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# In the Shadow of the Vatican: Churches of Christ in Italy

ELIZABETH WHATLEY

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Italy is a Roman Catholic country in which 85 percent of Italians are Roman Catholic, even if by name only. A majority of its citizens call themselves Roman Catholic whether they attend Mass on a regular basis or not. Only about 20 percent attend Mass regularly, which reflects a common view that Catholicism is more than attending Mass. Catholicism is in the bloodline, heritage, history and roots of every Italian. They see themselves as part of the eternal church. This reality makes the task for Churches of Christ in Italy very difficult but not impossible. One could say the mission efforts in Italy have been frustrating and even a failure, but one could also say they have been fulfilling and even fruitful.

In 1929 Mussolini signed a Lateran Pact with the Roman Catholic Church, making Catholicism the religion of the state. In fact, until 1949 all non-Catholic churches were illegal in Italy. The post war Italian constitution recognizes freedom of religion, but non-Catholic congregations still had to get their licenses from the police. This was not always easy for the Churches of Christ because we do not have a central head of church.

In 1984 Italy and the Vatican updated several provisions of the 1929 Lateran Pact, including the end of Roman Catholicism as Italy's formal state religion. But even with this formal alteration, little has changed and this is apparent once a person visits an Italian city. Everywhere you go you see a large number of Catholic churches and religious icons. Crucifixes and religious symbols of saints appear in stores and homes for protection. Small tabernacles can be seen on street corners and buildings throughout cities and the countryside that remind people to pray. Also, church bells ring once every half hour, calling people to pray and give thanks to God. And of course, Rome is the seat of the Pope.

Churches of Christ started in Italy after World War II by two men who served in the military: Harold Paden and Gordon Linscott. Harold Paden was a Sergeant and a bazooka specialist. He was in the Tenth Division, fighting in the Apennines between Florence and Bologna. Gordon Linscott, who also served in enemy lines during the war, was fluent in Italian, which gave him the ability to do advance work in establishing churches. Gordon Linscott was the first to find a location for the mission work to get started. He found a villa in Frascati, a small suburb of Rome. With the support of many Churches of Christ from the United States, five couples and one single male began the mission work of the Church of Christ in Italy.

The small mission task force arrived in Frascati, Italy on January 15, 1949. They were hopeful about the future of their work and named the villa *Villa Speranaze*, which means "house of hope." Many activities and programs were initiated from the villa; one of the most noted was a home for young men. They were also able, in cooperation with the Red Cross, to distribute a vast amount of clothing that arrived from the United States. Many Italians gathered to learn from these "Angels of Mercy." They conducted Bible studies with the help of interpreters, and by the end of January over 300 Italians were involved. The first baptism came in March; by June, fifty new baptized members were part of the Frascati Church of Christ. Once the Italian government learned of the success of the church, fear arose and things became more difficult for

the missionaries. Many accusations were made and some missionaries were expelled from Italy. The Italian government even tried to expel members of the church. Many Americans received personal threats against them from a militant group called the Catholic Action. It was not an easy beginning, but these efforts to curtail the work of the missionaries did not stop the growth of the church.

In 1952 there was an attempt by the Italian government to close the Frascati Church of Christ. But by then, the Church of Christ in Italy had made wonderful progress and had grown in numbers. The Catholic Church was feeling the threat of the work of the missionaries and began harassing the Church of Christ. A group of missionaries decided to take action and received help from a United States senator on the grounds that Italy was in violation of a treaty between the United States and Italy that guaranteed reciprocity of treatment between these two nations. The United States State Department issued a formal protest, which the Italian government accepted, thus resolving the legal problems for Churches of Christ.

However, other issues arose due to the fact that Churches of Christ do not have a central head. This is still a problem for the Church of Christ today. In order to be officially recognized by the Italian government, a church needs to have an official head of state. Since the Church of Christ does not have a church head it cannot be legally recognized in Italy. Therefore, like the Muslim faith in Italy, the church does not receive any benefits, such as tax breaks and the legal right to own property. With its nondenominational status and no official church hierarchy, the Church of Christ is left in a no-man's-land among the churches. But the church has found ways to work in spite of the restrictions that it faces.

