



Don Carlo Chiomento, of the Church of St. John the Baptist in the Candiolo municipality of Turin, Italy, wears a mask as he stands outside his closed church.

VATICAN

## Are Italy's Church Restrictions Infringing on Right to Religious Freedom?

Critics argue that the latest policies, which mandate that citizens can only visit a church if they have another state-authorized reason to venture outside, are an unnecessary constitutional overreach.

By Edward Pentin – Posted 4/3/20 at 6:40 PM

ROME — Tensions have been rising this week between Italian faithful, concerned their religious-freedom rights are being infringed, and a government issuing ever-more restrictive decrees with little pushback from Italy's Church leadership.

Matters came to a head on March 28, when, in an explanatory note, the government clarified further [lockdown rules](#) enforced on March 25 to help stop the spread of the coronavirus. In the note, the interior ministry stated that citizens could only pray in a church if leaving their house for another state-approved reason.

At the moment, these reasons are to buy cigarettes, groceries, medication or to walk dogs, leading many to view the government's restrictions as implying these reasons are more essential than visiting a church to pray.

The clarification came in response to Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, president of the Italian bishops' conference, who had asked the government about the new rules, as they placed new "limitations" on "entering places of worship" as well as the continued "suspension of civil and religious ceremonies."

Since the March 25 decree came into force, law enforcement officials, whose presence has grown considerably, including installing numerous roadside checks, have the power to stop anyone out in public.

Failure to follow the rules, including taking an obligatory self-certification form when traveling to different city municipalities for a valid reason (proven work needs, absolute urgency, short/daily commutes or medical reason), can lead to fines of between 400 and 3,000 euros (\$440 and \$3,300). As of March 28, almost 5,000 people had reportedly been penalized.

The government had provisionally scheduled the lockdown to end on April 3, but on April 1 extended it at least until April 13, Easter Monday, hoping the rate of infections will not just have slowed by then but started to decline.

On April 3, the Holy See said it had decided to also extend “measures adopted so far to avoid the spread of the coronavirus, in coordination with the measures launched by the Italian authorities” on April 1. Pope Francis likely learned of the probability of extending the measures through Easter when he received Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in private audience on Monday.

Italy was the third country, after China and Iran, to be hard hit by the virus, so far recording almost 14,681 deaths and with 85,388 people currently suffering from the virus. As of April 2, [87 mostly elderly priests](#) had succumbed to COVID-19, as well as 63 doctors.

## Legal Criticism

But while certain measures are largely recognized as needed to help halt spread of the virus, for many the government breached religious-freedom rights with its clarification, further limiting public worship.

Lawyer Anna Egidia Catenaro, president of Associazione Avvocatura in Missione, a Catholic law association in Italy founded around the time of the 2000 Jubilee Year, said the March 25 decree was “gravely injurious to religious freedom and therefore needs to be changed.”

In an “appeal to parliamentarians of goodwill,” Catenaro [wrote](#) March 27 that the decree needed to be amended “before it is too late,” adding that such limitations on religious activities and places of worship were “unjustified, inadequate, unreasonable, discriminatory and even unconstitutional in several respects.” She then listed what she saw as the “perils and pitfalls” of the decree and proposed why they presented an “insidious danger.”

With respect to imposing “suspension” of religious ceremonies and a “vague” limitation on places of worship, Catenaro asserted the government has “no power to close” churches. It could instead simply require that “we respect distances between people and not form gatherings.”

In a statement accompanying the government’s March 28 explanatory note, the government’s department for civil liberties acknowledged the “limiting of various constitutional rights, including the exercise of worship,” but stressed that churches did not have to close and that religious celebrations were allowed if undertaken “without the presence of the faithful” in order to avoid the potential for contagion.

The response, however, was inadequate to some. The director of the Catholic daily *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana*, Riccardo Cascioli, said the rule that you can only go to a church if you are on the way to the supermarket, pharmacy or doctor is “an absolutely unacceptable policy,” which contrasts not only with the decrees published so far, “but also with the Constitution.”

“In practice, we can go to church to pray only when we are on our way to doing something else recognized as necessary,” Cascioli [wrote](#) March 28. “The right to go and buy cigarettes is recognized, but not the right to go and pray (although the churches are empty),” he added. “We are facing serious declarations which seriously infringe on religious freedom” and are a result of a “purely materialistic conception of man, so only material needs count.”

