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Tough immigration law in Italy spawns Catholic backlash, insider drama

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A controversial new immigration law in Italy, which criminalizes living in a clandestine state and authorizes citizens to mount their own anti-immigrant patrols, has spawned both a major backlash from the Catholic church as well as a fascinating bit of insider Catholic drama.

The dynamics in Italy seem to have obvious implications for the United States, as the Catholic church gears up to make a major push in favor of immigration reform.

Adopted last Thursday by the Italian senate, the law was put forward by the far-right Northern League, an important coalition partner in the center-right government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Catholic leaders have been in the forefront of opposition to the measure, charging among other things that it could deter illegal immigrants from seeking hospital treatment or enrolling their children in school.

Probably the most barbed critique has come from Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, a veteran Vatican diplomat who has served since 2001 as the secretary, or number two official, in the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples.

"This law," Marchetto said last week, "will create a great deal of pain." He expressed concern for its impact on human rights, and called the criminalization of clandestine immigration the law's "original sin."

Marchetto's sentiments were quickly dismissed by Roberto Maroni, the Northern League politician who

spearheaded the law, as "the usual litany" of Catholic complaints.

On Saturday, Marchetto told *NCR* that he finds it ironic that Italy is moving in the direction of an anti-immigrant posture at a moment when the United Nations and various international economic agencies are beginning to realize, he said, "that immigration is actually a positive factor in economic development, and is therefore a key to exiting from the current global crisis."

Unfortunately, sometimes people only think in terms of their own pockets," Marchetto told *NCR*, "and there's a growing realization that a welcoming approach to immigration is important in this sense too."

Though Marchetto may be the most outspoken church leader, he's hardly alone.

A spokesperson for the Italian bishops' conference, Fr. Domenico Pompili, said "it's evident that any response [to immigration] based solely on maintaining public order, which is certainly necessary to guarantee, is nevertheless insufficient, if it doesn't address the deep causes of migration."

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During a Saturday vigil Mass, Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi of Milan likewise addressed the suffering of immigrants.

Much of this suffering is provoked by questionable measures in rich countries, which ought to be most committed to policies of welcome and serious integration," Tettamanzi said. In what was widely interpreted as a criticism of the new Italian law, Tettamanzi expressed hope that the future will bring a "just regulation of the migratory phenomenon and the problems it creates."

Given that the wider Catholic world often looks to Italy, it's no surprise that prelates from immigrant-producing nations have also expressed concern about the new Italian law.

Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini of Guatemala, for example, called on Saturday for "disobedience to laws such as that introducing the crime of living in a clandestine state in Italy, a country with a Christian majority," arguing that such laws "move in the direction of closure to immigrants and to the poor."

Bishop Nester Herrera, president of the bishops' conference of Ecuador, charged that the new Italian law will be self-defeating. By impeding the ability of migrants to send home legally obtained earnings, he said, such laws "make even more people poor, and compel more of them to immigrate."

Despite this Catholic drumbeat, the Vatican itself has taken a more cautious stance.

When asked for a reaction to Marchetto's highly public criticism of the immigration measure, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, replied that "the Vatican as such has not taken any position," saying that the Vatican "doesn't get into political polemics but governs the universal church."

Those words were almost universally seen in Italy as a way of putting distance between the Vatican and Marchetto, which surprised most observers. Not only has Pope Benedict XVI himself long been a proponent of immigrant rights, but the 68-year-old Marchetto is well-known for penning a series of commentaries on the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) defending a reading of Vatican II in continuity with earlier councils and layers of church tradition "a perspective close to the heart of Benedict XVI.

That, in turn, brings us to the fascinating bit of insider Catholic drama.

Marchetto's commentaries on Vatican II are explicitly styled as a refutation of the work of the so-called "Bologna School" associated with Italian Catholic scholars Giuseppe Alberigo and Alberto Melloni, who oversaw a massive five-volume history of the council faulted by Marchetto and other critics for an overly liberal interpretation treating Vatican II as a dramatic rupture with earlier traditions.

In the current row over immigration, however, one of the strongest voices in the Catholic world rushing to Marchetto's defense has been none other than Melloni.

In an op/ed piece in Sunday's *Corriere della Sera*, Melloni argued that Lombardi's statement has "done damage to Monsignor Marchetto, who for months has been battling for the human rights" of immigrants.

(Paranetically, Melloni conceded that Marchetto "has dedicated some time during his long diplomatic career to furious historiographic polemics of which the present author was the target, though certainly not an unarmed one.")

Melloni actually defended Marchetto's authority, saying that his words on immigration "come not from a layman or a simple priest, but a bishop," and one "nominated and confirmed, like all members of the curia, by the will of the pope, and given Vatican citizenship precisely to guarantee his immunity."

By not backing up Marchetto, Melloni wrote, the Vatican risked giving the impression that it "supports a law that has created disquiet and tumult" in Catholic circles.

Noting that Pope Benedict XVI recently enacted a measure specifying that the Vatican City-State will no longer automatically take Italian law as a source for its own, but rather will review each measure on a case-by-case basis, Melloni expressed hope that the Vatican will soon publicly stipulate that its own law will not follow the new Italian measure as a way of making a statement.

As the saying goes, politics makes strange bedfellows "and this unlikely alliance of old foes in the Italian immigration debate certainly proves that the point applies to the Catholic church.

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