The Church of Christ has acquired properties by having them purchased by individual members of the church. In addition, the church found a way to purchase Bible schools in Italy. Bible schools were started to train young men and women in Frascati, Milan and Florence. The original plan was to provide a way for self-supporting members to begin working for the church. The schools still exist but do not serve the same purpose as originally intended.

The Bible school in Florence has a two-fold purpose—to serve the community and the local Church of Christ in Florence, and to oversee the Avanti Italia program. It offers the community weekly Bible courses in Italian for groups or individuals of all ages, as well as online and by correspondence. All the services are free of charge, as much of what the school is about is making friends and teaching people about the love of Christ. The work is slow and the outcome unpredictable, but the seed is being planted. The Avanti Italia program is a Christ-centered, service based, two-year program designed to equip college graduates for a lifetime of cross-cultural ministry. Trained in Florence, the workers are then moved to other cities where the Church of Christ needs their support and help.

Times did not come easy with Vatican II and the statement by Pope John XXIII calling for cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and the “Separate Brother” in a spirit of acceptance, love and respect. With this ecumenical movement there was, by all practical purposes, no external difference between faiths. With this new outlook and the importance of Catholicism in the culture, what would make someone want to convert and take on a new life in Christ if the church they have known all their lives was already important part of their life?

What is the state of the Restoration Movement in Italy today? The Church of Christ in Italy is not experiencing the growth or success as was characteristic of the early years in its history. Certainly, it is difficult for the Restoration Movement to have any effect on Italians who see Catholicism as part of their life and culture. But Italy itself is changing with an influx of immigrants from other countries, and the area of growth in Churches of Christ is largely among immigrant peoples rather than among Italian citizens. Most of the new members are people in need, who turn to the church for help.

Aside from its own life and work, the Church of Christ in Italy has very few ecumenical connections with other Christian traditions. Individual congregations are very good at working with one another within the country, and sponsor events such as an annual Bible retreat, Bible camps, retreats for men and women, weekend conferences and other activities.

Restoration churches in Italy are also heavily entrusted to or dependent upon leadership from the United States. They are still organized and supported by American churches. Many churches in Italy do not have elders or deacons; leaders have not developed within given congregations. This lack of leadership not only keeps them dependent upon American churches but also contributes to a lack of growth among Churches of Christ in Italy.

In regard to the role of women in the church, Churches of Christ in Italy hold a very traditional view. This is consistent with the Roman Catholic Church, in which women have a very limited role, except for reading the liturgy during Mass—a change brought by Vatican II. In the 1970s many women left the Church of Christ because they wanted to have a more active role. Many of these women have not returned to the church after many discussions and disagreements. Most roles for women are typical of what you would find in many churches in the United States. They serve as church secretaries and work behind the scenes and among the women of the church. But they do not have formal roles in ministry or in the worship services of the church. Many of the workers that come from the United States are women and they serve as teachers of English using the Bible, an approach very similar to Let's Start Talking (a ministry started in 1980 to bring the good news to people all around the globe. The focus is teaching English using the Bible and the Gospel of Luke as the textbook. All courses are taught one-on-one so that relationships form between the teacher and the student.)

How does the larger society perceive the role of the Church of Christ? One might say that most Italians would not see the Church of Christ as an option for them. Because the Catholic Church is so deeply embedded in their history and because of Vatican II, they see no reason to leave their own faith. Generally, Restoration themes have no appeal to them. They would, however, see the Church of Christ as a viable option for Americans or immigrants.

It is not impossible for one to come to faith in Italy, but it takes years of building friendships. Missionaries must be willing to let go of the customs and lifestyles of their culture of origin and adapt to the local culture of the people they are trying to reach. If one can do this, the assimilation into the culture is good and people are more willing to accept and receive the good news. This can take years of cultivating friendships and a constant willingness to be with and love your neighbors and friends. There can be no time clock. It is a work involving many hours of prayer. The Churches of Christ exist in a no-man's-land in Italy, and in many ways are still in the infancy stage after sixty years in the country.

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