He pointed out that weddings are allowed if limited to a small number of guests and wondered why Masses could similarly not be celebrated under the same rule. “We are faced with illogical and discriminatory directives against Catholics,” he said, and he called on Cardinal Bassetti to raise his voice “loud and clear” not to “create a hazard to public health, but to recognize religious freedom and the equality of citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution.”

### Bishops Asked to Do More

But Cascioli and others believe the Italian bishops have been ineffective because they have been silent in the face of other infringements on religious practice.

Cardinal Bassetti himself, they point out, unilaterally instructed churches across Italy to close on March 12, stating the decision was taken “not because the state requires it, but out of a sense of belonging to the human family.”

The decision, which, it emerged, had ultimately been taken by Pope Francis, was [reversed the following day](#), after strong protests from cardinals and bishops.

Some Italian lay faithful are now making their frustrations known. One group has launched an 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.”

The [petition](#) created by Save the Monasteries, a Catholic advocacy group, “urgently” asks both civil and ecclesiastical authorities “to resume liturgical celebrations with the participation of the faithful, especially Holy Mass on weekdays and on Sundays, adopting the provisions appropriate to the directives for the COVID-19 health emergency.”

Signatory Susanna Riva from Lecco wrote under the appeal: “Please reopen the Mass to the faithful; do the Mass outdoors where you can; hang a sheet on the door of the church where the faithful can sign up for the Mass they intend to take part in and have it distributed throughout the week; thanks!”

Sister Rosalina Ravasio, founder of the Shalom-Regina della Pace Community of Palazzolo sull'Oglio, who has spent many years working with disadvantaged groups, [criticized](#) what she called “the capitulation of faith,” adding as a reminder that “the coronavirus is not the center; God is the center!”

### Messori on Masses

Meanwhile, prominent Catholic author Vittorio Messori has criticized the Church for its “hasty suspension” of Masses, churches being closed and then reopened, and the “weakness of asking for free access even while respecting security measures.” All of this “gives the impression of a ‘Church in retreat,’” he said.

Messori, who co-wrote *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* with Pope St. John Paul II, [told](#) *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana* on April 1 that “obeying the legitimate authorities is a duty for us,” but this does not change the fact that Masses could still be celebrated that follow health precautions, such as celebrating Masses outside. What the Church is lacking, he said, is a “mobilization of the clergy that defined the Church in past times of plague.”

Instead, he said there is a perception “that the Church herself is afraid, with bishops and priests all taking shelter.” The sight of St. Peter’s Square closed off was “terrible to see,” he said, giving the impression of a Church “barricaded inside its residence and effectively says: ‘Listen, deal with it yourselves; we are just trying to save our own skin.’” It was an impression, he said, “that is widespread.”

And yet, as Messori also noted, there have been examples of personal heroism. One is 84-year-old Capuchin Father Aquilino Apassiti, chaplain at the John XXIII Hospital in Bergamo, the epicenter of the virus in Italy.

Every day, Father Apassiti, who lived through World War II and served as a missionary in the Amazon for 25 years fighting disease and superstition, prays with relatives of victims. The Capuchin, who managed to beat terminal pancreatic cancer in 2013, [told](#) the Italian daily *Il Giorno* he was once asked by a patient if he was afraid of contracting the virus.

“At 84, what can I be afraid of?” Father Apassiti replied, adding that he “should have died seven years ago” and has lived a “long and beautiful life.”

### Church Leaders' Comments

The Register asked Cardinal Bassetti and the Italian bishops' conference if they would like to comment on criticism of their handling of the pandemic, but they have not yet responded.

In an April 2 [interview](#) with InBlu Radio, the Italian bishops' radio station, he said it was important to “do all we can to show solidarity” for “everyone, believers and non-believers.”

“We are living a great trial, a reality that encompasses the whole world. Everyone lives in fear,” he said. Looking ahead, he predicted the looming unemployment crisis would be “very severe.”

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin [told](#) Vatican News on April 2 that he “share[d] the sorrow” of the many faithful who suffer for not being able to receive the sacraments but recalled the possibility of making spiritual communion and highlighted the gift of special indulgences offered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cardinal Parolin said he hoped any churches that “may have been closed will reopen as soon as possible.”

[Edward Pentin](#) is the Register's Rome correspondent.