

## **THE INFLUENCE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE FAMILY IN ITALY**

### ***Abstract***

*The moral discipline of family and its relations have a central role in the discourse of the Catholic Church in Italy. The very idea of the family, marriage and its status, divorce, abortion and forms of family planning, as well as relations between men and women are critical for the morality of the Catholic family. Italy is perceived as a traditionally Catholic country, however, in the past few decades, it was not immune to the impact of social processes, such as globalization, individualism and materialism, which led to a decline in the number of followers, reduced spirituality, family crisis and change of the concept of unity.*

*This paper analyses the role of the Catholic Church in the Italian society in the past and the present, focusing on major debates on forms of families, marriage, divorce and abortion. It gives an overview of the influence of the Church as an institution on the family in the contemporary society and examines ways the Catholic Church has shaped and defined the Italian family over the time.*

**Key words:** FAMILY, CATHOLIC CHURCH, ITALY

### **Introduction**

In the spirit of Catholicism, family has always been a major protagonist in the transmission of religious values. Holy baptism, communion, confirmation, matrimony and other important Catholic rites and festivities are events that families mark in compliance with religious beliefs and traditions.

In modern societies, traditions are less cultivated and we are witnessing growing secularism at the expense of religious beliefs (Ташева, 2004) and increased individualism, which has led to a redefinition of family structures, delayed marriages, increased number of divorces and new concepts of partnership and moral values.

Secularism, materialism, diminished spiritualism and individualism is having a significant impact on the number of religious followers. Today the Catholic Church in Western Europe and the United States of America is going through a very difficult period. As a consequence, catholic followers are increasingly distancing themselves from faith and the recommendations of the Church, especially in the areas related to sex, family and moral values. Furthermore, in certain traditionally Catholic Western European countries religion does not symbolize common culture anymore, as in the past, and the-

refore, traditional religious beliefs, individual religiosity and generally the number of believers are steadily declining (Garelli, 2013).

As in other pluralistic societies, Italy is seeking solutions to the challenges associated with the impact of individualism, materialism, globalization, industrialization and other phenomena on the family. Nonetheless, Italy remains a traditional Catholic country with a significant number of the population who consider themselves Catholics - 71 percent<sup>1</sup>. Moreover the presence of Vatican on its territory offers additional incentive for researching the correlation between the religion and family values.

The following paper will analyse the impact of the Catholic Church on contemporary Italian families and describe how the Church shaped and defined the Italian family in the past and today. Special attention will be directed to religious oratories that play a central role in preaching Catholic values among the younger believers.

Furthermore, this paper will offer analysis of statistical data and existing researches. In the first half of 2017, we have carried out an online survey focused on the influence of the Catholic Church and youth, which included 34 respondents, aged 30 to 40 years, living in Northern Italy and originally from major urban centres (Milan, Turin, Padua etc.). Our decision to focus on Northern Italy is justified, given the perception that the influence of religion, especially in relation with families, is declining in Central and Northern Italy. In fact, the discrepancy between Northern and Southern Italy does not apply solely to the economic aspect, but also to several areas of social life, including the religious dimension. Traditionally Italians living in the South and the islands (Sicily and Sardinia) declare themselves as more attached to Catholicism and its moral values and traditions (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014, 1099).

### **The influence of the Catholic Church in Italy**

Since its early development, mainly due different interpretations of the Old and New Testament, Christianity had an uneasy and undefined relationship with the human body, sexuality, marriage and family. Marriage and sexual relations were directed by the principles of reproduction, monogamy and fidelity and such defined regulations of marriage served to maintain a stable society (Browning & Green, 2006, 84-85).

In the Middle Ages the Catholic Church in Italy had a strong impact on the public and private life of its followers, predominantly on their moral values, the regulation of sexual and family relations, marriage, divorce and abortion (Black, 2004). Any practice that exceeded the established religious practices where "*marriage justifies sex*" was considered a heretical or sinful conduct (Black, 2004, 85).

