

Introduction

Probably the nation that most influenced the western world, Italy has a remarkable history and culture spanning over 3,000 years. From the brilliance of Leonardo da Vinci to the romantic beauty of Michelangelo, Italy has produced many of the world's famous painters, artists, opera singers, architects and sculptors who continue to inspire millions.



History

Italy's history is rich with the cultural influences of the Etruscans, Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans, all occupying the land and establishing colonies before the time of Christ. For centuries Italy was the centre of the Roman Empire, providing the basis for the cultural development of western Europe. Italy's influence continued to be significant during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, helping to lead the way in European philosophy, science and art.

Most of the independent states of the Italian peninsula were unified under King Victor Emmanuel II of the Savoy dynasty on 17 March 1861, establishing Italy as we know it today as an independent nation-state. Rome remained under the Papacy for another nine years before becoming part of the Kingdom of Italy.

In 1922 Benito Mussolini became the fascist dictator of Italy, establishing links with Germany and later becoming an ally of the Axis Powers during the Second World War. As a result of its defeat in the war, Italy was torn apart by ideological conflicts and faced great economic and social problems. In June 1946 a referendum was held on whether to keep the monarchy and led to the establishment of Italy as a republic. In 1948 a new constitution was adopted.

Since the constitution Italy has had a fairly insecure political life, having seen several coalition

governments and frequent power changes. While the effects of such continuous changes have been to moderate extremes of policy, it has also hampered attempts to tackle serious national problems such as poverty in the south, the infiltration of the Mafia, and political corruption at all levels.

Since signing the Paris Treaty in 1951, Italy has been at the heart of European politics, becoming a charter member of NATO and the European Union and in 1999 introducing the Euro.

Current challenges

- ▶ Despite being one of the G8 nations, there is widespread poverty in the south of Italy with 20 per cent of the population being unemployed. The islands of Sicily and Sardinia are particularly poor regions.
- ▶ Italy has the lowest birth rate in Europe. It is estimated that over the next 50 years the population will fall by a third.
- ▶ Italy has been rocked in recent years by scandal and corruption. The Mafia and the Neapolitan Camorra who have considerable influence at every level of society control much of the country's wealth.

BMS involvement in Italy

In recent years (since 1993) BMS World Mission has been involved in church work in Italy – although there was BMS work as early as the 19th century. There are currently three BMS couples based in Barletta in the south, Genoa in the north, and the island of Sicily. BMS is currently involved in the following projects:

Church work in Barletta and Santeramo

BMS workers Ann and David MacFarlane are pastoring Barletta Baptist Church and are involved in regional youth work in south east Italy.

Church work in Genoa

Claire and Mark Ord are pastors of the Baptist church in Genoa and Rapallo. Mark is leading theological training for African pastors in Italy.

Church work in Sicily

Huw and Alex Anderson are involved in church ministry in Siracusa in Sicily.

Background information

The land

Located in south-central Europe, Italy is made up of a boot-shaped peninsula jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea, with two large islands, Sicily and Sardinia. France, Switzerland, Austria, Monaco and Slovenia border Italy. The country also has two enclaves (small independent countries) in its territory – San Marino and Vatican City.

Italian terrain is mostly rugged and mountainous with some plains and over 2,000 miles of coastland. The Alps are found in northern Italy. The broad Plain of Lombardy, comprising the valley of the Po River, stretches between the Alps and the Apennines.

There is a sharp division between north and south Italy. The north has a flourishing economy, with industry and farming concentrated on the Po River plain. The south is less developed, relying almost entirely on agriculture. Vineyards and tourism are a major source of income.

Religion

Though no longer the state religion, Roman Catholicism forms Italy's major denomination, with over 80 per cent of the population nominally Catholic. Most Italians will have their first communion at seven and have their children baptised but after that attendance declines. Though Italians have affection for the Church and the Pope, the Church is seen as irrelevant to modern life. Very little notice is taken of the Church's teaching on issues such as birth control, abortion and divorce.

Protestants make up about one per cent of Italians, with the Waldensian church, with whom Baptists work, being the largest. The Protestant churches are growing due mostly to the arrival of immigrants who are evangelicals.

There is a growing Muslim immigrant community (about three per cent).

The Baptist Union of Italy has 116 churches and roughly 6,400 members according to EBF 2007. The Union has had severe financial difficulties but is now able to pay their pastors and other co-ordinators.

Prayer points

- ▶ Pray for the work of the Baptist Union in Italy; that they would reach the needs of isolated Christians in remote parts of the country and would see God work through them in powerful and transforming ways.
- ▶ In an increasingly secular nation, pray for unity amongst the churches in Italy, that together they would work to see God's kingdom come.
- ▶ There has been a long history of Mafia activity in Italy. Despite numerous attempts by the government and police (who are often infiltrated themselves) to curtail their activity, all levels of Italian society remain heavily corrupted by the Mafia. Pray for God to raise up people of integrity, honesty and justice, to withstand and overcome the Mafia's control.
- ▶ Give thanks for the 'tentmaking' missionaries from all over the world who are coming to Italy looking for work and are also bringing their faith that enlivens and encourages the life and worship of Italian Baptist churches.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Keep up-to-date with BMS World Mission's work across the globe by visiting www.bmsworldmission.org

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- ▶ find out more about the resources we have to offer
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