

Personal Choice, Political Act

George De Stefano (October 17, 2009)



The De-Baptism Movement Comes to Italy

I baptize thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.



With these words, accompanied by the pouring of water, Catholic priests baptize infants, initiating them into the Roman Catholic Church.

To undo baptism, to “de-baptize,” is somewhat more complicated. The process, which the Church has given a Latinate mouthful of a name -- “actus formalis defectionis ab Ecclesia catholica” -- requires that individuals submit a form letter to the parish where they were baptized stating their intent to leave the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church considers baptism a sacrament that cannot be cancelled. But the “actus defectionis” letter means that the individual no longer will be affiliated with the Church, in effect de-baptizing him or her.

The letter states, in part, “I hereby reject the teachings, dogma and authority of the Roman Catholic Church and any benefits, so-called sacraments, graces and blessings supposedly bestowed upon me, either in the past or the future. Furthermore, please note that I make these statements personally, consciously and freely.”

In Europe, ex-Catholics increasingly have chosen to de-baptize. The National Secular Society in Great Britain reports that since 2005 more than 100,000 have downloaded the de-baptism letter from the organization’s website. There, and elsewhere in Europe, former Catholics de-baptize largely because they have left the faith. But a small but growing number of Italians are choosing de-baptism not only because they no longer consider themselves believers. They’re taking this dramatic step to protest the political stances and activities of the Catholic Church, as well as the privileges the Italian state grants it.

In 1999, Italian law recognized the de-baptism procedure. Church officials are required to amend their records when baptized persons submit the letter declaring that they are no longer Catholic.

In France, the strict separation of church and state is enshrined in law. But in Italy, the 1929 Lateran Pacts between the Vatican and Mussolini’s Fascist dictatorship guarantee Catholic religious education in public schools, and state funding of the Church itself.

Not only that. In recent years, the Vatican, aided and abetted by politicians of the right and center-left, has flexed its muscles on a number of secular issues, particularly gay rights, abortion, and reproductive technologies such as artificial insemination. What in essence are Catholic policies are imposed on the Italian public, which increasingly rejects them. And although some 90 percent of Italians have been baptized, only about 25-30 percent are regular churchgoers. Yet the Church, and the politicians aligned with it, insists that the Church’s values should be those of Italian society. This, even though Catholicism has not been Italy’s state religion since 1984, followed five years later by a Constitutional Court ruling that secularism is a “supreme principle of the State.”

So in Italy, choosing to be de-baptized is indeed a political act.

Last October, Italy’s Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics (UAAR) held the first De-Baptism



Day. More than 1000 Italians requested de-baptism certificates prior to the event, according to the UAAR. There also were De-Baptism Day demonstrations in 22 Italian cities.

The UAAR, which claims some 3,000 members, argues that the practice of counting all baptized persons as Catholics gives the Church inordinate influence and power, allowing it to claim most Italians as members even though they “joined” as infants, when they hardly could exercise their own free will in the matter. The UAAR has challenged such practices as the installation of crucifixes in public schools and polling places and the allocation of tax money to Catholic charities.

Encouraged by the success of the first De-Baptism Day, the UAAR has organized a second one, for October 25, 2009.

I recently interviewed, via e-mail, two Italians who have gotten de-baptized: Raffaele Lelleri, in 2003, and Francesco Giudice, the following year. Raffaele, a social science researcher who focuses on gay issues, health care, and immigration, and Francesco, an information technology professional, were born and raised in northeastern Italy, between Austria and Slovenia. They moved to Bologna in 1997 and have lived together for the past 11 years. In September 2006, they were married in the city hall of Toronto, Canada. They together answered my questions about de-baptism as both a personal choice and a political act.

Why did you both decide to be de-baptized?

We decided to de-baptize for our self-respect, our freedom, and above all, our consciences. Today, in our country, the Catholic Church is a violent and arrogant power center, at war with the aspirations to happiness of many men and women, entirely centered on the defense of its own privileges, more interested in imposing its own ideas -- on same-sex couples, gender, divorce, abortion, euthanasia, assisted fertilization -- than in the actual lives that people live on a daily basis. We absolutely do not want to be complicit with this, not even on a purely formal level.

This is a big deal in such a Catholic country as Italy. What reactions have you experienced?

Many of our friends also have been de-baptized, especially in the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] community. Some did it before us, and we gave the idea to others, so that by now it is rather well known. The word ‘de-baptize’ is now included in recent Italian dictionaries. Our families of origin have reacted in different ways --Raffaele’s with some irritation at the beginning, perhaps because this choice seemed too extreme; Francesco’s was indifferent. Everyone with whom we have discussed it was either neutral or very favorable about our decision.

Being de-baptized isn’t just a personal matter; it has political implications, too. For example the Catholic Church receives tax and other economic benefits based on the numbers of people it can claim as being Catholic, that is, listed in baptismal registries.