Until the 1970s divorce and abortion were illegal in Italy, and children born in extra-marital communities were legally discriminated. Under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, until recently, Italians generally preferred family life and traditional forms of families and believed in the values of marriage. Such influence contributed

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<sup>1</sup> This data is confirmed by more researches from 2016, including those of the Research Institute of Italians (Eurispes) and the informative organ of the Evangelical, Methodist and Waldensian Churches in Italy (Riforma).

to the delayed diffusion of new forms of families (reconstructed families, cohabitation and same-sex unions) in Italy and other Mediterranean countries.

However, Italy was not immune to the social changes that occurred in the Western hemisphere in the second half of the 20th century, including the hippie movement of the 1960s and the birth of feminist movements in the 1970s. In fact, this is the period when the most significant legal changes related to divorce, cohabitation and abortion occurred in Italy. In a 1974 referendum, 59 percent of Italians voted in favour of a Law on divorce. Up until 1987 divorce was only permitted following five years of separation of the spouses which was established to three years after 1987. The Law of 1975 was another important milestone which allowed children born in extra-marital relationships to obtain the same rights as those born within marriage; this included the right to alimony in the event of separation. Despite this, today extramarital relationships still do not enjoy the same rights as married ones, for instance in regard to rights after the separation of partners and pension rights after the death of one partner. The abortion Law was finally introduced in 1981 following a referendum in which 67 percent of Italian citizens voted in favour (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014, 1085-86).

Today the influence of Catholic values is manifested in various spheres of life among Italians. It is necessary to highlight the political side of this aspect with the right-wing party Democrazia Cristiana that was in power from the post-war period until the early 1990s and maintained close relations with Vatican and the Church. Although the Catholic Church is an independent and sovereign body, nonetheless, the Italian Government and the Church have additional agreements and provisions which establish their relations (Ташева, 2004, 136-137).

These days the Catholic Church maintains its influence through media. Vatican has its National Radio (Vatican Radio) which is broadcasting in 41 languages. They also own two national newspapers (L'Osservatore Romano and l'Avvenire), a satellite television channel (Sat 2000), a weekly magazine-Famiglia Cristiana (which means Christian family), other minor print and non-print media outlets, and enjoy airtime on national television Rai (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014, 1084-85).

In addition, the Catholic Church has a particular influence on youth through the oratories<sup>2</sup> (*oratori giovanili*) - something similar to youth centres that are located in the church. Although various forms of oratories existed since Middle Ages as designated praying spaces in the proximity of a church, they have been officially established in the 16th century by Saint Philip Neri, a Catholic priest who advocated for bringing faith and spirituality closer to the followers through a joint reading of the Bible, recreational, educational and charity activities. Soon his preaching gained numerous followers and Pope Gregory XIII approved the Confederation of Oratorians of St. Philip Neri and they were given the church of Santa Maria in Vallicella (Mercorillo, 2005).

Today, the Church uses oratories as a mean to introduce youth to the Christian values. But despite the religious purpose of the oratories, they have a prominent social role, by representing a space for recreation, entertainment and comfort to their visitors.

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<sup>2</sup> The word *oratorio* derives from the Latin *orare*, lat. = to pray.

Specifically, oratories resemble each other and their common structure and they might provide: a recreation section, a football field, halls for other sports, a café, and a place intended for Catechism i.e. the teaching of religious doctrines in the form of questions and answers, under the guidance of a parent or a priest. More modern oratories might also offer: a screening room, a theatre room, a music room, a kitchen and recently a website. Moreover, they teach volunteering and charity. Finally, these oratories are operated by priests and volunteers, as well as official religious organizations.<sup>3</sup>

The variety of services offered by oratories is actually the cause of great attendance; but they also stand out for their inclusion and the fact that are open to visitors from different cultures and religions. Furthermore, in the summer, oratories operate as summer camps or summer schools with recreational and educational purposes, including games, excursions and performances. Besides recreational activities, oratories are a place where young followers are taught Catechism which allows them to receive their first communion and confirmation.

In 2000, Italy introduced several laws that seek to improve the position of oratories at the national and regional level, favouring their reconstruction and recognition of the “social and educational function of oratories” (Law No. 328 of 11.08.2000 and the Law no. 206 of 1.08.2003).

