

Penne & Ink

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Revs. Kristin and David Markay,
serving at the Chiesa Evangelica Metodista
via Porro Lambertenghi, 28
20159 Milano, Italy
email: markay@fastwebnet.it
phone: +39-02-607-2631
Congregation's English web site:
<http://www.methodistchurchofmilan.com>
(GBGM Advance Special numbers:
Kristin #12193Z. Dave #12192Z)

*"Which of these three, do you think,
was a neighbor?"*
(Luke 10:37)

Four Ghanaian men were in the car together, driving back from a night prayer-meeting at their church. As often happens in Italy, two police officers standing next to their parked squad car, waved them over. This was not a check-point for drunk drivers, but an immigration control stop. Police can ask for documents on the subway, in the bus station, in hospitals or school rooms. Some officers have been known to rip up the papers, denouncing them as fake. Others have been known to yell verbal abuse. Other such random checks have erupted in violence.

The four men became very nervous and whispered in Akan between them. Only the driver had proper immigration documents. One other was waiting for his to be processed. Another had recently been laid off from his factory job and, therefore, had lost his valid reason to stay in the country. The other was recently arrived. One *legale*, three *clandestini*.

The police officer strolled up to their car, rhythmically patting his baton on his open palm. He lowered his head and stared inside the car: "Documenti, per favore." The driver handed his "permesso di soggiorno" (permit of stay) to the officer, who studied it, jotted down some information on a small pad of paper, and handed it back.

"And the others?" he asked.

The African men looked at one another and stared blankly at the officer. The driver, not sure what to say, began to explain that the group was returning from their church.

"Wait. Which church?" asked the officer.

"The Waldensian/Methodist Church" the driver responded.

"The one not too far from here?" the officer asked.

"Yes, that is our church."

"Ah, I know it... You're OK. Move along."



Fishing by the Sea of Galilee – from this summer's *Settimana Biblica* (VBS) held at the Methodist Church of Milano.
(photo by Phyllis Martinelli)

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"A reading from Malachi 3:5... *"Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages ..."*

The tall African man standing at the microphone in the front of the Synod assembly suddenly stopped reading - - silence - -. Delegates in the hall began to crane their necks to see what had happened. Had he lost his place? Had the breeze blown a page?

The service had been organized in a hurry to protest a set of new laws which discriminate against foreigners. For the past twenty-four hours the Waldensian/Methodist press office had made contact with key newspapers and local television news networks. Computer experts had compiled a series of images of immigrants to flash on a big screen during the vigil. Several people had hand-painted posters. Archivists had gathered articles detailing injustices to be read aloud. Hundreds of people – most of them European, and most of them middle class - - had entered the church that morning for the vigil. More than one had glanced at the television cameras and adjusted a shirt collar.

Ten persons had taken their turn at the microphone, reading selected scripture verses about how to treat the alien...from Leviticus, from the Gospels, from Ephesians, etc. The liturgy was moving along as planned -- properly choreographed and well-executed. And then it was his turn. He introduced the scripture, began reading, and then stopped. After a long, uncomfortable silence, he brought his hand up to his face and rubbed his eyes. The quick inhale of a sob came through the microphone. He shook his head and walked back to his seat.

A young pastor dropped her chin to her chest. A cameraman flicked the off-switch on his video recorder. One of the organizers closed her folder, found a Bible, flipped to Malachi, walked up to the microphone, and read the rest of the verse:

"...the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not hear me, says the Lord of hosts."

And then she sat down. And in the even longer, unscheduled silence that followed, something felt turned-off, and something else turned on.

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Members of our congregation helped offer hospitality and interpretation at the annual Homeless World Cup, held this year in Milano (<http://www.homelessworldcup.org>)

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"The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?"
(I Corinthians 10:16)

The faithful formed a circle around the altar. My colleague removed the cloth from the bread and the cup.

Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him...

I was vaguely aware of something moving in front of us. We continued through the liturgy, into The Great Thanksgiving.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty...

Yes, it was something moving. It was a hand waving. I glanced up. The hand's owner, a fourteen year-old boy, smiled at me, as if satisfied to have finally caught my attention. With one hand he held up two fingers. With the other, he shielded the sign, as if to hide from others this secret exchange going on between us. Not sure whether to receive his gesture as a sign of spontaneous friendliness or a protest against the war, I continued.

And so with all your people on earth and all the company of heaven...

More waving.

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

As my colleague and I lifted the chalice and patin, and the stewards came forward to prepare to serve, the young man approached us.

"Pssst. Pastors. Could I take two pieces of bread today? One for my mother? She has to work this morning." We both nodded to him.

As we proceeded around the circle in his direction, I noticed that he was digging in his pockets for something. He retrieved a little plastic bag, the kind that holds pocket tissues.

The body of Christ, given for you.

He reached out his hand and received a piece of bread. Then he reached out and took another.

The blood of Christ, shed for you.

He dipped one piece in the chalice, then put it in his mouth. Then he touched the other piece of bread to the wine, carefully put it in the bag, and tucked it into his jeans pocket.

This afternoon, the sacrament – slightly pressed – will go by subway to the train station. It will ride the train for another half-hour, then be taken on foot the mile or so to a one-room apartment.

And tonight, after the day-shift gets out, at a small kitchen table, a weary soul will lower herself into a chair. A young celebrant will take out little plastic bag. And a holy and living sacrifice will be shared.

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Kristin and David with the newly-elected president of the Italian Methodist Church, Alessandra Trotta
(photo by Ullas Tankler, GBGM)

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Thank you for your prayers, your letters and your financial support.

Peace in Christ,

The Markay Family