

Catholic Church, Young People, and Human Rights in Italy

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Abstract The Catholic Church is said to still have a strong and influential role regarding social and political issues of today's Italy. It is therefore relevant to present their official position on some human rights issues to understand the Italian debate about human rights and, through a focus on young Italians' opinions, also its possible future.

This contribution addresses more specifically two questions: (1) what is the official position of the Catholic Church in Italy on labor rights, immigrants' rights, reproductive rights and LGBT rights? and (2) what are young Italian people's views on these same rights?

Firstly, this article suggests that the church champions labor rights and immigrants' rights whilst opposing various reproductive rights and the recognition of same-sex couples. The second question is answered with reference to a number of surveys regarding young Italians' views on human rights' issues. The data reveal that young respondents believe that the right to work is a key human right but is not satisfactorily upheld in today's Italy, and that they do not consider immigrants' rights as the most important human rights. However, Italian young people support assisted reproductive technologies and are the only population segment to endorse legal recognition for same-sex couples.

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In Italy, Roman Catholicism is the religious denomination of the overwhelming majority. More than 95% of the Italian population was baptized in the Catholic Church, more than 85% feel that they belong to the Catholic Church, whilst around 25% claim to attend church once a week, although this figure drops to 17% among young people aged 16–24 (Cesareo 1995, p. 95; Garelli 2011, p. 59; Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2006). In view of Catholicism's virtual religious monopoly, this article

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will focus primarily on the role of the Catholic Church in the public debate surrounding human rights and religion in Italy. The article will also examine young people's opinions on this debate, because young people are a key indicator of how human rights culture will evolve in Italy.

The Catholic Church in Italy, which here refers to the official position of the Catholic hierarchy, is said to have a very strong and influential role on government and politicians rather than the general public. These claims are made particularly expressed by liberal circles who lament the lack of a clear separation of church and State in Italy (Ercolessi 2008). It is therefore relevant to present the official position of the Catholic hierarchy on some human rights issues in order to understand the Italian debate about human rights. In the public debate, the Church hierarchy's priorities for social issues are often expressed in the speech made by the President of the Italian Bishops' Conference at the opening of its Permanent Council. The address is given twice a year and always reported in the national media, with a particular focus on points of political relevance. The address given by Cardinal Bagnasco to the Permanent Council on September 24th 2012 will be taken as indicative of the church hierarchy's thinking on human rights issues in the current Italian public debate (Bagnasco 2012). In short, the position of the Catholic Church on human rights in Italy is ambiguous: some rights are officially and strongly endorsed and others are repeatedly opposed in the public arena. Those rights which are supported by the church can be loosely grouped under the heading of social and economic rights, both for citizens and non-citizens. In contrast, the church publicly opposes so-called sexual and reproductive rights. We will provide examples of the first group, namely labor and immigration rights, and of the second group—reproductive rights and LGBT rights. This contribution addresses two questions: (1) what is the official position of the Catholic Church in Italy on labor rights, immigrants' rights, reproductive rights and LGBT rights? and (2) what are young Italian people's views on labor rights, immigrants' rights, reproductive rights and LGBT rights?

Labor Rights and Immigrants' Rights

Social and economic rights are referred to in literature as second-generation human rights. These rights developed in the nineteenth century and were formally defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. They include the right to work (Article 23), to rest and leisure (Article 24), to an adequate standard of living and to security in the event of unemployment (Article 25), and the right to education (Article 26) (van der Ven et al. 2004, p. 101). Labor rights, the first group of rights considered here, fall into this set of social and economic rights. Article 1 of the 1948 Italian Constitution begins with the following statement: "Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labor"; furthermore Article 4 says that "the Republic recognizes the right of all citizens to work and promotes those conditions which render this right effective."

In the issue of labor rights, civil law affirmations coincide with the teachings of the church. The Vatican II Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) acknowledges that the right to work is a fundamental right for all human beings (GS 26; John Paul II 1981, no. 18). According to the moral theologian Piana, after the 1950s, Catholic theology and teachings clearly affirmed the priority of the subjective side of labor over objective considerations: workers are more important as human beings than the output and profit generated by their work. From the Catholic perspective, this emphasis on the dignity of the human being is the cornerstone for all labor rights: the right of workers to keep a job, the right of young people to work, the right to equal access to the labor market for the weak and marginalized in society (immigrants, disabled, women, etc.) (Goffi and Piana 1991, pp. 462-466; Pizzuti 1981).