### **The Catholic Church and the family in contemporary Italian society**

Strong ties with the Catholic religion have survived in Italy despite intensified secularization and the growing religious pluralism, which is a result of increased immigration of people with different cultures, traditions and religious beliefs in the country. In the past, religious minorities have been present in Italy in minor proportions, but in the recent years the number of Muslim and Orthodox followers has increased as a result of constant migration flows from North Africa (Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia) and Eastern Europe (Romania, Albania, Ukraine). Their presence has influenced and reduced the proportion of Catholic followers in Italy which has always been very high (above 80 percent). A comparative survey on Italian Catholicism from the 1990s and early 2000s shows that 89 percent (1994) and 86 percent (2007) of Italians have catholic beliefs (Garelli, 2013, 5). In 2016 that figure was reduced to 71 percent. In our research (2017), as well, nearly 71 percent of respondents declared themselves as Catholics.

Family represents an instrument for the transmission of religious values; the mutual influence between family and religion was stronger and durable in the past though. Nowadays faith is not a key factor in shaping the family and its influence is gradually diminishing. Parents tend to educate their children in secular spirit; even declared Catholic families attend church, masses and other religious ceremonies less frequently. Nevertheless, when asked about the most significant factors influencing their religious beliefs, our respondents indicated the family: one or both parents; whilst other family members (brothers, sisters, cousins etc.), religious education, Catechism, a priest or

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<sup>3</sup> The author has attended regularly oratories in the period from 1985 to 1989 and from 1993 to 1997, in Milan, Italy.

friends were named as less influential. Surprisingly, although religion education did not emerge as a top influence in the previous question, half of our respondents (47 percent) consider it useful, whilst the other half (41 percent) indicated it as an impractical subject. It is interesting to note that although Religion is not a mandatory subject in Italy, all respondents have chosen to attend it; high attendance of Religion in school is confirmed by other observations from the 1990s (all but three students attended Religion in a class of 20 in a primary school in Milan from 1993 to 1997), but today the figure has decreased significantly. Unlike Religion classes, nearly 60 percent of the respondents believe Catechism i.e. studying the doctrine of the Christian faith was useful. Similar trend emerged in regard to the oratories, for which Italians have generally positive attitude. According to our research, nearly 65 percent of the respondents have attended oratories in their childhood and the majorities of them identified oratories as friendly meeting places and have pleasant memories. Correspondingly, more than half of the respondents do not perceive oratories as places with exclusively religious character.

Today, the biggest change in believers' attitudes towards Catholicism in Italy is related to the declining attendance of masses, other church services and decreasing time dedicated for prayer. According to our survey, the majority of respondents (47 percent) attend church during major Catholic holidays (Christmas, Easter, etc.), 24 percent visit church only for touristic purposes, 12 percent never goes to church and only 6 percent goes to church every week, once a month or once a year.

Decreased religiosity, the family crisis, declined frequency of religious practices, less interest in religious education, and in general diminished spirituality of people, further affects the relationship between religion and families in Italy. Changes in those relationships began in the mid-1970s, as a result of a series of social changes and movements, and the introduction of the above-mentioned legislations related to abortion, cohabitation and divorce, as well as the growing number of naturalized foreigners with different cultures and religions in the country.

Today the influence of the Catholic Church in Italy remains strong, but statistical data indicates major changes affecting marriage and cohabitation in recent years. In fact, today young couples are increasingly delaying marriage and the average age of the first marriage has been increased: during 2000-2008 the average age for women to get married was 28-30 years and 31-33 years for men (Vignoli & Salvini 2014, 1086). Furthermore, the number of religious marriages has diminished considerably, while the number of couples opting for cohabitation increased significantly, which consequently augmented the number of non-marital births. In 1970 non-marital births accounted for only 2 percent; this number has grown steadily each decade reaching 24 percent in 2010, with the highest hit in the second decade of the 21st century (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014, 1087). Officials of the Catholic Church believe that couples opt for cohabitation over marriage primarily due to the increased level of individualism and that the concept of family transformed from the "basic unit of society" to the "basic unit of the individual." Moreover, they consider that even within marriage, individualism prevail the sense of partnership, and the plural pronoun "we" has been gradually replaced by the singular "I" (Paglia, 2013).

