



Roman Knows

Living in the shadow of the Vatican

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La famiglia. A concept as indigenous to Italy as vino and pasta. “The strength of the family conquers all,” says Antonio Lo Giudice with a sarcastic laugh.

Almost all. Openly HIV positive, bisexual and unemployed, the 31-year-old Lo Giudice has come face-to-face with the limits of his parents’ love. Though Lo Giudice describes his parents as “borghese ... wealthy” (his father is a prominent physician at the Vatican), their purse strings stretch only as far as food and shelter and a monthly allowance of 50,000 lira, about \$30.

This is the other side of la famiglia, and the reason for his parents’ cold shoulder is the strongest of Italian institutions, the Church. As it has for centuries, the Pope’s influence continues to shape Italian social policy, shutting Lo Giudice out from governmental assistance. In Italy, HIV only qualifies as a disability for those whose T-cell counts are less than 200. With a recent count of 274, Lo Giudice receives nothing. And work is not an option: Without la tessera sanitaria -- a health certificate -- Lo Giudice cannot get a job.

No money, no job and no way to get one. Yet despite the disappointments his azure eyes have witnessed, they remain youthful, hopeful and warm. “Siamo amici,” he shrugs. “I have become friends with my HIV.” His blue eyes are steady, and his voice soothes like the Dalai Lama’s. “If you fear, you lose the battle. Eliminate fear, and nothing can eliminate you.”

Lo Giudice refuses all pharmaceuticals. “My doctors said that without medication I would die within two years.” That was one year ago, and Lo Giudice has yet to develop any physical complications from HIV. “They call me crazy,” he smiles. “I’m not. Non sono pazzo.” So much for his doctors, but growing up in the shadow of the Vatican, how has he handled his family’s and his church’s disapproval? “I have nothing to hide. Non ho segreti. I am the only judge of myself.”

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