

Naples rubbish: “Not God’s gift”

Judith Harris (July 08, 2011)



NAPLES - “I’m so ashamed!” Handsome Michele, Neapolitan father of four, has been driving tour buses through Naples for over two decades. “I simply hate having the tourists see these piles of rubbish.” We were inching our way through the usual midday traffic on the Via del Mare alongside the docks for the luxury cruise ships and the ferries to Capri and Ischia. Beside us a mound of garbage, three feet tall, snaked for many yards along the avenue before turning the corner to continue up a side street.

When Neapolitan authorities, including members of Parliament, appealed to other regions to lend a helping hand, the Northern League leadership turned its back. The crusty co-founder of the League, Senator Giuseppe Leoni, who is also president of an organization called Padania Catholics, said harshly, “Taking it [Neapolitan rubbish] is unacceptable. Their rubbish is not God’s gift.”

Admittedly, there are some credible grounds for reluctance. Renzo Tondo, governor of the Friuli-Venezia Region, argues that last year his region had accepted Neapolitan rubbish for disposal in its



incinerators, but that once was enough. "They can ask us for a helping hand one time, but in Naples this reiterated state of emergency undermines the credibility of the people promising a definitive solution. The Northern regions simply cannot be called upon to help when the same problem crops up again only a few months later. But let me be clear," Tondo continued. "We have no political prejudice against the garbage from the Campania Region. For us today it is a political problem: I am told we have no space whatsoever in our own incinerators for rubbish coming from other regions. It's tough enough for us to get rid of our own."

The situation remained drastic enough that the Neapolitan Cardinal Archbishop Crescenzo Sepe issued a bitter statement last Friday. "Naples once again has been humiliated, its dignity betrayed, its future prospects blighted, its rights ignored." The situation is "unacceptable," he concluded, with organized crime holding the city in a "deathly grip, trying to turn this latest city crisis to its own interests."

In making a connection with organized crime, the Cardinal Archbishop was very much on target. When elected last month, Mayor Luigi De Magistris, who replaced Rosa Russo Jervolino, vowed that by year end Naples will recycle 70%. But then shock set in as he discovered himself committed to what he has described as a "civil war" pitting organized crime against civil society. And in fact the situation has been aggravated by gangs of hooded youths, suspected of connections with certain local interests, rampaging through town by night to torch piles of rubbish; some were reportedly caught on camera. Burnt rubbish is reportedly more valuable than unburnt, for disposal of each ton to the private business interests involved costs the seller E 1,000 (circa \$1,450). Not surprisingly, therefore, in the past two weeks over 300 fires have been set—on Monday alone, 47—burning an estimated 2,100 tons of garbage. According to Italian journalist Cristina Zagaria, reporting from Naples, the fires released as much dioxin in that period as would normally be released by a proper incinerator in a decade.

But today there is also good news. Despite the objections from the Northern League, from next week on a large amount of the rubbish can finally be sent to incinerators and dumps in seven of the nineteen other regions, according to Campania Regional Governor Stefano Caldoro, speaking July 7. These welcome Samaritans range from all over Italy: Sicily and Puglia in the South; the Marches, Tuscany and Emilia Romagna in the Center; and, in the North, Lombardy and Tondo's Friuli Venezia Giulia.

Mayor De Magistris is doing his level best. Ten days ago he climbed aboard a rubbish truck to set an example. (See him at the wheel at <http://video.corrieredelmezzogiorno.corriere.it/?canale=politica&videoid=cm-157180> [2]) The next morning at 6 am he was at the rubbish collection center, thanking the men who had worked the trucks around the clock to clear much of the city's historical center. From circa 1,500 tons of accumulated trash and garbage the amount has dropped to 1,300, according to Asia, the town's rubbish collection agency. Ordinary citizens in Naples have been actively cooperating through ad hoc neighborhood committees who encourage careful division of rubbish into recycling. Outside Naples itself, Pompeii township is one of 12 which reports little trouble.

The stakes are high. The European Union will apply financial sanctions on Naples unless the situation is resolved, according to Janez Potocnik, EU commissioner for the environment. In March 2010 an EU court found the Region guilty of neglecting the environment and froze E 500,000 of funds which were due to the Campania. The area's politicians in Rome on the right as well as the left are concerned over this. And local magistrates have opened three separate inquiries into the health risks and political reasons behind the rubbish disaster.

But there is another story in Terzigna, a town which lies within the Vesuvius National Park. Local women have formed a committee called Mamme Vulcaniche (Volcanic Moms), who demonstrated June 27 against its construction on health grounds.



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