



A couple prays in the church of San Giuseppe dei Falegnami in Rome during the coronavirus lockdown taking advantage of the few hours of opening of the church, April 11, 2020.

WORLD

Italian Bishops Push Government to Allow Resumption of Public Masses

After the bishops expressed frustration over the ‘arbitrary’ exclusion of religious ceremonies from a new timetable for relaxing the nation’s lockdown rules, it now appears restricted public liturgies will resume soon.

By Edward Pentin – Posted 4/30/20 at 1:51 PM

ROME — After Italy’s bishops [reacted angrily](#) over the exclusion of Catholic Mass from the government’s announcement Sunday of its plan to ease of lockdown measures, Italian media is reporting that the Church looks set to be allowed to resume public liturgies in May with agreed restrictions to avoid contagion of the coronavirus.

On April 29, *Avvenire*, the newspaper of the Italian bishops’ conference, reported that a “possible time horizon” currently being drawn up between the government’s technical-scientific committee and Italy’s bishops is to allow public Eucharistic celebrations in the open air from May 11 (although an informed source said May 18 is “more realistic”) and May 25 for the return of public Masses in churches under secure conditions, including spatial distancing between members of the faithful, the wearing of gloves and masks, and the suspension of some parts of the liturgy such as the exchange of peace.

The development follows an intervention by Pope Francis who on April 28 had called for “prudence and obedience to the rules so that the pandemic does not return” — words that appeared to realign disaffected bishops with the government.

On April 26, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced a timetable for a gradual relaxation of coronavirus lockdown rules in Italy, which included permitting parks, businesses and factories to open on Monday, and galleries, museums and libraries to reopen on May 18.

But the prime minister said public religious ceremonies would not be allowed because the risk of the spreading the virus remained high. No date for their resumption was mentioned, although funerals were permitted from Monday on the condition that the total number of people attending was limited to 15.

“I understand that freedom of worship is a fundamental people’s right — I understand your suffering,” Conte told the Italian public in a televised address, adding he would be continuing to consult his scientific committee on the matter.

The Italian bishops’ conference responded with a stern statement, accusing the government of “arbitrarily” excluding the possibility of public Masses and stressing that “commitment to serving the poor, which is so significant in this emergency, stems from a faith that must be nourished at its source, especially the sacramental life.”

Weeks of Discussions

The bishops’ frustration was heightened by the fact that the decree was issued after weeks of discussions and an assurance from Italy’s Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese on April 23 that any new measures would “allow the widest possible exercise of religious freedom.” Throughout the discussions, the bishops’ statement said, it was “repeatedly and explicitly stressed” that the Church would be able to “resume its pastoral actions” once restrictions were reduced.

Further irritation was expressed by Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, president of Italy’s bishops’ conference, who, in a break from his more acquiescent previous position vis-à-vis the government, questioned why it was possible to go to the park but not to a liturgy. In comments to *La Nazione*, he asked that people be allowed to “return to the altars,” which “means guaranteeing respect for a faith that must be able to nourish on its own sources.”

Cardinal Camillo Ruini, president of Italy’s bishops from 1991 to 2007, praised the bishops’ conference for “protesting forcefully,” telling Italian media that “for believers, the Eucharist is above all the need for the bread of life.” Unfortunately, he added, “the government has disregarded this need, arrogating to itself competences not its own regarding the life of the Christian community.”

And Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Sant'Egidio lay community, protested by [saying](#) “the state can say how many people may enter a church, what the precautions are, but it has no right to decide whether acts of worship can be held or to remain in silence.” He added that the Church “seemed to be treated worse than a category of commerce.”

The bishops' conference declined to comment to the Register, saying on April 27 that “at this stage we have decided not to give interviews but to wait.”

‘Space of Freedom and Hope’

The policy did not prevent individual bishops from speaking out, however, and the same day Bishop Giovanni D'Ercole of Ascoli Piceno produced a [video](#) criticizing the government's decision. He said the Church is not a “place of contagion but a space of freedom and hope.”

