

# “Annus Horribilis” for the Church in Germany. But Also in Italy and in the Vatican



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There has been an uproar over the disastrous **statistics** relative to 2020 published in mid-July by the episcopal conference of the Catholic Church of Germany, marking a decisive drop in comparison with the previous year, especially in participation in the sacraments.

At the end of July, in an autobiographical interview with “**Herder Korrespondenz**,” pope emeritus Benedict XVI went to the root of the disaster, blaming the Church’s decline on an “Amstkirche” made up only of institutional offices and documents, but ever more empty of “heart and spirit,” with the consequent “exodus from the world of faith.”

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But if Germany is weeping, Italy is not laughing. Here the numbers are making the rounds out of the limelight and without commotion, but these also mark, in 2020, a sharp drop in some important indices as compared with 2019.

This is gleaned from the survey carried out by the CENSIS in the summer of 2020 on a representative sample of Italians, brought out in the book “**The lost flock**” published at the end of June with a preface by dean of sociologists Giuseppe De Rita.

For example, this survey found that only 8 percent of Italians and 11 percent of Catholics recognized the Church's ability to “make sense” of the difficult situation produced by the Covid-19 pandemic.

A Church perceived as absent and distant from the vast majority of the population - especially at a particularly critical moment - is certainly not a sign of vitality, in a country like Italy that in the early 2000s was still seen by Pope John Paul II as a providential “exception” of Christian tenacity, capable of stemming the wave of secularization that was sweeping over the West.

But there is also another kind of statistic that must be taken into consideration. And it has to do with what is called the “8 per thousand.”

In practice, every year the Italian state donates eight tenths of one percent of its tax revenues to religious confessions that have entered into an agreement with the state.

The decision to allocate the funds to this or that religious confession is up to the individual taxpayer, free to indicate or not, with a signature, who should get the proceeds.

Since 1985, when this mechanism was introduced in Italy, signatures in favor of the Catholic Church have long been an overwhelming majority, reaching a record of almost 90 percent in 2005, 89.82 to be exact.

2005 was the year in which Benedict XVI succeeded John Paul II. During the pontificate of Joseph Ratzinger the percentage of signatures in favor of the Catholic Church went down by a few points, but not the absolute number of signatories, which continued to rise and in 2011 reached the record peak of 15,604,034.

In 2013, after Benedict XVI’s resignation and the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio as pope, the Italian Catholic Church boasted a good 15,226,291 signatures, equal to 80.91 percent of the total.

But then the number of favorable signatures went down inexorably, year after year.

In 2017 there were 13,774,382, equal to 75.36 percent of the total number of signatories.

In 2018 and 2019 there was an illusory rise in the percentage, respectively to 78.50 and 77.18 percent, but still with the absolute number of signatures dropping, first to 13,520,527 and the next year to 13,156,158.

But in 2020 there was a true collapse, more than a million signatures down, to 12,056,389, and with the share of the total dropping to 71.74 percent, almost twenty points below the 2005 record.

The historical series of the 8 per thousand data is available to everyone on the official website of the Italian **Ministry of Economy**. Thanks to this mechanism, every year the Italian Catholic Church receives about one billion euros from the state, the **use of which** is published in detail, as required by law, on the site created “ad hoc” by the bishops' conference.

One billion euros is a substantial figure, but it is six times lower than the roughly six billion that the German Catholic Church collects every year from the state, thanks to the different mechanism of the “Kirchensteuer,” despite the fact that its 22 million faithful are less than half of those of the Italian Church.

It cannot be ruled out that the decay - denounced by Ratzinger - of the German Catholic Church to an “Amstkirche” all bureaucracy without heart and spirit is also attributable to this sumptuous state funding. To avoid this taxation, a German citizen baptized into the Catholic faith must revoke his membership in the Church, which from then on will deny him the sacraments.

As for Italy, it should be noted that the collapse, in 2020, of the 8 per thousand signatures in favor of the Catholic Church was accompanied by a sharp surge in

signatures in favor of returning this subsidy to the state. From the 2,826,428 in 2019, the signatories in favor of the state rose in 2020 to 3,801,974, equal to 9.16 percent of the total.

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And in the Vatican, on the other shore of the Tiber?

At the end of July, the Holy See released a data set on its budgets and in particular on the performance of what is called Peter’s Pence, the offerings to the pope collected every year all over the world.

It was 83 million euros in 2014, the first full year of Francis’s pontificate. But three years later it fell to 64 million, and in 2020, after another three years, to 54 million.

No specific investigations have been carried out on the reasons for the drop in the Pence, nor on the collapse in Italy of 8 per thousand for the Catholic Church. But that this decline is “connected to the public opinion of Catholics” or in other words to their judgment on the ecclesiastical institution is an explanation shared by many observers, for example by Andrea Riccardi, Church historian and founder of the Community of Sant’Egidio, in a recent commentary.

Meanwhile, in the Vatican the trial against Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu and other defendants belonging to the secretariat of state has begun, a trial already **very poorly prepared** - in disregard of the most elementary rights of defense - and with even more risky developments, which could rope in Pope Francis himself.

Of course, the media hype over the unfolding of this trial will not be a balm for “Catholic public opinion,” nor will it favor a rally of its market indices.

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