The respondents of our survey were more divided regarding the religious marriages: half of them would prefer to get married in church, while the other half rejects religious marriage. Considering that 71 percent of the respondents declared themselves Catholics, we can conclude that among Catholic believers there are those who would not opt for a religious marriage, which consequently confirms the reduced influence of religion in Italy. More specifically, only one third of the respondents completely agree with the statement that the Catholic religion significantly affects marriage in Italy, while 65 percent only partially agrees with this statement.

Another qualitative research on religion and its impact on marriage concludes that there is a proportional relationship between religion and marriage, and that more religious people choose marriage over cohabitation; similarly, they consider that Catholic religion and its influence are the reason of late diffusion of cohabitation in Italy than in other less religious European countries. Additionally, catholic followers believe that marriage is the foundation of society and religious ceremony in church has a symbolic meaning and value, while non-religious respondents equate the notions marriage and cohabitation or completely reject marriage (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014).

Furthermore, it should be noted that in order to celebrate religious matrimony, unlike Orthodox Christianity, followers of the Roman Catholic Church are required, despite baptism, to obtain communion and confirmation of the covenants created at Holy baptism. Trends from the 1990s showed that there is a declining participation in all public religious practices (baptism, first communion, confirmation and church matrimony). According to our research half of the respondents had received the three most important rites in the Catholic religion (baptism, communion and confirmation), and all of them were baptized in the church. As for the baptism of their children, 47 percent of the respondents believe that it is a decision that should be jointly made with their partner, 29 percent would prefer to baptized their children and 24 percent believe that their children should choose their religion by themselves, when adults.

Almost 60 percent agree that the Catholic religion influences significantly the Italian family. Over half of the respondents partially agree with the statement that the Catholic doctrine is the foundation of family values, 12 percent fully agree and 24 percent of the respondents disagree. Over 40 percent also disagree with the statement that the Catholic religion affects the most important decisions of their lives, but 24 percent somewhat disagree and 12 percent completely agree.

Finally, while the Catholic doctrine has a solid and perpetual views regarding abortion, divorce, homosexuality, euthanasia and other issues, perceptions of Italian Catholics on these issues have drastically changed. In fact, in 2007, 71 percent of Italians thought that divorce is an acceptable behaviour in comparison with the 63 percent in 1994. Abortion has been accepted by more than half of Italian Catholics in 2007, and 37 percent supported euthanasia as well. The major changes are related with homosexuality: support of homosexual unions has doubled in 23 years; in 1994, only 16 percent supported homosexual couples as opposed to 30 percent in 2007 (Garelli, 2013, 6).

### **Conclusion**

Family and religion have always represented important components of Italian society and the strong presence and influence of the Catholic Church has shaped the life of Italians. Today, this influence is greatly reduced and the data show that Italy follows the trends of other Western European countries, where people, especially youth, are increasingly turning away from the traditions and religious beliefs.

Italy's biggest problems today are connected to declined birth rates and the reduced value of marriage. Larger and smaller research presented in the paper confirmed the official data, namely the significantly increased number of extramarital communities from 227,000 in 1993 to 972,000 in 2011 (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014, 1080), reduced number of religious matrimony, diminished participation in church practices, mass and other religious rites. Unlike the 1990s, today the percentage of young Italians who attend religious education in primary and secondary schools has diminished considerably, especially in the central and northern regions of Italy and fewer families choose to guide their children towards a religious education in Catholic schools. Perhaps the decreased religiosity and indifference to religion among youth is the most worrying data for the Catholic Church.

Due to the above-mentioned changes occurred in Italy and in most Western European countries, in recent years the Roman Catholic Church and Pope Francis are trying to keep pace with the alterations of modern times, opening dialogues on topics that in the past were considered taboo and that the Church had a solid and unchanging views on (one of them is the subject of contraception as prevention from diseases). Such open discourses demonstrates that the Church is trying to preserve its followers and is in the search of new forms of communication to get closer to the people, while trying to restore faith in religion and spirituality.

Finally, the impact of religion and the Church in Italy remains strong compared to other countries, despite the fact that many positions of the Church remain unchanged (abortion, euthanasia, homosexual couples etc.). Many Italians identify themselves by Catholic values and cherish the traditions associated with the most important moments of their life, such as birth, marriage and death (Garelli, 2013). The family today still represents an important place for self-realization, thanks to the cultural transmission of tradition from one to another generation.

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