For us, the choice to de-baptize is above all an ethical question. This ethic is something both very private -- regarding who we are, and what we believe -- and very public, regarding the world we want, in which we can be ourselves. Given the war being waged by the Catholic Church, de-baptism is necessarily also a political act. But the Catholic Church itself proclaims that religious membership has a political connotation. Religion is now ever more political in Italy. Even the so-called devout atheists maintain that it is only the pope who can hold society together and give a future to Italy.

“Devout atheists?”

“Devout atheist” is an ironic oxymoron that describes people from the worlds of culture and journalism who, although they are declared atheists and have not had actual religious conversions, tend to defend the ideas and the positions of the Catholic Church for political reasons. Kind of like those in the United States who, though not religious themselves, uphold Christian values in opposition to Islam. In today’s Italy, the Catholic Church says that there cannot be ethics without religion. In our lives, with the respect we have for ourselves and for others, we try to show the contrary, every day.

What has been the reaction of the Church to the de-baptism movement?

At the beginning there wasn’t a single official position, both because the phenomenon was very limited in quantitative terms, and out of the fear of indirectly promoting it. The response was delegated to individual priests. Now the situation is different because there have been various official pronouncements, from both the Italian state and the Vatican state. Notwithstanding the fact that thousands have been de-baptized – though there are no official statistics, which only the Catholic Church could provide -- the strategy of both the Catholic hierarchy, and those that support it, is to not give any importance to this phenomenon. In the newspapers, for example, they give more importance to a single person, preferably a VIP, who re-converts to the religious life, and maybe goes to kiss a reliquary, than to the thousands who are ever more distancing them from the Catholic Church.

You both used to be practicing Catholics. How did you become non-believers who decided to be de-baptized?

We both were born and grew up in a peripheral part of the country where religion is still today one of the few social resources of local communities. If you wanted to volunteer, or work for a better society, or go camping in the summer with your peers, and maybe find a boyfriend, the only options were Catholic. For many years Raffaele was a member of Catholic Action, and even had a leadership role. In time, though, we came to realize, though with sadness, that we could not believe in an institution that didn’t believe in us.

There are gays and lesbians who say they are Catholic and want to reconcile their sexual identity and their religion. What’s your opinion?

We don’t want to be like the Catholic Church, which from on high says what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. Everyone has his or her own path; as long as you don’t harm anyone else, it’s OK. We are firm in our convictions and happy to be anti-clerical. At the same time, we value gay Catholics and we believe that they are doing important work within the Church. We have chosen to change it from outside, they from within. Certainly it’s not easy to be gay and Catholic. If they decide to give up their fight, we would not condemn them. We don’t judge even the very many clergy members who are homosexual. We would like, however, for them to make their voices heard more often, to show that there really aren’t such clear-cut borders between the religious and LGBT communities.

Do you think the de-baptizing movement has the potential to grow in Italy or will it be a “niche” phenomenon?



Tough question...it's very likely that in the coming years the de-baptizing movement will remain more a niche phenomenon than a mass one. This is not a problem, though, because if we stay united, our potential to change things necessarily will grow. We are and will remain a minority, but we must be an active minority. In any case, the secularization of Italian society will continue. It remains to be seen, however, if inertia and apathy will win or if there increasingly will be more people ready to commit themselves to opposing the politics and the privileges of the Catholic Church. We believe that those of us who are de-baptized must speak up more about ourselves because we are not devils or crazed revolutionaries, as they portray us. We are instead some normal people who have some minoritarian ideas and/or identities that risk being wiped out if the Catholic Church were to be all-powerful, as it would like.

It's often said that although only about one-third of Italian Catholics attend church regularly, the Church and the Vatican still wield considerable power in Italy.

Without a doubt the Catholic Church – its rites, its resources, its values, its schools, its means of communication, its voluntary groups – is an important part of Italian heritage, above all for the older generation. It really would be very difficult to imagine our country without the Catholic Church. And many thousands of outstanding individuals have contributed to the good of society through Catholic voluntary groups, even if they don't fully share the church's politics. Moreover, the fact that the Vatican geographically is so close to Italy certainly matters. The Pope intervenes very often on the national scene, which he seems to think is his own backyard. Then there are more political issues – for many years being Catholic has meant being anti-communist. This position was very significant under Fascism, during World War II, and after, when the Italian Communist Party was the strongest of any in the West, and in these times. Loyalty to the dictates of the Catholic Church, even to its privileges and its whims, is used by many as a political weapon to discredit adversaries and, unfortunately, too often it even wins elections.

What do you think of the argument that the de-baptizing movement actually is a tribute to baptism because by going to the trouble to get de-baptized you show that you take the sacrament seriously, which “real” atheists wouldn't do?

We do not underestimate the importance of baptism: it is like a brand that defines you. But for us, the most important thing is to be anti-clerical; this is our political and public stance, which has to do with our ethics and our morality. Francesco, though, is more agnostic whereas Raffaele is more atheistic; therefore we do not have a single shared opinion on this matter. But in our daily lives we both want to live according to our morality. It's difficult to go against the current, but you feel satisfaction because you are acting in accord with your principles, with integrity.

For more information about de-baptism and the Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics, visit the [UAAR website](#) [2]

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