

Report from Rome by Rosanna Impiccini

No mercy killings!

A barbaric Trieste court ruling has opened the door to a national debate on euthanasia.

The scandalous sentence handed down by the Superior Court of Trieste against a woman accused of having murdered her mother, has reopened in Italy the debate on euthanasia and even worse, on the ability of any individual to "suppress" the lives of suffering persons.

The 55-year-old woman from Trieste strangled her mother with a nylon stocking and then justified this by citing the victim's "atrocious sufferings." The defendant was sentenced to only three years of house arrest, after a rarely used article of the penal code was applied, "homicide of a consenting person." The article provides that a person who brings death on another who specifically requests it, is not punishable for voluntary homicide.

Needless to say, it is hard for dead people to confirm the statements of their survivors.

Even more serious, the court ruling sets a legal precedent: For the first time a homicide is justified by "mercy." Had the Trieste judges taken the trouble to read the acts of the Nuremberg trial against Nazi doctors, they would have discovered that the same "mercy" arguments were used: "thousands of persons killed because they were suffering so much." Fortunately, at that time, no one believed in that farce.

A recent poll claimed that 46% of Italians favor euthanasia; the poll, based on a sample of 2,000 people, should be taken with a grain of salt, but it was significant that almost total opposition to euthanasia was registered in the poorest strata of society and in the over-55 age group. This

means that the potential victims have grasped the fact that euthanasia would be an *economic* solution to get rid of "useless eaters."

The Trieste case, which has twisted the word mercy into its opposite, has reopened the euthanasia issue in the press and in Parliament. A Socialist Party congresswoman reintroduced a law which would allow euthanasia, and the so-called "lay" parties have more or less lined up behind this bill. We hope that the government of Christian Democrat Ciriaco De Mita will not go down in history as the government which passed pro-euthanasia legislation.

Although Italian law punishes a doctor who brings death to a patient, it is now being reported that this is quite a common practice. Florence gynecologist Giorgio Conciani, a promoter of mass sterilizations, has stated that many Italian doctors habitually practice both active and passive euthanasia for their terminal patients. Naturally, Conciani's statement is aimed at speeding up debate on the law, by demanding juridical legitimization of an already existing situation; it could be considered the usual provocation, but it has been confirmed by many other physicians.

In mid-April in Milan, the first European Congress on Palliative Medicine was staged by the Floriani Foundation, a think tank that deals with terminally ill patients. "Palliative medicine" means that you kill the patient while giving him the illusion that he is continuing to get treatment to help him get well. Giorgio Di Mola, an anesthesiologist and vice president of the foundation, says, "For us it is a

question of offering a good death to those who have no more hope. . . . We alleviate pain. If the sick person wants to live and suffer to the end, I accept his will. If the suffering is too great for him, I put him to sleep and I keep him asleep until he dies. Passive euthanasia, sure. We guarantee that pain will be removed as much as possible. But when there is nothing more to do, we support the patient's desire."

The euthanasia troops have figured out that for now they cannot go for a showdown, but must be a bit more sophisticated. At the "palliative medicine" conference they recommended "not proposing overly audacious and brutal applications of their own theories about euthanasia because people's feelings have to be respected." The other strategy is that of limiting the opposition in the Catholic world, by using all the ambiguous movements which have infiltrated the Catholics.

A resounding reply to this game came in the Milan Catholic Archdiocese newspaper, *Avvenire*. The bishop of Termoli-Larino, Cosmo Francesco Ruppi, wrote, under the title, "The betrayal of all civilization," an article exposing euthanasia as the "legitimization of death camps and all the evils carried out in this century." Ruppi stated, "No authority can make the illicit licit . . . no one can ever legitimize euthanasia without opening up a moral fissure of incalculable importance."

At the same time, the National Retirees Federation of CISL, the Catholic labor confederation, passed a resolution against euthanasia which received very little press coverage. They denounced the refusal to take so-called "heroic measures" in treatment, and warned of the risk that instead there will be cessation of treatment and "assisted suicide."