

Rome's Mayor & the Jubilee Year Called by Pope Francis

Judith Harris (September 03, 2015)



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ROME – Gearing up for the Jubilee Year called by Pope Francis for Dec. 8, the City of Rome is cleaning up its act (and some of its streets). The problem is the recent, devastating wave of scandals known as “Mafia Capitale” (Mafia Capital), which showed crime and corruption extending from shifty politicians and bureaucrats all the way down to organized crime bosses. Is there time, money and will power enough to be ready in just three months? The answer is a qualified yes – but it will not be easy.

No one has ever accused Marino, a transplant surgeon from Genoa, of being a part of the invasion of Rome by the barbarians of crime. This is a problem which he inherited from his predecessor as mayor, Gianni Alemanno. But he has taken the rap, blamed both for having allegedly ignored the dimensions of the question, and for having failed to act swiftly enough. Marino denies both charges, pointing out that in August 2013 the then prefect of Rome had flatly denied the existence in the Eternal City of Mafia-type activities, acknowledging solely "facts and behavior that were linked to organized crime." When this was shown to be untrue, literally dozens were sent to prison.

On this Mayor Marino does not mince his words. "The extraordinary commitment of Prefect Gabrielli, the determination and disregard to threats we have received from [crime bosses at] Ostia, and the new awareness of the presence of the metastatic cancer in our midst, are encouraging all the democratic powers to unite to combat these phenomena, which are clearly mafiosi. Today my voice is less isolated."

Marino is a survivor. For a time the scandal risked the dissolution of his city government, and replacement with an appointed commissioner. It was a victory for Marino when, instead of dissolving the city council and sending Marino himself back to Genoa, a commission of inquiry decided to take no further action than to have him act in concert with Franco Gabrielli, 55, from Viareggio, the new prefect of Rome.

The role of the prefect will be to preside over the legality of contracts preparing Rome for the Jubilee year. Gabrielli, former secret service (SISDE) boss and then head of the Civil Protection agency, thus becomes Dr. Marino's partner cum overseer in managing a cleaner Rome. Will the two get on, and will the vaunted cleanup – physical as well as of personnel – make a difference?

The question is important because predictions are that the Jubilee Year will attract 33 million pilgrims, or from 50,000 to 100,000 a day, to the Eternal City. Initially 25 million were expected, but the figure is ballooning. The real crowd control challenge on the ground is expected for the week of Feb. 8, when the remains of Padre Pio will be installed inside St. Peter's basilica, with a special day of prayer Feb. 13. Safety too is a high priority, and plans are to disallow overflights of Rome, including and especially by ultra-light aircraft.

Nevertheless, even as Marino met in New York Wednesday with his fellow big city mayor Bill De Blasio, back home there was little let-up in the attacks on him. In mid-August Marino left Rome for a two-week family vacation. Given the Jubilee walkup tensions, the new prefect Gabrielli openly



criticized Marino's two-week absence even though, ending his vacation in Manhattan, Marino said that in New York he was meeting with potential investors. "Certainly he did not do well by not being here," said a petty-sounding Gabrielli. "I respect his mentality as a surgeon – that is, of one who gives his all at work, but when he thinks he should, takes a rest, probably to regenerate himself." (Marino replied that the hard-working deputy mayor Marco Causi had remained.)

A comparison between Jubilee Rome and Expo in Milan has been made because both run-up's have been tinged with evidence of corruption. This Jubilee budget is trifling by comparison with that of Expo; no major works are planned for Rome. Nor is there a comparison with the Jubilee Year of 2000, which called for far more ambitious projects. The 33 contracts negotiated so far, which will be put on line, mostly regard that regular maintenance which has been sorely neglected: the tidying up of bridges, sidewalks and the area around the Stazione Termini, Rome's major train station. Another project is being called percorsi di fede (pilgrim walks), which will take the visitor from St. Peter's to other ancient basilicas.

One quarrel is with the tour bus operators. In order to maintain orderly traffic (including for workaday Romans), city officials and police expect pilgrims to walk. But many are elderly and/or handicapped, so buses will be necessary for them, but Rome's traffic commissioner is asking around \$1,150 per bus as a congestion charge, a fee the companies find exorbitant.

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