

Blessed Fascism

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Right-wing extremists Forza Nuova march, and a priest gives the benediction



“The priest’s tunic is just a longer blackshirt.”

That observation about the similarity of ecclesiastic and Fascist attire came from Giulio Tam, a Roman Catholic priest in Italy. Tam showed up in Bergamo last week to bless a rally by Forza Nuova, a violent neofascist party that had just opened a “sede,” or office, in that city. Tam, in his black priestly garb, marched alongside Forza Italia’s leader, Roberto Fiore. He was photographed giving the Roman (Fascist) salute as he marched with Fiore, followed by a hundred or so Forza Nuova militants wearing helmets and brandishing clubs.

According to La Repubblica, Father Tam’s marching companions sang Fascist anthems and shouted threatening slogans. Some even chanted “Sieg heil.”

Tam was proud to be in their company. As he told La Repubblica, “I will always stand at the side of the young people of Forza Nuova. Mussolini is a martyr and I am in favor of his beatification. The Roman salute? The kids asked me to bless them and I performed my function.”

Italian media described Tam as a “lefebvrano,” meaning, that he belongs to the ultra right-wing St. Pius X Society founded by the renegade French priest Marcel Lefebvre.

The convergence of ultra-conservative Pius X adherents and Italian ultra-rightists isn’t exactly a new development. “Traditionalist” Catholics long have openly supported the far right. Tam, for example, celebrates an annual mass at Mussolini’s tomb and regularly attends Forza Nuova meetings. But the “lefebvrano” movement and its reactionary politics have come under heightened scrutiny lately, ever since Joseph Ratzinger aka Pope Benedict XVI announced his intent to lift the longstanding excommunication of four of its leaders, including the notorious Holocaust denier, “Bishop” Richard Williamson.

Williamson has denied that the Third Reich planned to exterminate Europe’s Jews and maintains that “not a single Jew” was killed in the gas chambers.



The pope's initiative, purportedly undertaken to repair a schism in Roman Catholicism, has blown up in his face, earning him near-universal condemnation. The Vatican was forced to do serious damage control. Williamson and company were told they'd have to recant their Holocaust denial and accept the reforms of Vatican II as preconditions for being re-admitted to the Church. (The Second Vatican Council is a particular bete noire of the lefebvrians; they oppose both its liturgical reforms and its ruling that Jews are not responsible for the death of Jesus.) But Williamson, in particular, doesn't want to play nice. He's issued a series of evasive statements, saying he'd retract his views, but only if they were proved wrong.

The Vatican has said that Williamson's statements to date don't pass the smell test. But it's unlikely that Williamson will fully recant; his anti-Semitism and far-right politics seem as intrinsic to him as his British accent.

Whatever headaches Williamson and his colleagues are causing the Vatican, far more alarming is the growing presence and audacity of Forza Nuova. Father Tam's favorite political party lately has been inflaming anti-immigrant sentiment in Italy. It has called for the "immediate repatriation by force of every foreigner who is not in Italy for work useful to our nation."

But Forza Nuova doesn't limit itself to anti-immigrant rhetoric; its bullyboys also physically attack them. And not only immigrants: FN also has it out for leftists and gays, and has assaulted both and vandalized their property and meeting places. At Rome's gay rights march last year, a bunch of these disgusting thugs threatened marchers with knives.

Forza Nuova, using classic Fascist language, calls for a return to the values of "God, Fatherland and Family." Its ideology has strong roots in traditionalist Roman Catholicism -- hence the Lefebvre/Pius X connection.

Forza Nuova doesn't do especially well at the polls. But unimpressive election results don't mean this group isn't a threat. The economic, social, and political climate in Italy right now provides opportunities that Fiore and his followers are eager to exploit. The worldwide economic disaster is hitting Italy hard, with rising unemployment and other signs of economic malaise. Immigrants increasingly are scapegoated over conditions for which they bear no responsibility. In a period of right-wing dominance (and weakness of the left), social minorities, such as gays and lesbians, also are stigmatized and attacked as internal threats to the nation.



Moreover, though Forza Nuova originated in northern Italy, it now has offices all over the country, from the far north to Palermo. When I was in Sicily a few years ago, I saw, far too often, its slogans painted in public spaces. My favorite was “Keep Sicily Aryan and Pure,” a stunning combination of the horrific and the ludicrous.

But the Forza Nuova phenomenon isn't restricted to Italy. Fiore's noxious gang is only one of a number of similar parties and political formations that have emerged in Europe. FN is a member of the European National Front, the coordinating body of European far right and so-called “Third Positionist” parties and movements.

The British National Party, a far-right group led by Nick Griffin, also belongs to the European National Front. The British daily *The Guardian* recently revealed that Griffin and Roberto Fiore not only are ideological soul mates; they're also business partners. The paper reported that CL English Language, a London school that teaches English to foreign students, is run by Fiore, and that the school's accountants are Nick Griffin's parents.

Fiore arrived in Britain in October 1980, a 21-year-old fugitive from the Italian police who wanted to question him about the notorious Bologna train station bombing two months earlier, which killed 85 people. He settled in London, where he met Griffin. The two shared an apartment and even ran a travel agency together.

Fiore returned to Italy in 1999. He'd been cleared in the Bologna bombing but found guilty of “subversive association” and sentenced to nine years in prison. That was reduced to five-and-a-half on appeal. But the jail term eventually was “timed out” under Italy's statute of limitation laws, permitting Fiore to return to his homeland.



One of the main aims of this poisonous “flower” is to overturn Italy’s law banning attempts to reconstitute Mussolini’s Fascist party. But as Forza Nuova and other right-wing parties and groups active in Italy today demonstrate, you don’t need a Fascist party to have fascists.

Part of the problem is that Italy, though it prohibits a reconstituted Fascist party, has not dealt with its Fascist past as vigorously and as honestly as Germany has confronted – and unequivocally repudiated -- its Nazi history. If it had, Roberto Fiore’s Forza Nuova would be banned, not marching through the streets giving roman salutes and blessed by Fascist priests.

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