad as Prodi’s administration was, it looks enlightened compared to what has followed it.

In February of this year, members of Berlusconi’s former Forza Italia party organized a seminar titled “Woman, Life, and Family.” The chief organizer was one Mara Carfagna, a Forza Italia parliamentarian whose main claim to fame was having been a beauty queen who posed nude for a calendar. At this gabfest of cretini, Carfagna declared that “gays are constitutionally sterile,” adding the usual right-wing, natalist boilerplate about the “fundamental requisite” being “the ability to procreate.”

This genius is now the Minister of Equal Opportunity in Berlusconi’s government.

More recently, she declared that gays and lesbians are not at all discriminated against in Italy.



Arcigay would beg to differ. It has compiled a dossier of anti-gay hate crimes and acts of discrimination that have occurred in Italy during the past two years. It can be viewed online at: <http://www.arcigay.it/dossier-omofobia-italia-2006-2008> [2]

This shocking tally of violence, including murder, as well as bullying, vandalism of gay gathering places, and hate rhetoric does not include a recent outrage: the June 2 beating of two young gay men by ten or so thugs at a train station in Naples.

This past weekend the Gay Pride celebrations were held in Milan and Rome. Gianni Alemanno, Rome's new right-wing mayor, made quite clear his attitude to the Pride parade. He denied the parade the official support (il patrocinio) that the previous Rome administration had (half-heartedly) provided. He also refused to permit the marchers to end up at Piazza San Giovanni, as the organizers had requested, because there's a major church there. Once again, in today's Italy, the "right" of the Catholic Church not to be offended outweighs the constitutional rights of Italian citizens.

I had feared far worse than this. Given the recent resurgence of far-right violence by such groups as the Hitler-loving Forza Nuova, I was certain there would be attacks against Gay Pride participants. And sure enough, a group of right-wing extremists, some carrying knives, did try to disrupt the march at Piazza Venezia. They carried black Fascist banners and screamed at the marchers, "We will stab all of you." Fortunately, the police held them back.

Rome's gay march was successful, with several hundred thousand in attendance, according to Repubblica. (The police absurdly underestimated the crowd size at between 10,000 and 20,000. The New York Police Department used to engage in this politically-motivated undercounting after each year's Pride parade, but no more.) The parade combined colorful spectacle and political protest, including symbolic celebrations of gay marriages. About 30 demonstrators also held a brief protest at Piazza San Pietro under the rubric "No Vat," a double entendre playing on the unpopular value-added tax (VAT) and the Vatican. They unfurled a large banner that declared, "The Vatican occupies Italy, we occupy the Vatican."

So Italy's gay population, or at least the activists, refused to be intimidated by the powerful forces arrayed against them.

But where are their supporters, the liberals and leftists, the grassroots Catholics and just plain decent Italians who in the past spoke out against homophobia?

As Arcigay's president Aurelio Mancuso stated, "the intellectuals, the large cultural and social associations, the unions, all have been totally silent."

"This, our evident aloneness," Mancuso concluded, "is not only our problem because if this wave of violent homophobia is not stopped, Italy is at risk for further decline and social barbarization, of unpredictable consequences."



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[2] <http://www.arcigay.it/dossier-omofobia-italia-2006-2008>