

## Day 28: life in Italy under lockdown. “The whole world is in the same boat as Rome”



Julius Silver in Pixabay

When Virginia Raggi was elected mayor of Rome in June 2016, she became its first female mayor and the first from the anti-establishment party, the Five Star Movement. She couldn't have foreseen becoming the first mayor of either sex or any political party to preside over the total lockdown of her native city . . . and the almost complete collapse of its tourism-dependent economy.

In 2019 Rome hosted about 29 million visitors responsible for 60 percent of the city's GDP. This year the city can't count on any international tourists, says Raggi, because foreign tourism won't return till borders open, and each country will be loosening its restrictions in its own time. "We have to focus on local tourism, by which I mean from Rome itself at first, and then from other parts of Italy," said the mayor in a meeting with the press earlier this week. This represents a whole new mindset for the Italian capital, and the politicians who govern it. The estimated loss for Rome in 2020 ranges up to €20 billion. "It's a figure hard to conceive," she admits.

For now Raggi is concentrating on measures to ease the physical, psychological, and—to the extent that she can—economic pain of her

constituents. Thanks to the dramatic reduction in city traffic, Rome is in the process of sanitizing its 5,000 kilometers of roads, as well as its *metropolitana* (subway), train, and bus stations, and 60,000 waste bins around the city. A project to asphalt the roads is proceeding more rapidly thanks to the lack of cars, though this advantage is partly offset by a reduced workforce and limited supplies. “We can’t do it all in one day but we are proceeding in stages,” the mayor says.

Rome was among the first cities in Italy to close down community centers, especially for senior citizens, schools, and offices, Raggi claims. Because there is almost no demand for taxis, the city has negotiated with drivers to bring food and pharmaceuticals to families and individuals in quarantine. Taxi drivers have volunteered to bring medical staff to and from hospitals free of charge. The city has made available 100 vehicles from its own fleet to doctors and nurses who don’t have their own cars. Rome has also eliminated some parking restrictions to facilitate the movement of vehicles. Sure, the roads are empty, but now parking is largely free and more accessible.

As Milan is doing, Rome has started a fund for micro-businesses that don’t have access to bank loans, and mini-entrepreneurs who want to create new businesses and can’t get loans. “Think of it as micro-credit,” says Raggi. “We have to consider people who may have been struggling to make ends meet before the crisis and now have lost everything.”

A top priority for the mayor is to ensure that no one in Rome should go hungry during this brutal period. That includes the old, the solitary, the homeless, migrant workers, and gypsies. “*Non mettere insieme il pranzo con la cena*”, she says, quoting an Italian saying that means no one should starve. The national government created food vouchers worth € 15 million; Rome developed an app to get them into the hands of people immediately, rather than waiting for the physical distribution of paper coupons.

She insists that recipients should include people who work *in nero* (illegally, without declaring their income), a widespread Italian practice. She has been criticized for this stance, but insists that today, “We have to think 360 degrees. Usually it is politically correct to ignore these people, but we have to consider them in these exceptional circumstances.”

The city has upped capacity at food distribution centers and introduced the (somewhat alien to Italians) concept of what Americans call “doggy bags”, so people can take food home with them rather than eating in communal centers with heightened risk of contagion.

Romans do not live by bread alone. The hardest thing for people during lockdown is the lack of human contact, Raggi reports, and her administration has been trying to soften the blow of isolation. In nursing homes, where physical visits from family members have been curtailed, volunteers have been providing iPads and similar so residents can remain in contact with their families. Technology, including the telephone, is being deployed to offer psychological aid, tele-companionship, counsel 24/7 for the victims of abusive family members. “An entire network of assistance has been activated,” she says. “We are inventing all manner of things to deal with the situation.”

Asked about hospital shortages and medical practices, she says, “We have an excellent healthcare system but there have been too many cuts, reductions in services, especially to the indigent, too many closures and too much privatization of public hospitals over the last 20 years. This policy was counter-productive in the long term, as the current situation demonstrates. We need to rethink our medical system.”

Healthcare is not the only component of society that must be re-examined.

The Roman way of life, living socially and gregariously and above all OUTSIDE, cannot return all at once . . . and perhaps not at all as it was. The national government will establish a progressive re-opening, and it will happen in stages, with a timetable determined by doctors, scientists, and medical experts.

“When you think that something as tiny as a virus has blocked the entire world, no one could have imagined it. Even world wars affected mostly the countries in conflict, but in this situation the whole world is in the same boat. It is an epochal crisis that will make us rethink our entire way of living,” Raggi concludes.

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