Labor rights can be classified in the group of rights which are publicly supported today by the Catholic Church in Italy. In his speech, Cardinal Bagnasco touches on some burning social issues that need to be tackled by the government and by politics in general: rising poverty, the economic crisis, unemployment, temporary employment, and the lack of a stable income, all of which prevent the younger generations planning their future (Bagnasco 2012). The Church's concerns mirror the current crisis over the right to work in Italy. Statistics indicate that in September 2013, 3.2 million people were unemployed, which is the highest number in the last 35 years. The unemployment rate is 12.5% for the general population and 40.4% among young people. In some southern areas, this latter figure exceeds 50%. Therefore it is not surprising that a national survey on youth and human rights shows that Italian young people think that the right to work is the least respected human right in Italy. Those surveyed felt that the right to work was the only right not to be sufficiently respected in Italy, as Table 1 shows (Conferenza dei Presidenti 2012).

Do human rights apply only to citizens or also to non-citizens? The debate surrounding this question is complex and beyond the scope of this brief article (van der Ven et al. 2004, pp. 105–106). What is relevant here is that the Church advocates a wide range of socio-economic rights for both citizens and non-citizens: in the Italian public debate, the Catholic Church is a vocal advocate for immigrants' rights, both for legal and irregular immigrants, who tend to move to Italy in order to improve their economic and social situation (Tanzarella 2003). Supporters of these rights base their argument on the freedom of movement defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 13) and in the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 12). Immigrants' rights are set out more comprehensively in the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, where fundamental rights are affirmed for both regular and irregular immigrants. It is important to stress that Italy, like all other migrant destination States in Europe and North America, did not ratify the Covenant. Immigrants' rights are an important human rights issue in the current Italian political debate: around 60% of the 92 recommendations sent by the United Nations Human Rights Council to the Italian government in 2010 referred to immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers (Human Rights Council 2010).

The teachings of the Catholic Church affirm immigrants' rights more forcefully than international legislation. The Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* speaks of the

“personal right of migration.” (GS 65). According to Tanzarella (2004), the clear affirmation of the “right to emigrate” goes back to John XXIII and his Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, in which he states that “every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own State. When there are just reasons in favor of it, he must be permitted to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there. The fact that he is a citizen of a particular State does not deprive him of membership in the human family, nor of citizenship in that universal society, the common, world-wide fellowship of men.” (John XXIII 1963, no. 25). This line of social teachings on immigration continued through Paul VI and John Paul II, who in his Exhortation of 2003 *Ecclesia in Europa* writes that “The phenomenon of migration challenges Europe’s ability to provide for forms of intelligent acceptance and hospitality (...) Everyone must work for the growth of a mature culture of acceptance which, in taking into account the equal dignity of each person and need for solidarity with the less fortunate, calls for the recognition of the fundamental rights of each immigrant” (John Paul II 2003, no. 101). More recently, Benedict XVI called for an orderly migration policy which would prosecute and condemn human trafficking but should “not end up in a hermetic sealing of borders, more severe sanctions against irregular migrants and the adoption of measures meant to discourage new entries” (Benedict XVI, 2013).

In Italy, many immigrants and asylum-seekers arrive after travelling, risking their lives, for hundreds of kilometers across the north African desert and the Mediterranean. Applying the social teachings of the church to the Italian context, Bagnasco (2012) says in his speech that the church is vigilant and engaged in safeguarding the human dignity of the immigrants, not only through its charitable agencies but also by pointing out the responsibilities and obligations of civil authorities and legislators in this matter.¹ The Pastoral Guidelines on Immigration issued by the Italian Catholic Bishops’ Conference in 1993 clearly promote a culture of acceptance toward all immigrants, both regular and irregular, and warn against the growing threat within Italian society of intolerance, xenophobia and discrimination against immigrants and asylum seekers, and the religious and cultural minorities they belong to (Commissione Ecclesiale per le Migrazioni 1993, nos. 7, 8, 34).

What do young Italian people think about the respect of immigrants’ and minority rights in Italy? Looking again at Table 1, we can conclude that young Italians think that the right of political asylum is one of the most respected in Italy (mean = 7.3); whilst respect for minorities is considered one of the least enforced rights (mean = 6.3). It seems that young Italians do not believe that immigrants’ and minority rights are among the most important human rights. The survey reveals that the right to political asylum, the right to citizenship and respect for minorities are considered to rank amongst the least important rights proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see Table 2).

¹ Here the cardinal remarkably calls for respect of the migrants’ human dignity together with respect of the dignity of human embryos.

