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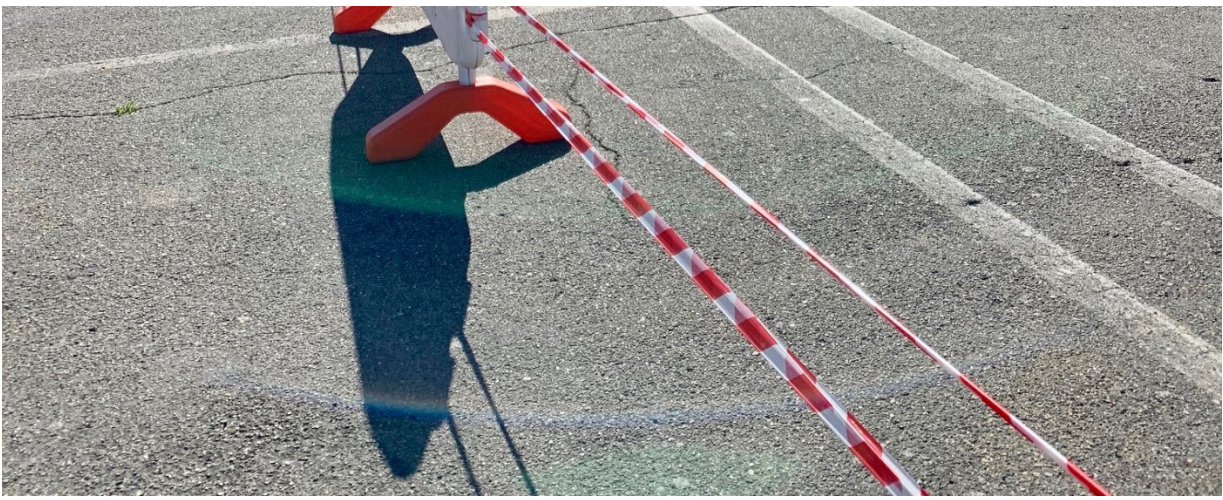
Day 56: life in Italy under lockdown. Market madness and the number eight



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May 2 · 4 min read ★





by C. Flisi

Today marks the eighth week of full lockdown in Italy. Some loosening has begun and Phase II officially begins on Monday, but meanwhile it's worth reflecting on the symbolic importance of the number eight in religion. Buddhists have the Eightfold Path, the eight spoke wheel, and the eight auspicious symbols. Hindus have the eight seats of wealth, eight guardians of the directions (the deities controlling space), and both Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth) and Shiva (the destroyer) have eight forms. According to Muslims, there are eight gates to heaven. The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah lasts eight days.

For Christians, eight symbolizes the resurrection: when the seven days of the week are completed, the eighth day begins the life cycle anew. This explains why many Italian baptismal fonts and the baptisteries that house them are octagonal-shaped.

So maybe our life of (post-pandemic) normality begins again with an auspicious aura of prosperity and a fast track to heavenly festivities. But I wouldn't bet on it.

I went to our town's outdoor market this morning; food stands were open again after two months of shutdown. In other cities in Lombardia, and in other regions of Italy, open-air markets may or may not have been open during part of this period; the government offered guidelines but each locality had the final decision.

Today, mine was a ghost of its former bustling self. Only a (gloved) handful of food stands were open, and only those that had survived without income during these past two months and whose proprietors had calculated that it was worthwhile to reopen under highly restrictive circumstances.

The market area itself was cordoned off, and policemen and women were standing at the separate openings for "entrance" and "exit." I had to stand in line, like at the supermarket these days, waiting to be waved in. But first my face mask was inspected and my temperature was taken. "Sorry my dog isn't wearing a mask. Do you need to take her temperature too?" I asked. I think the orange-vested woman holding the distance thermometer smiled behind her mask. "No, that won't be necessary."

I asked the couple at the stand where I buy my *olive piccanti* how they had managed during their period of inactivity. "What do you think? Badly. Since we are self-employed, the government promised us € 600 a month. We received a check for March but we won't receive another one till June. What do you do with € 600? We can't cover our business expenses with that, much less live. Your government {meaning the US} moves

a lot faster than ours. Our Parliament talks and talks but nothing has happened to help us.”

“How are you going to manage now?” I wondered. Few people coming to the market, few people allowed in, the volume of business is a fraction of pre-March numbers.

“*Fra poco e niente, c’accontentiamo con poco,*” they shrugged. (Between nothing and little, we will settle for little).

At the stand where I buy my *taralli* from Puglia, the smiling woman who usually serves me was not there. Her daughter was pleasant enough and I asked about her mother. “Oh she is tired so she is resting today.” Sensing a concern in her voice, I didn’t press further.

The stand where I buy nuts and specialty breads used to be packed. Customers had to take a number and wait up to 10 minutes or more, and the Sicilian proprietor had one or two Moroccan assistants to handle the crowd. Today he was alone and one person was ahead of me. “How’s it going?” I asked. He didn’t answer but nodded around him as if to say, “You can see for yourself.”

My dog wanted to linger at the market because she loves the smells of the food stands — the *salumi* and the cheeses above all. Occasionally she will find a stray morsel and that’s reward enough for hanging around. But today the police are counting everyone who comes in and goes out. Every minute we remain within the market perimeter means the waiting line becomes

longer and more impatient. So I gave her a tug and we headed to the “exit”, where a policewoman nodded to us and lifted her phone. “*Una esce*” (someone is leaving), she announced to her counterparts at the entrance on the other side of the piazza.

“You have to call?” I was incredulous. “There is no automatic click-in, click-out system?”

She seemed bemused. “*Signora, siamo in Italia. C’arrangiamo come possiamo* (Madame. we are in Italy. We are doing what we can).”

I admired her ability to accommodate graciously to trying circumstances, but wondered if a little less acquiescence and a little more proactivity might not be an improvement over the long term.

Lakshmi may symbolize prosperity somewhere in the world, but Shiva is currently ascendant in Italy.

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