

A New Family Style for Italy

Judith Harris (July 22, 2012)



Gay civil unions? The traditional family has always been the bulwark of Italy, its citadel, saving grace and court of financial last resort. But even within this venerable institution, change is coming, albeit with difficulty, as the definition of "family" itself comes under attack.

ROME - At a meeting of its directorate on July 14, the supposedly left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD) was asked to vote a motion to support gay civil unions. The motion was put forward by Ivan Scalfarotto, his party's vice president, and Paola Concia, the first openly gay member of Parliament. But when party leader Pier Luigi Bersani backed away from putting the issue to a vote, a nasty shouting match broke out.

If anything, Bersani's hesitation triggered a broader debate elsewhere. At a meeting this week with the national leadership of his Union of Christian Democrats (UDC), Catholic centrist Pier Ferdinando Casini declared that, "Marriage between gays is a profoundly uncivil idea - a violence of nature, against nature." Casini, however, whose critics did not overlook that he is on his own second marriage, acknowledged that de facto unwed couples, though not gays, should have some form of "judicial guarantee."



This week the Milan city council is slated to vote on the issue, and a demonstration in favor of civil unions took place there. Mayor Giuliano Pisapia went on record reiterating his promise of last March to institute an official registry for civil unions which would include recognition of gay couples. If Pisapia's proposal passes, couples in civil unions, including gay couples, would obtain access to all city services available to families.

The Catholic members of the Partito Democratico in the Milan city council declined to back Pisapia's project. But as the argument continued unabated, PD leader Bersani went on record, saying firmly, "We will allow gay unions. Others tend to their own positions." Some 86 Italian townships already have a registry for de facto heterosexual couples, while two towns have a registry that permits gay couples a form of legality.

Arguing against the revised family law was Mattia Ferraro, vice president of the Union of Catholic Jurists in Milan, who warned that: "One cannot ignore the risk that the equivalency being sought between civil unions and families founded upon matrimony leads toward the legitimizing of polygamy." If passed, the polygamous immigrant in Milan could demand that his union with several wives be recognized, Ferraro pointed out. Pro-gay rights activists objected to their desire for legal recognition being compared with polygamy, even though the question of how to deal with polygamous immigrant families is in fact a knotty problem in some Northern Italian cities.

Statistics demonstrating the changing Italian family explain some of the support for the rights of civil unions. Even without immigration, and despite Church pressure, the Italian family has already been dramatically transformed. Today one out of every four children is born to parents who are not married; in 1912 only one out of 20 was born out of wedlock. Moreover, according to the official statistics-gathering agency ISTAT, today's Italian family lasts on the average only 15 years before the union is dissolved. If not yet approaching U.S. statistics, which show one out of two marriages ending in divorce, in Italy in 2010, out of 1,000 marriages over 300 ended in legal separation or divorce--twice that of 1995. The number of separations is rising by 2.6% a year and divorces, 0.5%.

The average age of separation is 45 for men and 42 for women. But curiously the over-sixties are beginning to live what the statisticians call a second life. In 2010 over the year 2000 the number of men over sixty who divorce has doubled, with 10% of the men separating or divorcing by comparison with 6.4% of the women.

And even as the traditional Italian marriage wanes, gay marriage is beginning to be accepted, and Parliamentarian Paola Concia, 48, legally wed Ricarda Trautmann, a criminologist, though not in Italy. The civil ceremony took place in Frankfurt, Germany, just one year ago, as the magazine Vanity Fair reported >>> [2]

Next on the agenda, slowly but finally at least beginning to be discussed: gay couples adopting children.

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