Table 1 Perceived level of human rights' respect in Italy among young people

N= 1,846	Mean	St. dev.
Prohibition of torture	7.8	2.4
Prohibition of slavery	7.6	2.4
Religious freedom	7.4	2.5
Right to property	7.3	2.3
Right to political asylum	7.3	2.3
Freedom of association	7.3	2.3
Right to education	7.2	2.3
Right to citizenship	7.1	2.4
Right to health and well-being	6.8	2.3
Equality between men and women	6.6	2.3
Freedom of speech	6.5	2.6
Respect for minorities	6.3	2.4
Right to work	5.7	2.6

The research was conducted in 2008 on a national representative sample of 2000 respondents from 18 to 34 years old. Respondents could evaluate the level of respect in Italy of each listed human right on a scale from 1 ("not respected at all") to 10 ("very much respected"): (Conferenza dei Presidenti 2012, p. 61)

Table 2 The importance of the human rights listed in the UDHR according to young Italians

	Mean
Prohibition of slavery	9.5
Right to health and well-being	9.4
Freedom of speech	9.3
Right to education	9.2
Prohibition of torture	9.1
Right to work	9.0
Equality between men and women	8.9
Religious freedom	8.7
Freedom of association	8.6
Right to property	8.3
Respect for minorities	8.1
Right to citizenship	7.5
Right to political asylum	7.3

Respondents could evaluate each listed human right on an increasing scale of importance from 1 to 10. (Conferenza dei Presidenti 2012, p. 27)

Reproductive Rights and LGBT Rights

The human rights debate in Italy has recently expanded to address new issues, mirroring changes within society and situations that could not have been anticipated in 1948 when the UDHR and the Italian Constitution were written. One particular new area of debate and interest are “Sexual and Reproductive Rights”. These rights are enshrined in the Program of Action of the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and in the Platform for Action of the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women. Based on these documents, for example, the Swedish Government defines “sexual rights as meaning that all people, irrespective of sex, age, ethnicity, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation, have a right to their own body and sexuality. In addition to the definition of sexual rights presented above, there is the general human rights principle of non-discrimination on sexual or other grounds, such as sexual orientation or gender identity.” (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2006). The ICPD Program of Action stipulates that reproductive rights “rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents” (Article 7.3). Consequently, access to assisted reproductive technologies can be classified in this set of rights. Two examples of the Sexual and Reproductive Rights’ group will be covered here in order to demonstrate the Catholic Church’s public opposition on some human rights issues: reproductive rights and LGBT rights.

In the case of reproductive rights, the Catholic Church opposes most assisted reproductive technologies, for example in vitro fertilization (IVF). The church argues that women’s rights are in conflict with another important right, namely the right to life (Marsico 1999). Church teachings claim that embryos should be protected as “human persons”, meaning that they have the right to live and should not be destroyed, as is the case in IVF procedures (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, n. 2274; Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 2008, no. 14). There are many views in the public debate as to when an individual human person can be considered as such, i.e. as having human rights. The Catholic Church takes the view that an individual and unique human life begins with the fertilization of the egg cell, i.e. at the very beginning of the development of human zygote (Centro di Bioetica 2008). According to the moral theologian Salvino (1993), this position can be justified by philosophical, anthropological, biological and theological reasoning. Nevertheless the debate is still open and the Catholic Church, according to Ford, has adopted the safest position in advocating respect for human life from its very inception and considering the human zygote as having the right to life (Ford 2002).

Some scholars argue that a strong emphasis on “natural law” has re-emerged in the teachings of the Catholic Church over the last 30 years (van der Ven 2010, pp. 201–203; Menozzi 2012). This emphasis prompted a wave of public statements

by Benedict XVI against reproductive rights which are in conflict with the right to life. In Italy, the views of the pope, as the bishop of the capital city, have a massive influence on the media and public debate on these issues. According to some observers, the political influence of the Catholic hierarchy has resulted in “a very restrictive law” on assisted reproductive technologies (Law 40/2004). Efforts to amend the law through a general referendum in 2005 also failed, not least because of the “most determined, forceful and direct” intervention by the Catholic hierarchy in Italian politics in decades (Ercolessi 2008, pp. 146–147). In August 2012, the European Court of Human Rights decided that Law 40/2004 violated the right of one Italian couple to respect for private and family life, because this couple was a carrier of cystic fibrosis but the law prohibited them from performing a pre-implantation diagnosis of the embryo in the IVF process (Human Rights Europe 2012). As this case shows, the debate surrounding Law 40/2004 is not yet finished in Italy. Catholic bishops have attached great importance to the issue in their public discourse: Bagnasco’s (2012, no. 9) recent speech included the statement that “embryos’ dignity” should always be protected and that the recent call for the affirmation of “new rights” should not be immediately welcomed but subject to careful and critical scrutiny. It is indeed true that these “new rights”, as demonstrated by the example of reproductive rights, are not yet universally recognized in international declarations, in national law and in public opinion. The Catholic Church strongly opposes some of these new rights and has taken a firm stance in the debate surrounding them, claiming to be concerned to affirm more important and “non-negotiable” human rights, like the right to life (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2008, no. 12).