Priests are “responsible and don't act recklessly,” he said. “The right to worship is guaranteed by our Constitution and by conscience.” He argued that in this case it is God who should be obeyed more, not man, adding that he “imagined common sense will prevail.”

Also significant was that Italy's President Sergio Mattarella, known to be very close to the Church, intimated his disapproval and argued that “common sense” could have prevented the clash.

Italy's bishops have been under pressure from the faithful to bring back public Masses, with petitions and demonstrations organized and letters sent to the hierarchy, including [one](#) from the Rome-based Save the Monasteries, an organization dedicated to preserving Christian culture.

So how did the confrontation arise? Italian media have recalled that Pope Francis had spoken critically of the restrictions only a few days earlier, which may have emboldened Italy's bishops who, until Sunday, had been quietly accepting all of the government's decrees.

In a televised homily on April 17, the Holy Father [told](#) viewers that Masses online and encouragement to make spiritual communion were “not the Church.” To be without people assembled together and to be “without the sacraments” was “dangerous,” he said, as it could cause people to start living just for themselves, “detached from the people of God.”

Papal Intervention

But on Tuesday, the Pope appeared to be separating himself somewhat from the bishops' position, saying in a [homily](#) that morning it was important to pray for "prudence and obedience to the rules so that the pandemic does not return."

According to *Corriere della Sera*, the Pope later called Prime Minister Conte on Tuesday evening, as did the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin. He and Conte know each other through their associations with Villa Nazareth, the elite university college in Rome founded by Cardinal Domenico Tardini (Conte was a student there, Parolin a director). These discussions reportedly led to a proposal being put forward whereby public Masses could at least be celebrated outdoors from May 11.

The Pope's apparent change of approach to the situation mystified some Italian commentators.

"It leads one to think that some positions of the episcopate born from the effort to interpret the intentions of the Pontiff as faithfully as possible, only to then be corrected or even denied in the space of a few hours," [wrote](#) Massimo Franco in *Corriere della Sera*.

Franco pointed out a similar occurrence in March when, on Francis' instruction, the vicar of Rome, Cardinal Angelo De Donatis, [ordered](#) churches to be closed, only for the Pope to reverse the decision the next day after protests from bishops and cardinals.

Others had different interpretations of the Pope's homily remarks. "Pope Francis clearly disapproves of the clash strategy," wrote Domenico Agasso in *La Stampa*, quoting an unnamed senior Vatican prelate. Rather than directly disavowing the harsh message of Sunday evening, the Pope's aim was to prevent the bishops and the government from being closed off from one another, the prelate reportedly said.

Meanwhile, Archbishop Bruno Forte of Chieti-Vasto believed the Pope in his April 28 homily was implying that there is a "space" in which politicians cannot dictate what to do in the Church. The Pope's words, he [said](#), show "precisely this: that it is the Church and its pastors who must act responsibly and prudently, in compliance with the rules." Archbishop Forte added that it was "incomprehensible and unacceptable not to allow the liturgical celebration which is part of a fundamental constitutional principle, a freedom that must be guaranteed."

In comments to the Italian news agency *Adnkronos*, the Italian bishops' conference undersecretary, Father Ivan Maffeis, said the path ahead "must necessarily include a transitional phase," adding that the Pope's words were "decisive and opportune." The Church, he said, "cannot in any way be justified in racing ahead."

Other Religions' Perspectives

Other religions have accepted government decree, and support the Pope's homily remarks. Buddhists in Italy are "totally in tune" with the Pope's call to obedience, said Filippo Scianna, president of Italy's Buddhist Union.

"We have made so many sacrifices in recent months, it is important to continue to follow the government's instructions", he said, adding he understood the motives for the Italian bishops' response, but that it is "time to be patient again."

Imam Yahya Pallavicini, president of COREIS, the Islamic Religious Community of Italy, said if the Pope "calls for obedience to prioritize the health of the faithful, he evidently has good reasons to direct the Catholic community to this priority." But he told *La Repubblica* his hope was that the mosques reopen for the last 10 days of Ramadan on May 12-22. "We are ready," he said. "We are just waiting for the signal."

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