

According to Church sources, half a billion euros are spent on aid projects around the world
A tacit agreement means social welfare is dismantled by government while the Vatican fills the most gaping cracks

Charity: the other face of our tax-donations

How the Church is replacing the State



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Behind the huge donation made by the State to the Catholic Church, which costs the Italian taxpayer around five billion euros each year, there is also a noble side and purpose: charity. Church sources speak of half a billion euros spent by the Vatican and by the Bishops' Conference on aid works all over the world. The most substantial amount comes from the CEI (the Italian Bishops' Conference), which gives 20% of the billion received from the "voluntary" tax contribution known as the *otto per mille*, some 200 million euros, to charitable and aid works: 115 million in Italy and 85 million abroad. But the flow of Church aid money also arrives via other channels, such as Caritas Internationalis, the Cor Unum papal fund, voluntary organisations and even the Vatican Bank (IOR) and the Opus Dei prelature, more often noted for less benign activities.

It is debatable whether this amounts to much or little of the total cost of the Church to the Italian people. Many Catholic voices maintain that perhaps more could be done with it. However, in reality the parishes and Catholic missions remain the only organisations engaging with the most desperate sections of society, those from which the State is retreating further with each day. The source of the many gifts and tax breaks granted to the Church, more so ever since the Concordat was renegotiated twenty years ago, is partly due to the frenetic lobbying by bishops and the pursuit by all parties of the Catholic vote (now as little as 6-8% in absolute terms, but always decisive). There is also a unwritten pact by which, while the State dismantles social welfare piece by piece, the Church undertakes the "dirty work" of filling the most gaping cracks and marshalling the growing mass of the excluded who no longer have any rights, guarantees or protection. You only have to tour around Italian cities to see how widespread this alternative network already is. The parishes have become in many cases the main reception centres for immigrants, job centres for foreigners and ex-prisoners, counsellors for families with a grandparent with Alzheimer's, a drug-addicted child or a family-member with mental health problems. Centres run by Caritas in the capital are the only reference points and shelters for the "people of the street", homeless, beggars and alcoholics abandoned by the State and their families. They are carrying out the invaluable role of data collection for the determining of new emergencies such as child poverty in Italy which is the highest in Europe.

The incapacity of governments to come up with a serious policy on immigration, aside from the populist knee-jerking, has in reality delegated the most important social problem of the last twenty years to the priests. In Milan, people like [director of the local Caritas branch] Father Colmegna are performing the role of de facto “shadow Mayor” on the social periphery now with a majority immigrant population. It is not only social policy which is lacking. The charity “Community of Sant’Egidio” in Rome has become an internationally recognised reference point for its policies concerning Africa and South America, more often consulted on the matter by the Italian Foreign Ministry. The movement for a moratorium on the death penalty, the only time in which Italian foreign policy has excited attention from the outside world, started life within the charity which is based in Trastevere. The Patriarchy of Venice, particularly after the arrival of Cardinal Scola, has woven a fine network of cultural exchanges with Islam. The Political Left’s natural preoccupation with the Third World has collapsed, the wells of secular solidarity have been poisoned in the “clash of cultures”, and it is now the Catholic organisations which almost have a monopoly on Third World problems, even the kind we have here in Italy. The formula is “services in exchange for cash”. Tax breaks, exemptions, grants of all kinds rain down on the Catholic world as the Italian State delegates all the dirty work that it doesn’t want and can’t do. In the end, it is always used as justification for the anomalous relationship between the Catholic Church and the Italian State, and goes beyond the improbable quibbling over the figures. The argument is logical but the balance is unfair. The State has nothing to gain from admitting its own ineptitude and as is often the case, it is actually down to a few Catholic intellectuals to blow the whistle.

In our society pulped by egotism, according to a report by the research body Censis, Giuseppe De Rita says that the backup role being played by the Catholic Church has turned into a conquest of the heart of social interaction and the area of “social inclusion”. “The Church is the only organisation which now understands that in order to create society you need inclusion. It’s not just a question of providing services but also shelter, basic values and identity. Once upon a time in Italy, there were many lessons in inclusion. If you think about the Italian Communist Party in its own regions or with its big trade unions, networks of housing for the poor and cooperatives, well this world has mostly disappeared, and the mediatisation of politics has changed the rules of the game. If today Veltroni wants to launch the Democratic Party, he thinks about a particular event, or gimmick or press-release, but it’s not the same thing. In contrast with other countries, the Italian State has never been able to stimulate social inclusion and for this reason it is not in a position to create effective social policies and pays the price. Local councils are the only source of political inclusion open to the Italian people”. Isn’t it the case, though, that local councils and mayors are coming more often into conflict with the clergy’s support role, for example in the case of the unpaid ICI buildings tax? Isn’t it paradoxical that in an ever more secular society we are handing over such important duties to the clergy? The response from De Rita is clear. “It’s true that Catholicism in itself is in crisis. Individual choice now goes beyond the teachings of bishops. The real strength of the Church is not in its public, media-savvy, politicised face, but in remaining the only organisation with strong roots in the community and everyday social functions that create a sense of solidarity which many secular people don’t have, myself included. The Church as represented by the Vatican is another story”.

How do the people who have dedicated their lives to society feel? For forty years as part of the charities Abele Group and then Libera, Father Luigi Ciotti has fought on all the battle-fronts that politicians think are lost: poverty, mafia, addiction, legal inequality, prison ghettos, insecurity and social exclusion, workplace fatalities; often with the support of the Church, but not always. As

president of AIDS-charity Lila, he was hauled before the Vatican for maintaining that wearing a condom to prevent transmission of HIV was an act of Christian Love. He was again in trouble with the Vatican when he addressed a 3 million-strong crowd in the Circus Maximus during a anti-government rally in support of workers' rights in 2002. His is a testimony from the front line. "In forty years I have learned that a happy society is one with less solidarity and more rights. Generosity by itself is not enough, and sometimes it is used as an excuse to leave problems unresolved. This generosity makes us complicit in a system founded on injustice which then delegates the care of shanty towns to a handful of volunteers so that they don't cause too much bother. Volunteers from Abele Group and Libera, Catholic or not, certainly don't harbour regrets over their choice of career, it was all we ever wanted to do, but not all that we are capable of doing. We always get the impression of facing the same problems over and over. The question is about regaining more justice and not offering as charity things which people should have a right to". Does the Church seem to draw more attention to issues of sexuality or families through its charitable activities rather than to general social issues, or is that an anticlerical prejudice? "The Church is the work of men and welcomes all kinds, even people fairly distant from each other, but it's true that the media and politicians only concentrate on certain aspects. For example, if the bishops criticise the Civil Partnership law, the controversy lasts for years. If, however, Benedict XVI sermonises against juvenile insecurity, the story will have vanished from the TV News by the same evening. Many in the Church think more about spiritual things and consider that justice may not be possible in this world. I have never looked at it like this. I think that the path to Heaven has to be paved here on Earth".

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