

Politics as Usual?

by Norma Jean Bishop

The Piazza dei Cavalieri (cover photo) is one of Pisa's most beautiful piazzas and the site of the **Scuola Normale Superiore**, founded in 1810 by Napoleonic decree, where only the best and brightest are admitted to study, for example ex-president Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, physicist Enrico Fermi, and Italy's outstanding poets, Giovanni Pascoli and Giosuè Carducci (both Tuscans). Amid the current changes at the vertices of Italian government, it is heartening to know that the caretaker prime minister, Mario Monti, is strongly considering a *Normalista*, former president of the Scuola Normale (1999-2010) Salvatore Settis, for the position of Minister of Italian Culture.

Reflections about politics often lead us back to Dante, and here in Piazza dei Cavalieri is no exception. The young lady on our magazine cover seems to be gazing with some concern in the direction of the Palazzo dell'Orologio (see photo on this page). Standing next to the glorious Normale, this palace contains the Torre della Muda where, according to Dante, the infamous Count Ugolino della Gherardesca was imprisoned along with his sons and grandsons. Dante portrays Ugolino as a power-hungry *politico* at his worst. Ugolino is frozen within the deepest circle of *Inferno* because he betrayed his home, Pisa, and his political party, the Ghibellines. In Italy, where people maintain strong ties for a lifetime and more, this story's theme is never archaic. According to tradition, Ugolino cannibalized his children after Archbishop Ruggieri degli Ubaldini locked them up, leaving them to starve to death in 1289.



A plaque on the wall of the Palazzo dell'Orologio refers to the now unrecognizable original prison tower. However, scientific literalism demolished the ghastly legend in 2002. A Pisan paleoanthropologist excavated Ugolino's body and examined DNA from his ribs which showed he had not eaten meat (let alone human flesh) before dying. "Truth," however, should never get in the way of a good story.

Ugolino belonged to an important Ghibelline family in Pisa. The Ghibellines preferred the Holy Roman Emperor, while the Guelphs of Florence and Genoa preferred the Pope. Ugolino, who was both Podestà (supreme civil authority) and Ghibelline leader, created an alliance with Guelph Giovanni Visconti during Pisa's battles with the Guelph states. As punishment for his treason, Ugolino was imprisoned and Visconti exiled. The Guelphs helped Ugolino to escape, and he again betrayed his Ghibelline compatriots, returning as head of a Pisan fleet in 1284 for the war against Genoa, feigning surrender and causing Pisa's defeat. Again in power, Ugolino gave

away Pisan castles to Lucca and Florence for political expediency. As Ghibelline fortunes improved, Ugolino allied with the Ghibelline Archbishop Ruggieri, exiling his Guelph grandson in 1288 to consolidate his relationship with Ruggieri. Ruggieri then betrayed Ugolino by inciting the public against him and ordering his lifelong imprisonment, along with his sons and grandsons.

In Canto 33 of the *Inferno*, Dante has Ugolino gnawing on the Archbishop's head for all eternity, in an unholy alliance between ex-colleagues. Ugolino's image as father fares no better. He became famous as the "Cannibal Count."

For Dante, eating one's children may have served an analogical purpose, since all the events in the *Inferno* are reverse images of what happens in Paradise. The Eucharist (celebration of the Mass) becomes a horrific reverse Eucharist in the Ugolino scene. On a more mundane level, bad deeds have bad consequences, and disloyalty to one's family and community deserves to be punished.

Pisa's university may yet produce more leaders of Ciampi's stature. Italians can only hope that their future will be more noble than in the past.



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