



Earthquake. Laws Must be Followed. Just to Avoid Another Tragedy

Maria Rita Latto (April 12, 2009)

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Last Sunday night at 3:30 a.m., practically every Roman was abruptly awoken, feeling the bed shaking, hearing the furniture creaking and the walls making a sinister sound. It was clear that somewhere not far from Rome a natural disaster had just occurred, bringing death and destruction along with it. A few hours later news arrived that the quake had hit Abruzzo, specifically the city of L'Aquila and several towns covering 230 square miles in central Italy. Since that horrible awakening, many Italians have been searching for news and ways to help the victims of the earthquake in Abruzzo.

Day after day on television, the images of rubble, dust, bodies, pain, and death reveal the situation in the area hit by this terrible event. There are so many stories, so many people who stare back at us from the screen, all showing an incredible amount of dignity as they cope with the violence of nature. Those faces, of every age, all bear the same distinct expression typical of people who live in this area; they are so strong, stubborn, and proud even as they confront tragedies such as the loss of dear relatives or their own homes.

Nature can be so ruthless, though in many cases, words have the same effect as an earthquake. While people in Abruzzo are living a nightmare, we still see the same humiliating, typically Italian "blah, blah, blah" television shows which also have the same effect as an earthquake: they show no respect for sorrow. We watch surreal debates featuring politicians, earthquake scholars, experts, and psychologists who all try to give their opinions and convey information. Most of these programs present a rather bleak picture of the situation in Italy. How is it possible that houses were built on river beds, on archaeological sites, along the slopes of volcanoes, and in areas that have a high risk of earthquakes or natural disasters? How is possible that no one caught this? It seems incredible that the politicians who express shock and surprise on television were not aware of these facts, especially since a quick Internet search shows that there are unstable areas throughout Italy. For example, the fact that Vesuvius has been "sleeping" for so many years does not mean that it will lie dormant forever, even though those who approved the construction of homes near the volcano seem to think so. On television our politicians are speechless at the suggestion that there were so many victims not because of the earthquake, but because of unsafe buildings that inevitably collapsed. Many tragedies in the past have shown that continuing to build houses in the wrong place, with the wrong materials, and with no oversight will once again lead to death and destruction. The lessons of the



past, however, were not learned well enough and the collapsed hospital in L'Aquila, which was established just nine years ago and cost twenty times more than the initial estimate, is one final proof of this fact. No one is able to answer the question as to whether it had been built according to seismic standards and whether comprehensive measures were taken, especially since a hospital should be fully operational despite any catastrophe. No one has been able to explain the tremors that the people in the Abruzzo have been enduring since January, other than be dismissed by experts as "normal" ground settling. No one knows why emergency evacuation drills have never been put into place in case the ground settling became something more serious and dangerous, as actually happened. There are many more unanswered questions, such as whether those who violated local building safety codes will receive amnesty, or whether recently passed laws regulating the volume of building new private houses were written according to safety standards. It is not clear how safe nuclear power plants can be built in a country with such a high risk of earthquakes. It is not clear whether the proposal to build a bridge in the Straits of Messina (which would connect Italy's mainland to Sicily, and which has not yet been built but has already cost millions of Euros) has taken safety standards and the area's geological structure into consideration.

Television programs, though, are reporting that stronger earthquakes in Japan and California have resulted in fewer tragedies than the earthquake in Abruzzo because laws there are strictly followed and enforced. Why doesn't that happen here? And yet in the past there were so many earthquakes in Italy that laws were passed imposing strict codes on the construction of houses, bridges, and public buildings according to seismic standards. The last century began with the horrific earthquake of 1908 in Messina where more than 100,000 people died. In 1915 the city of Avezzano in Abruzzo was completely destroyed and there were 30,000 victims. It happened in 1930 in Irpinia where 1,400 people died, in 1943 in Le Marche, in 1958 in L'Aquila, Abruzzo, and again in 1963 in Irpinia, and then in 1968 in Belice, Sicily with 370 dead. The most recent earthquakes occurred in 1976 in Friuli with 1,000 victims and in 1980 in Irpinia and Basilicata and the province of Salerno with approximately 2,000 dead. All of these tragedies required a steady stream of money for the reconstruction, which in most cases was not used to prevent future tragedies but was controlled by local mafias and politicians. This situation demonstrated a complete lack of respect for the many innocent victims who were killed by the natural catastrophe and ravaged by chronic Italian corruption.

In the meantime, on the second day after the quake, Tg1 at lunch time, after showing the harrowing images of death and destruction, announced that its coverage of the earthquake aftermath was the most watched while giving its share of the number of viewers. It was another surreal fact presented on Italian television and another source of rage for all those viewers who are sincerely worried about what is happening in Abruzzo. This is the same rage that was provoked by the experts' refusal to give clear answers to the Italians viewers who have so many questions that need to be answered.

Fortunately, despite the disgusting behavior displayed by the media outlets, there has been the overwhelming generosity of the Italian people who are always there, ready to help all those in need. From the first hours after the quake there were so many families from all over Italy who volunteered to host victims in their own homes. A group of families in Naples left their telephone numbers with the National Fire Department, offering to aid people from L'Aquila. The Farindustria donated necessary medicine for the emergency. Caritas as well as many banks and companies began raising funds for Abruzzo. Many hotel associations offered rooms to the homeless. In Rome there are various points where trucks are waiting to be loaded with first aid items, shuttling back and forth from



Abruzzo. Thousands of volunteers have headed to the most critical areas and many more are preparing to work in shifts, relieving the volunteers who are already there. Fund raising efforts have also been organized abroad, in the United States, France, Germany, Serbia, and Egypt. Many Abruzzesi all over the world have donated money to their region that has been so tragically hit. The famous pop star Madonna gave over \$500,000, showing that her heart is still connected to Pacentro, a small village near L'Aquila where her family is from.

After so many words, after so many tears, and especially after watching the funerals, there is the hope that once the period of mourning has passed, there won't be the usual rush to divide the funds for the reconstruction. We also hope that from now on, someone will understand that it is imperative to enforce the laws that have been passed, if only to prevent another tragedy that, as usual, has been already foretold.

(Edited by Giulia Prestia)

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