What do young Italians think about assisted reproductive technologies? A survey among a representative sample of Italians aged 15–34, divided in two categories (religious and non-religious), revealed that 66.7% of the young Catholics and 84% of the non-religious young people believe that assisted reproductive technologies are acceptable (Deiana 2007). These results appear to indicate that whilst Catholic statements may have an impact on young Catholics, the majority still disagree with the church’s teachings on this issue.

The second group of human rights firmly opposed in public by the church hierarchy in Italy is LGBT rights, in particular recognition of rights for gay couples. Austria and Ireland have recognized civil partnerships between same-sex couples in 2010 and 2011 respectively, making Italy the last Western European country where gay couples have no legal status.²

The Church teaches that “marriage exists solely between a man and a woman”, and that this is a “natural” and universal truth about marriage (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003). Furthermore, the church claims that demands for gay couples to have rights are not a human rights’ issue, nor a matter of respecting principles such as non-discrimination and equality, because “the denial of the social and legal status of marriage to forms of cohabitation that are not and cannot be marital is not opposed to justice; on the contrary, justice requires it” (ibid., no. 8).

² In Italy there is no recognition of civil partnerships, this means that not only homosexual but also heterosexual non-married couples have no legal recognition of their status.

According to the theologian Lorenzetti, who presents and defends the position of the Church on this matter, opposition to gay marriage is not motivated by religious arguments but rather is based on the natural human condition, which “by principle” tends to find fulfilment in the reciprocity and differences between men and women. Therefore, he concludes, no “true” marriage can occur between two persons of the same sex (Lorenzetti 1994).

The cardinal’s speech again echoes these concerns of the church and its focus on “natural law”. He points out that the politicians discussing the introduction of civil partnerships in Italy are failing to address the country’s real problems in this time of economic crisis and argues that recognizing civil unions would “automatically weaken the family”. The cardinal also adds that if the law were to redefine the family in a way which is not rooted in the human nature (one man and one woman), this would lead society to “collapse”, suggesting that this is already happening in the countries where the notion of family has already been redefined (Bagnasco 2012).

A 2012 survey indicates that the majority of the Italians are not in favor of recognizing same-sex partnerships, but opinion has been shifting in the last few years. Those in favor increased from 32% in 2005 to 40% in 2012, whilst the proportion of Italians against recognizing gay partnerships dropped from 66% in 2005 to 59%. The results show that characteristics such as religious practice or political affiliation do not appear to be relevant in shaping this opinion, whilst the age of the respondents is a determining factor. Younger people are more supportive of same-sex partnerships than their older counterparts: according to the survey, 51% of Italians aged 18–24 think that civil unions for same-sex couples should be recognized in Italy (Mannheimer 2012). Therefore it is possible that public opinion in Italy will be more in favor of recognizing certain rights for same-sex couples in the coming years, moving away from the official teachings of the Catholic Church.

Conclusions

In order to understand the role of the Catholic Church and of young people in the current Italian debate about human rights, this article has sought to provide succinct answers to the following questions: (1) what is the official position of the Catholic Church in Italy on labor rights, immigrants’ rights, reproductive rights and LGBT rights? and (2) what are young Italian people’s views on labor rights, immigrants’ rights, reproductive rights and LGBT rights?

Based on some official teachings and statements of the Catholic Church, both on universal and national level, this article established that the church champions labor rights and immigrants’ rights in the public debate whilst opposing various reproductive rights (particularly assisted reproductive technologies) and the recognition of same-sex couples.

The second question was answered with reference to a number of surveys regarding young Italians’ views on human rights’ issues. The data reveal that young respondents believe that the right to work is a key human right but is not satisfactorily

upheld in today's Italy, and that they do not consider immigrants' rights (the right to political asylum, to citizenship and respect for minorities) as the most important human rights. However, Italian young people support assisted reproductive technologies and are the only population segment to endorse legal recognition for same-sex couples.

To sum up, in terms of socio-economic rights for citizens and non-citizens and certain sexual and reproductive rights, it seems that the only point of agreement between the Church and young people in Italy is the need to defend labor rights. Immigrants' rights are advocated by the church and neglected by young people, whilst young people are in favor of reproductive rights and LGBT rights, which are opposed by the Church. This thumbnail sketch may indicate that the political impact of church statements is set to decline in the future debate on human rights in Italy.

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