

Italy Celebrates Easter

Juidith Harris (March 23, 2016)



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ROME -- This Easter Holy Week is marked by sorrow for the deaths in Spain of young students, including seven young Italian women, in a tragic bus accident, and by the wanton terrorist violence in Brussels. But the positive traditions continue with, first and foremost, religious celebrations that honor the past but also reflect changing times.

Italy's Easter week began on Palm Sunday last week with the benediction of leafy sprigs from olive trees, more customary here than palm leaves, in memory of the faithful hailing the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The sprigs given to the faithful in church are kept throughout the year. If that is unchanged, Holy Thursday ritual now reflects today's crisis of the thousands of refugees arriving, not only onto Greek shores, but also onto Italy's.

These refugees include the four-year-old boy from Congo who arrived, after a perilous journey across Libya and then in a rubber boat across the Mediterranean to Catania, elegantly outfitted in jacket and bow tie. His mother had been assured that they would be greeted with a party on arrival (they



did not know where), and so her son was to be "elegant." His picture went viral; in fact, they are now in a refugee camp, just two more among the altogether 5,000 migrants who landed on Italian shores in just the past week.

Drawing attention to the drama of this historic migration, with its turbulent dimensions, on Holy Thursday Pope Francis will respect ancient ritual by washing the feet of 12 people. This year all will be refugees. Three years ago Francis, in his first Easter as pope, broke the tradition that the 12 would all be men, and he has now introduced a new rule that henceforth both sexes will be admitted to the age old ceremony. Not all will necessarily be Catholic, moreover; already in 2013 he had washed the feet of Muslims as well as of Orthodox Christians in a juvenile detention center in Rome. Last year he washed the feet of 12 detainees in Rome's Rebibbia Prison. The importance of the symbolism this year is the Pope's continuing intention to foster understanding among persons of diverse religions and ethnicities, particularly important at this time of conflict.

Good Friday brings the sorrowing Via Crucis processions, beginning with that of the pontiff inside the Colosseum in Rome at 9:15 pm. In our little village in the north of Lazio the procession is on Lake Bracciano, where the local scuba divers' school has mounted, on its boat afloat in the water, a huge Christian cross.

In St. Peter's Basilica on Easter Sunday after Pope Francis celebrates Mass, he gives the traditional "Urbi et Orbi" benediction. Easter Day is a joyful family celebration which is, almost needless to say, accompanied by special foods, as I-italy has already reported. The midday family feast of roast lamb with artichokes often concludes with the "colomba pasquale" (Easter dove), a vaguely bird-shaped cake, born in Northern Lombardy, that is a kissing-cousin modeled upon that region's beloved Christmas panettone. The Easter celebrations conclude on Monday with "Pasquetta" (Little Easter), a nationwide holiday that traditionally means a day-long trek into the countryside, with a picnic in the mountains or by the shore.

In Milan the Cascina Sant'Ambrogio agritourism association is organizing a mega-picnic in its vast park, where visitors can not only eat on the grass, but grill foods. Preparations have lasted literally months with the creation of a sprawling edible sculpture described as a "food forest." The goal is also to raise funds for restoration of an abbey within the Cascina park area. In Turin visitors can drop into the Masino Castle where Piedmontese picnic baskets will be available for enjoying within the adjacent park. Youngsters can participate in a treasure hunt.

Florence will present, for the 300th year in succession, the "Scoppio del Carro," a float almost 30 feet tall, which will be drawn through the streets by oxen until a dove-shaped rocket, dispatched by the Archbishop of Florence, will touch off its fireworks. Museums there, including the Uffizi, plus the Boboli Gardens will remain open. Similarly, Rome's museums will also remain open, some offering free entry (these include the Napoleonic Museum, the Barracco Museum of ancient sculptures, the Museum of the Walls). Villa Gregoriana, near Tivoli, will allow picnics inside that sprawling park, with guided visits into the villa itself and a special villa fee, E 17, for whole families.

Naples is offering culture to its visitors. At its sciences center, Citta' della Scienza, a special art laboratory for children has been mounted called Laboracovado, where youngsters can decorate Easter eggs, plus a treasure hunt, games and a show, see [>>>](#) [2].

At the Castel dell'Ovo a ballet called Peter Gabriel, performed by Carla Fracci and George Iancu, will be projected upon a castle wall. There too, museums will remain open.

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