

Italian Police Raid Bishop's Palm Sunday Mass

3



Mauro Scrobogna/LaPresse via AP

Thomas D. Williams, Ph.D.

7 Apr 2020 

4:29

ROME — Italian law enforcement intervened at the end of a Palm Sunday Mass celebrated by Bishop Raffaello Martinelli, with some 40 persons in attendance.

The bishop of the diocese of Frascati, to the southeast of Rome, had left the doors to the cathedral open and made sure that the faithful kept a safe distance from one another, but despite these precautions he received a fine, Italian media [reported](#), for non-compliance with the rules against the coronavirus pandemic, which [define](#) church attendance as a non-essential and therefore unlawful activity.

“I regret that this happened at the end of the celebration and that staff from the Municipal Police and the Carabinieri had to intervene,” **said** the bishop, “but it seemed to me that the various people present always kept the required distance from one another.”

“Something could have happened towards the end of the celebration, when some people entered to pick up olive branches,” Martinelli acknowledged.

The bishop added that “the three naves of the cathedral are very large, with an area of more than 800 square meters.”

“In the coming Easter celebrations, not being able to close the doors for security reasons,” the bishop concluded, “I commit myself to ensure an adequate service of people at the entrance of the Cathedral to coordinate people wanting to come in (as they do at the grocery stores), so as to comply even more scrupulously with the existing regulations and to safeguard everyone.”

Last month, police of Cerveteri, outside Rome, **interrupted** a Sunday Mass that was being live-streamed on Facebook because there were several people kneeling outdoors in front of the Church.

The officers dismissed the priest who was celebrating the Mass and then went up to the altar ordering the faithful to clear out, telling them they were not allowed to be there.

One Italian lawyer called the police action as an “obvious abuse” of authority and a violation of the freedom of religious practice guaranteed under the law.

This past weekend, Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy’s opposition party, said that people of faith should be able to care for their spiritual health as they care for their bodies.

“I support the requests of those who ask to attend Easter Mass, in an orderly, composed, and safe way, maybe even in groups of three, four, or five,” Mr. Salvini said. “You can go to the tobacco shop because people can’t get along without cigarettes, but for many the care of the soul is just as fundamental as the care of the body.”

“I hope that we will find a way for believers to go to church,” he said. “An appeal has been sent to the bishops to permit the faithful to enter church as they are permitted to go to the supermarket, respecting the distances, with masks and gloves, and in limited numbers.”

Salvini was referring to a petition launched by Elisabetta Valgiusti, the founder of a Catholic advocacy group called Save the Monasteries, appealing to the bishops to restore Masses and the other sacraments to the faithful during the coronavirus lockdown.

“We appeal for the recognition of the personal need of every member of the Catholic faithful to participate in the Holy Mass so that each person can actively worship while respecting the current legislation,” reads the petition, which has been signed by numerous clergy and laypeople.

Pope Francis himself has urged bishops and priests to rise to the occasion of the pandemic like courageous good shepherds, rather than running away like frightened “hired hands.”

“In the epidemic of fear that all of us are living because of the pandemic of the coronavirus, we risk acting like hired hands and not like shepherds,” he wrote in a March 13 **letter** to priests signed by his personal secretary.

“It is good for the churches to remain open. Priests should be on the front lines,” the letter declared. “The faithful should find courage and comfort from seeing their shepherds. They

should know that they can run in any moment and find refuge in their churches and parishes and find them open and welcoming.”

“Think of all the souls who feel terrified and abandoned because we pastors follow the instructions of civil authorities — which is right in these circumstances to avoid contagion — while we risk putting aside divine instructions — which is a sin. We think as men think and not as God thinks,” he said.

“We join the ranks of those who are terrified rather than joining the doctors, the nurses, the volunteers, the healthcare workers, and mothers and fathers, who are on the front lines,” he warned.

Follow [@tdwilliamsrome](#)