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A pope with appeal even to the pitchforks

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Rome — As if additional proof were needed of just how wide is the appeal of Pope Francis, the fact that he seems the lone authority in Italy at whom the country's motley "pitchfork" protest movement isn't angry probably delivers it.

Francis' Dec. 22 Sunday Angelus address drew some 50,000 persons to St. Peter's Square, including roughly 1,500 demonstrators connected to the populist *Forconi* uprising, an Italian word meaning "pitchfork."

Seeing a banner that read "The poor can't wait," Francis launched into one of his trademark extemporaneous riffs.

"That's beautiful!" he said, adding, "It reminds me that Jesus was born in a stable, he wasn't born in a house. I think today, while reading that sign, of so many families that are without a home, either because they never had one or because they've lost it for various reasons."

"A family and a home go together," Francis said. "It's very hard to keep a family going without a home to live in. In these days of Christmas, I invite everyone — persons, social institutions, political authorities — to do everything possible so that every family can have a home."

A Sicilian leader of the *Forconi* movement, Mariano Ferro, later said that Francis had "recharged the batteries" of the movement by legitimizing its "rebellion against injustice."

The term "pitchfork movement" was originally used to describe a series of protests by farmers in Sicily two years ago, but it's come to encompass a wide range of populist discontent across Italy uniting truck drivers, unemployed and homeless persons, small business owners, environmental groups, minor political

parties and even rabid soccer fans.

In general, the *forconi* are about raging against the machine. They're angry over the austerity plans of centrist Prime Minister Enrico Letta, they're mad at Italy's tax service, they decry the bureaucracy of the European Union, they're scornful of the business and labor establishments, and pretty much everything else.

In a country struggling with 12.5 percent unemployment (including a stunning rate of 40 percent among youth) and a nearly \$3 trillion national debt, in which one in every ten children is believed to live in desperate poverty, the roots of that rage are not hard to discern.

While the protestors range ideologically from the far right to the far left, they're united by a near-total lack of confidence in every traditional source of authority.

"These people don't feel that anyone's listening to them," said Duncan McDonnell, a political scientist at the European University Institute in Florence.

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"It really shows how there are big sections of Italian society that don't feel represented by anyone ? political parties, trade unions, interest groups or business."

That mounting populist anger propelled the maverick "Five Star Movement" of former comedian Beppe Grillo to capture almost a quarter of the vote in last year's national elections, which more or less coincided with the election of Pope Francis. Many of the *forconi*, however, now see Grillo and his party as yet another disappointment, absorbed into the usual squabbling and paralysis of Italian political life.

The anger of the pitchforks has occasionally turned violent, including recent demonstrations in Turin, Genova, Milan and Rome marred by clashes between police and protestors, along with some damage to property.

Francis urged the *forconi* who turned out on Sunday not to go that route.

"To all those from Italy who are gathered today to show their social commitment," he said, "I hope you make a positive contribution, rejecting the temptation of conflict and violence and always following the path of dialogue while defending your rights."

In truth, the protestors who showed up on Sunday were self-described "moderates" in the *Forconi* movement, who wanted to gather around the pope precisely to prove that they're non-violent. Most seemed thrilled the pope had acknowledged them.

Ferro was in tears on Italian TV afterwards, saying, "We're already divided by extremists who want to take over from us ? we don't war, but if we don't get answers [from the system] we'll end up with conflict."

In that context, Ferro said he felt Francis had "legitimized" the moderates on Sunday.

And therein lies the point: These days in Italy, there's really no other authority figure who would be in a position to bestow legitimacy on much of anything. Francis, however, remains the one endorsement everyone wants to have.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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