

Mother's Day... The Italian Way

Bianca Soria (May 07, 2014)



Every mother wants to talk about being a mother, no matter if anyone is willing to listen or not. And I'm no different, so of course I didn't want to miss the opportunity to write something on Mother's Day. I could have talked about my mum turning 70 today and wish her an even happier Mother's Day, but I'm not going to. Instead, I drew on a few news stories that hit the headlines in Italy over the last few months and that made me reflect on some aspects of Italian motherhood...

VIVA LA MAMMA!

We're probably all familiar with the idea of 'mamma italiana' fitting that widely spread and easily recognizable stereotype... Strong, caring, dedicated to nurture, protect and feed their babies (whether they're really such or whether they're a few decades old) until death (or a witchy daughter-in-law)



does them apart...

Whether we like it or not, the concept of 'mammismo' is stuck on us italians like wax on your legs when you're trying to remove any excess hair (and again stereotypes say that us italians have a lot of those too). It's considered a 'national characteristic' abroad, but apparently now also recognized within the borders. In fact at this year's annual opening of the Regional Ecclesiastic Tribunal in Genova, the Church has validated its existence by announcing that 'mammismo', defined as the 'psychological dependance on your parents' can be considered a good reason for marriage annulment.

Sure enough, according to statistics, interfering mothers-in-law are responsible for 30% of all separations and the phenomenon is supposed to be growing as young italians keep on living at home well into their thirties... And while the reasons for that are partly economic, the parents usually go out of their way to indulge their children without restraints 'while they can', inevitably contributing to making them unfit for a healthy relationship outside the family home.

I'm sooo tempted to start talking about mothers-in-law now, but I'll be wise... and move on to the next motherly topic...

IN THE NAME OF THE MOTHER

Another extraordinary example of groundbreaking achievements this year is the Decree Law that finally allows also married Italian mothers to give their surname to their children...

Up until the beginning of this year, Italian mothers could only pass on their surname if no father came forward recognizing the baby, which is a bit like saying: I know you needed a man to conceive your baby, but since I can't prove it, and since this child needs a name, all I'm left with is yours...

But going back to the new law, my first consideration is that it's a pity it was NOT promulgated thanks to the deliberate intent and effort of our legislators, nor as a response to the decades long battles italian women have been fighting to change this ancient patriarchal law...

For this forced step forward in our italian (r)evolution we (italian men and women who welcome this decision) have to thank the European Court of Human Rights for seeing what our legislators were too shortsighted to see: that it is discriminatory to deny women the right to give their child (alias the human being they carry for nine months, give birth to in excruciating pain and attend to relentlessly, from that day forward, for the rest of their lives) their last name.

Anyway, after being scolded by Mother Europe, in January this year Italy quickly proceeded to pass the law that legalizes the naming of the child after the mother...

But here is the catch...the law says that the mother's name can ONLY be assigned IF there is agreement between the parents... And if there is no agreement? Well, in that case the father's name prevails... So did I get this right? Isn't it like saying that the father's name will keep on being assigned to the child UNLESS there is a specific request from BOTH parents to give the mother's



name? In other words, if until now the Italian State was making this decision, from now on only the Italian fathers will.

Not much of an improvement in my opinion, more than a law created to erase discrimination this looks to me like a pacifier shoved in the mouths of many illuminated women and a few illuminated men... But I have faith, give it time... as we know all dummies are meant to be eventually spat out!

The reactions of the Italians to this historic development have been of course varied and colorful.

Many have been wondering why does Europe keep on wasting time on 'unimportant' issues when Italy is afflicted by many more urgent and devastating problems... Good point, why should we consider women issues urgent or important?

Others talk about the demolition of the fatherly figure, as if a father is such only when he passes on his name... but, given the patriarchal context, I'm not surprised...

And of course many others welcome the symbolic value of this law, as imperfect as it is, for the cultural innovation that brings to Italy .

As for me, proud Italian mother of children that carry both mine and my husband's surname, (but only thanks to my husband being Australian), I would like to see the fairest option also become available to all: naming the child after both parents.

MATER SEMPER CERTA EST... NOT ANYMORE

So let's move on and talk about an 'italian mother-to-be', or maybe not to be...

A tragic mistake in December last year led to an exchange of embryos between two couples in a Rome hospital. Embryos have been implanted in the 'wrong' mother, now pregnant with twins that are in fact not hers... The expectant mother claims those babies belong to her regardless of their DNA, while the biological parents, whose pregnancy failed to proceed, are obviously also claiming the same.

By paradox, even if in December those parents had wanted to use someone else's genetic material to become pregnant, back then it wasn't legally possible in Italy... That changed only a couple of months ago when the restrictive reproduction law dating back to 2004 was overturned...

So who's going to be the babies' Mother? According to Italian law the mother of a child is the one who gives birth to it. But here is the dilemma: the law does not contemplate a situation where the



biological parents have not given consent to implanting the embryos in a surrogate mother, actually... the law does not contemplate a surrogate mother at all. In fact in Italy any surrogacy arrangement, (commercial or altruistic) is illegal.

So apparently the expectant mother is committing a crime for being a surrogate and would commit another one if she gave up the babies (since the law also states that parents undergoing medically assisted reproduction "cannot renounce maternity or paternity")... unless someone quickly comes up with a law 'ad personam'(very quickly I'd say since these babies will be born soon) to unravel this legal and bioethical knot.

In the meantime that biological mother, unwillingly caught between a medical mishap and the inadequacy of our legal system, is probably spending this day wondering who, on the next [Mother's Day](#) [2], will be receiving her babies smiles and loving gaze.

My Mother's Day wishes today go to her. And of course to my own mamma who today is spending her 70th Birthday and Mother's Day on a plane from Rome to Chicago just to be with me. Mother's Day, the Italian way.

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[1] <http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/mamma1399606404.jpg>

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother's_Day