

Two thirds of “voluntary” tax contributions go to the Church
Despite taxpayers wanting it to go to the State
Doubts are cast in Italian Parliament

“Voluntary” Contributions for State Aid Projects Finish Up in Church Coffers

By Carmelo Lopapa | Translated by Graeme A Hunter



The Gregorian Pontifical University, Rome

Rome — The Gregorian Pontifical University, Rome: €459 000. The Company of Jesus Library Fund: €500 000. The Diocese of Cassano, Calabria: €1 146 000. The Brotherhood of Santa Maria della Purity, Puglia: €369 000. The list goes on for 17 pages and is signed at the bottom by the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi.

It’s not just one of many governmental decrees, but the very one which distributes nearly €44 million in 2009 that Italian taxpayers have allocated to the State as part of their *otto per mille* “voluntary” contributions. You only have to flick through it to discover that brotherhoods, monasteries, congregations and parishes are hoovering up the money that Italian taxpayers had earmarked for humanitarian causes or for social welfare and voluntary organisations.

Instead, it so happens that the more than €10.5 million assigned under the section marked “Cultural Heritage” has in reality ended up being used to restore or repair 26 Church buildings. These are buildings which probably have every right to draw on the separate *otto per mille* allocation destined solely for the Catholic Church, which gets its own “sacred buildings fund” from it. As if this wasn’t enough, the other €19 million destined for the areas of central Italy affected by the recent earthquakes has gone to the same places, i.e. churches and parishes, with only €14 million of that actually reaching the worst affected region, *Abruzzo*.

“Government Decree N° 121” was drawn up in early September by Prime Minister Berlusconi just back from his latest diplomatic incident (on 28th August) with the Vatican Secretary of State. He pulled out of a State Banquet for Vatican officials to avoid more attacks from the press. The Decree, which was submitted to the Italian Parliament on 23rd September, confirms that while the taxes are going to the State, the uses that the money is put to are immediately subject to the utter discretion of the Prime Minister. The Decree is “subject to parliamentary scrutiny” but only by the Budgetary Committees. The Chamber of Deputies Committee already reacted “positively” to it on 27th October and the Senate Committee will consider it in the next few days. Nevertheless, even the centre-right majority on the Chamber of Deputies Budgetary Committee lamented the diverting of State funds

and made the final approval conditional on a series of amendments, questioning its various deficiencies and incongruities.

Amongst the more surprising aspects of the Decree is the aid for “World Famine”, to which the Decree attributes rather modest financial resources in response to requests for financing of a limited nature which could have been met in their entirety. In short, the government is stingy towards the needy. In fact, on the last page under the heading “World Famine”, there are only ten charitable organisations receiving €814 000, equal to 2% of the total amount available.

What happens to the rest? Who gets the rest of the money that Italians have allocated to the State from their taxes? This year, the lion’s share goes to “earthquake relief in *Abruzzo*”, with funding for 32 organisations to the tune of more than €14.6 million. Caution, though, is required here. Apart from the preponderance once again of parishes and monasteries (almost all of them) in Aquila, Pescara and Teramo, something else doesn’t add up. It’s actually the parliamentary commission headed by far-right Northern League MP and Berlusconi government minister, Giancarlo Giorgetti which let the cat out of the bag. “The requests for funding in relation to *Abruzzo* predate the April 2009 earthquake and it would now seem appropriate to conduct a review and coordinate this funding with the works which have been planned after the disaster”.

The meaning is clear. Those buildings in *Abruzzo* which are to receive funds were not damaged by the earthquake on 6th April, or at least not as much as others were. Why, then, is a fifth of the entire *otto per mille* fund being diverted to them? Funding for 9 parishes and monasteries following the earthquake of December 2008 in the province of Parma is netting them another €4 million, while €11 million is shared by repairs to damage caused by all other disasters across the whole of Italy.

The result is that more than €10 million ends up going to benefit “Cultural Heritage”. 26 repair or restoration projects, almost all of which goes to dioceses, churches, parishes and monasteries. If we stick to only the largest amounts, there is €314 000 toward the Cathedral of the Assumption in Gravina, Puglia, €1.16 million to restore frescoes in the church of San Severino and Sossio, €987 000 for the restoration of Santa Maria ad Nives in Casaluce (both Naples), and the €579 000 for San Lorenzo Martire in Molini di Triora, and €413 000 for “improvements to the church of San Giovanni in Avezzano”, amongst others. Then, there’s the Gregorian Pontifical University and the Company of Jesus in Rome. This section of the Decree was hammered by the parliamentary amendments: priority should have been given to “projects submitted by regional representatives” not Church representatives. There is also apparently a section marked “Aid for Refugees” which, for 2009, the decree signed by Prime Minister Berlusconi allocates €2.6 million, a little over 5% of the total, and almost all of it (2.3m) goes to one body, the Italian Refugee Council. “An unfortunate lack of diversity”, warns the Budgetary Committee finally. “There are other projects which have been denied funds which are worthy of consideration”.

La Repubblica 17th November 2009