

Solidarity

BY E. ANN MATTER

One of my most lasting impressions of Italian culture hit me when I first went to Milan for a year, the first time I was in Italy as a member of the community rather than a tourist. As I was settling into my new neighborhood, a friend made sure to introduce me to the lady who ran the *cartoleria* (paper store) down the street. “If you need any school supplies,” she said, “*la Signora* will take care of you.”

“Oh,” I answered, “if I need anything like that, I will just go to Upim” (an Italian department store).

“Never mind Upim,” she retorted, “if you need anything for your work, show a little *solidarietà* for *la Signora*, and she will look after you.”

“What is *solidarietà*?” I asked.

It is a question I have been thinking about for some 20 years of going back and forth to Italy, a question that becomes more pressing every year.

Solidarietà starts with the idea of people coming together for a common goal. It means we feel with others and expect them to feel with us, to recognize each other’s dignity. Born in the medieval Italian communes, solidarity is intrinsic to the Italian sense of belonging, a concept shared by both ends of the political spectrum. The long tradition of Italian socialism makes a big deal of “*la solidarietà del popolo*,” solidarity with the people. In the recent elections, Silvio Berlusconi

and Romano Prodi both claimed to be the candidate of solidarity in the way, I suppose, that George Bush and John Kerry each claimed to be the truer American. Italian Catholic politics also claims *solidarietà* as a civic and moral virtue. In this sense, it has to do with helping and supporting others, often those weaker than ourselves. This is the solidarity with the poor seen in Catholic social services like Rome’s *Comunità di Sant’Egidio* or, in an American Catholic version, Philadelphia’s Project H.O.M.E. The mission of these groups, to give witness and stand with those being helped — not just to give them things but to give them, in a sense, ourselves — is deeply rooted in Christian values.

But the Italian mode of *solidarietà* that has made the deepest impression on me is not preached by politicians or bishops. It is lived by the common people in the community. Solidarity involves respect, an appreciation of other points of view, a belief that other experiences and other people are every bit as important as your own. It is a wonderful social virtue, but it is deeply challenged by changes sweeping European society.

Will *solidarietà* survive in a multicultural world? This question is explored in a recent Italian film by Marco Tullio Giordana, *Quando sei nato, non puoi più nasconderti* (*Once You Are Born, You Can No Longer Hide*). Here, the young

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hero, Sandro, falls off his father’s yacht and is rescued by a boatload of clandestine immigrants. By the time the boat has limped ashore in southern Italy, Sandro finds himself in complete solidarity with two Albanian youths, Radu and his sister, Alina. Sandro cannot understand why his friends are not welcomed and given the rights of citizens, not even when he learns that Radu is a thief and a pimp who sells his sister. Because of what he has been taught in school and by his family, Sandro thinks their lives are just as important as his. The genius of this film is that it shows at once the clarity of Sandro’s ideal of *solidarietà* and the extreme complexity and difficulty of a situation to which there is no immediate solution.

Solidarietà and how it is strained by modern realities is a question for all of us. Will we find a way in the 21st century to stand in solidarity with others? Will we be able to make a culture based on mutual respect? These are questions to be pondered by politicians and religious leaders, but also by cities, neighborhoods and, yes, universities. ■

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