

Collision Course: Civil Unions Demo vs. Family Day

Judith Harris (January 26, 2016)



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Among the the European Union's 28 members, all but Italy and a handful of East European countries do not yet recognize civil unions, and the EU has been prodding Italy toward taking action. Finally, on Thursday the Italian Parliament begins debate on a bill that would make civil unions fully legal. The latest to accept: Greece, where Parliament passed a bill on Dec.23 and the first civil union ceremony was conducted in the City Hall in Athens this week.

As the formal debate approaches, sentiment has polarized, and all over Italy demonstrations are being held for and against the proposed law.



Last Saturday, pro-civil union demonstrations brought out what the organizers claimed were one million Italians in dozens of cities. The demonstration slogan was "Wake up Italians", and hundreds waved alarm clocks.

In some cities, including Rome and Milan, civil unions are already regularly celebrated in city hall and widely publicized. Speaking Jan. 23 to an estimated 5,000 jammed into [Piazza della Scala](#) [2], Milan Mayor [Giuliano Pisapia](#) [3] said proudly, "Milan is the capital of civil rights, thanks to our regular registration and transcriptions of civil unions and same-sex couples. It's time to call a halt to discriminations -- no more citizens of Series A and Series B."

Not everyone wants to be awakened, however. From a tall building overlooking the square where Pisapia spoke, lights suddenly flashed on spelling out the words, writ large, "FAMILY DAY," a reference to the notable support for the family honored by Italian tradition as well as by the Catholic Church.

Behind the light show was, it is believed, another Milanese politician, [Roberto Maroni](#) [4], a founding father of the Lombard League, former Interior Minister and today President of the Lombard Region. The reference to "Family Day" is because this Saturday those opposing the civil unions bill will demonstrate against it throughout Italy. In Paris a million people turned out for a similar Family Day protest, but in the end their bill passed despite Catholic objections. Will this happen here? Very likely, partly because the vote will be a secret ballot.

The controversial law is known as the Cirinnà Bill, for its author, Senator Monica Cirinnà, 53, a member of Premier [Matteo Renzi](#)' [5]s Partito Democratico (PD). Born in Rome, she was a law graduate from Rome University, where she became an assistant professor for a decade before entering politics. In 1993 she was first elected to the Rome city council, and re-elected four times, gradually becoming involved in women's rights and gender issues. In the Senate since 2013, she serves on the Justice Commission, "a very tough but passionately interesting" task.

The law she drafted extends to "de facto couples" (unwed heterosexual couples). Her goal: "I want to take this battle all the way so as to give our country a modern, advanced legislation, which reflects people's needs, and which recognizes the full legitimacy and dignity of the many forms of 'family' that exist in our society." The law would extend to the civil union partner access to public health care and the right to a late partner's pension.

In a pointed homily last week Pope Francis said that civil unions and marriage should not be confused with each other. "The family founded upon marriage cannot be dissolved," he said on the opening of the Sacra Rota tribunal judiciary year. "The Church has indicated to the world that there can be no confusion between the family wanted by God and every other type of union." At the same time, while defending traditional Church teaching, he suggested last week that it is best to stay out of politics even though last December the pontiff also said, "Let us not lose our faith in the family" as an institution.

Not surprisingly, spokesmen for the Catholic Church in Italy have not hesitated to attack the proposed law more harshly than the pontiff himself, in defense of the traditional family of one man and one woman. But even here, as some commentators here point out, the Italian Church is not blasting away with the same loud broadsides as during the battles over divorce and abortion during the Seventies, when both became legal despite Catholic Church opposition. Indeed, last Spring the time necessary to obtain a divorce shrank from three years to just six months, in what is seen as a waning of Church influence over family matters.

Still, a host of amendments have been tacked onto the Cirinnà Bill to water it down. Stepchild adoption, which would allow a gay partner to adopt the other's child, is hotly contested. Another major issue is the bill's extension of the possibility of in vitro fertilization and surrogate motherhood.

Like civil unions, in vitro has been legally available in regularly authorized centers since the highly contested referendum of 2004. However, the existing law excludes in vitro fertilization for singles



and for homosexual couples. Indeed, one nasty amendment would have those who travel abroad to arrange for babies through surrogate motherhood prosecuted.

On both these hot button issues the PD party itself is sharply divided. Other opponents are, besides the Northern League, Forza Italia (the party created by Silvio Berlusconi) and, in a spirit of opposition to Renzi for its own sake, possibly [Beppe Grillo](#) [6] even though many in his Movimento 5 Stelle support the bill.

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