

Rome Mayor Hounded From Office

Judith Harris (October 14, 2015)



After over two years in office, Rome Mayor Ignazio Marino has resigned after being dogged by restaurant receipts claimed as official entertaining, but apparently personal. In truth, much of the harsh reaction against Marino is due to the slow progress in Roman preparations for the Jubilee year that begins Dec. 8. But there are two sides to every story, even this one.

ROME -- After two years and four months in office, Rome Mayor Ignazio Marino has finally caved in and resigned, presumably definitively. Akin to Hilary Clinton's run for the Democratic nomination being dogged by her email scandal, Marino has been hounded from office over six restaurant receipts claimed as official entertaining, but apparently personal.

The receipt that triggered the greatest public outrage was from a pricy downtown Roman restaurant where, said the owner, Marino's wife had made their reservation at 3 pm. That evening among other



shockers the Mayor ordered a bottle of wine that cost some \$65. To ensure that the restaurant owner actually recognized Signora Marino, the reporter who broke the story first showed him a photo of another woman, whom he did not recognize.

Marino reacted to this news scandal by offering to repay \$23,000 worth of the sums he had charged on his official as opposed to his private credit card. But it was too little and too late, and many here assume that his very offer amounted to an admission of guilt, even though in some Italian cities it is the norm for a mayor to place all charges on the official credit card, then have a subordinate deduct private transactions from the total for repayment.

In truth, much of the harsh reaction against Marino is due to the slow progress in Roman preparations for the Jubilee year called by Pope Francis to open Dec. 8. The Pope himself, advocate of mercy, came down hard on Marino, denying in September that, when the mayor flew to New York to hear the pontiff address the United Nations, the pope had actually invited him. In other words, the pontiff called the mayor of Rome a liar. With this even his own party, the Partito Democratic (PD), and its president, Premier Matteo Renzi, turned their backs on Marino.

On Tuesday the Guardia di Finanza, the Italian tax police, ransacked the mayor's office on the Capitoline Hill and took away all files they considered relevant to the mayor's expense account for his official entertaining, which totals \$259,000, according to city hall official accountants. A prosecutor will go over these, so we are told.

One reader's reaction was to confide to a Roman daily his shock at Marino's having put on his official city expense account the \$10 he had given to a starving immigrant -- i.e., that this is all silliness. And indeed there are two sides to every story, even to this one. Although no one is defending private entertaining at public expense, Marino is not lacking in defenders.

First, Marino inherited, not years, but decades of Roman city mismanagement which, as is known only now, was intimately involved with organized crime, sometimes even under the guise of welfare programs. Moreover, as the investigations into the Vatican's own bank, the IOR, have demonstrated, until only recently the Vatican bankers were accused of money laundering, and for decades were not above taking their cut in the dodgy finances of dodgy individuals. Under Pope Francis's cleanup over 1,000 IOR accounts in the names of laymen with no right to hold Vatican bank accounts have been shut down. That a part of the Roman church worked hand in glove with corrupt politicians for many years is no secret.

Secondly, whereas Marino is acknowledged as ultra clean personally, when newly elected he found himself surrounded by corrupt bureaucrats of high rank with links to organized crime, as he himself denounced not long after taking office. Among recent arrests have also been members of the PD -- that PD which turned its back on Marino.

Last Dec. 3 thirty-seven with city hall links and/or offices were arrested on Mafia charges, including the head of the city hall anti-corruption team. Marino's predecessor as mayor for over 5 years, Gianni Alemanno, whose political career began when he was elected national secretary of the neo-Fascist Italian Social Movement, was put under investigation in connection with -- again among other things



-- the city's payments for buses which in fact never arrived.

"We have added 700 buses to the city and hired 200 new bus drivers," Mario said on a recent radio broadcast. "Do you think I'm proud to admit to my peers in other cities that my predecessor as mayor is under investigation for Mafia activities?"

Marino, a surgeon from Genoa, is also accused of being an amateur in politics, who has failed to move swiftly or incisively enough within the Roman labyrinth. Perhaps -- but if his being an outsider is in some ways a handicap, it is exactly why he was elected. In fairness, the Vatican itself might have taken into account that to clean up the decades of Roman pot holes, piled-up rubbish and broken sidewalks would require more than the eight months permitted by the pontiff's surprise last-minute announcement of the Jubilee Year on March 13.

That Premier Renzi is as distressed as the Vatican at the slow work on the Jubilee preparations is understandable if belated. What he says today is that he wants a "dream team -- some really tough people" -- to take charge. Hmm.

Finally, and this is doubtless peripheral, restaurateurs here have savagely attacked Marino forcing them to remove their ever proliferating tables, which are illegal squatters on Roman sidewalks.

So what now? The most frequently mentioned possible successors are a magistrate with political experience, Alfonso Sabella, and Carabinieri General Leonardo Gallitelli.

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