

Church

Italians donate less to Church, President of Italian bishops attacks government

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**Riccardo
Cascioli**



What prompted Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi, the president of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), to launch a spectacularly misguided frontal attack on the government over the eight per thousand income tax? It is difficult to imagine that Cardinal Zuppi is

unaware of the relevant legislation, not to mention what has happened in recent years with regard to the mechanism established in 1985 to ensure that citizens can directly finance the Catholic Church by allocating it a fixed portion of the eight per thousand of their taxes.

Speaking at the opening of the national conference promoted by the Central Institute for the Support of the Clergy to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Law 222, which established the eight per thousand, Zuppi said, "I express my disappointment at the government's decision to unilaterally change the purposes and methods of allocation of the eight per thousand pertaining to the state. It goes against the agreed terms of the agreement itself and distorts its logic and functioning, creating a disparity that damages both the Catholic Church and other religious denominations that have signed agreements with the state.'

In essence, Zuppi is denouncing the Meloni government for introducing amendments to Law 222/85 — also known as 'Provisions on ecclesiastical entities and assets and for the support of Catholic clergy serving in dioceses' — which favour the state in the allocation of the eight per thousand funds.

The government's reaction was immediate: the amendment to the 1985 law 'was introduced by the parliamentary majority that supported the Conte 2 government', i.e. the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Democratic Party (PD) political parties. In 2019, those who wanted to allocate the eight per thousand to the state could choose from five types of intervention: combatting world hunger, providing natural disaster relief, assisting refugees, preserving cultural heritage and renovating school buildings. In 2024, the Meloni government simply added a sixth option: 'recovery from drug addiction and other pathological addictions'.

Therefore, Zuppi's criticism appears misdirected and unfounded, as the state merely declares the areas in which these funds will be allocated, providing taxpayers with the opportunity to choose. It is highly doubtful that this will significantly increase the number of signatures for the state.

Therefore, unless Cardinal Zuppi is considered naive, it is legitimate to ask what the real reason for this attack is.

To properly understand the issue, it is important to remember that the 1985 law was intended to regulate the legal recognition of ecclesiastical entities and property, as well as the means of supporting the clergy. Until then, this had been guaranteed by the *congrua* — the minimum income guaranteed to priests by the state. Under the new

system, taxpayers could decide whether to allocate a fraction of their tax revenue to the Catholic Church or the state for the care of cultural heritage by ticking a box on their tax return.

As far as the Church is concerned, Article 48 of the law stipulates that eight per thousand funds must be used 'for the religious needs of the population, the support of the clergy, and charitable works in favour of the national community or Third World countries'.

This model of agreement has since been extended to other religious denominations, meaning that today, taxpayers can choose from 12 beneficiaries (including the Catholic Church and the Italian state, which together receive over 90% of the funding).

The mechanism's key innovation is that the eight per thousand share of citizens who did not express a preference is divided between the Church and the State in proportion to the votes received.

However, it is precisely this system of redistribution that is highly contested by those who would like to see the Church's presence in Italy eliminated. It is this pressure to change the distribution mechanism that is of great concern to the CEI. The reason is simple: only slightly more than 40% of taxpayers sign one of the 12 boxes on the eight per thousand form. This means that 60% of the eight per thousand revenue is redistributed based on signatures from the remaining 40%.

In monetary terms, this means that of the 1.32 billion total eight per thousand revenue in 2023 (based on the latest available data), only 400 million is the direct result of taxpayers' choices; the remaining 600 million comes from the redistribution of the approximately 800 million without signatures.

Therefore, the eight per thousand that comes directly from taxpayers' choices would barely cover the clergy's living expenses (€403 million in 2023). Meanwhile, €352 million has been allocated for worship and pastoral work in 2023, and €243 million for charitable works.

Given this, it is easy to see what is at stake. When Cardinal Zuppi says that 'we are interested in the poor, not money', he is lying. The truth is that if the distribution mechanism fails, the Italian Church risks bankruptcy.

While the government has never questioned this, the left has repeatedly contested the 'coercive' allocation of the eight per thousand. The Radicals, for example, have always referred to it as a 'scam law' and have campaigned for its abolition.

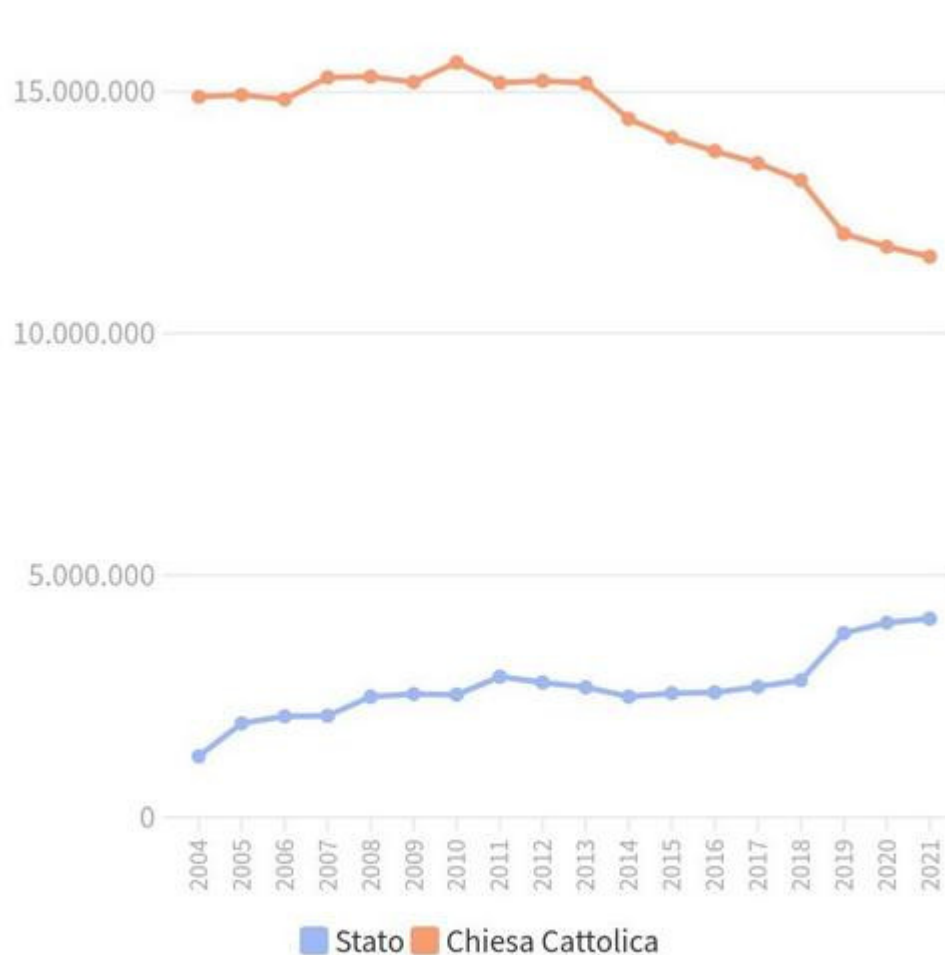
Cardinal Zuppi may therefore have wanted to pre-empt attacks on the redistribution

mechanism while seeking political support to save the current eight per thousand regime.

However, the words of the CEI president betray a certain nervousness because, in recent years, more and more Catholics have withdrawn their support for the Catholic Church. The reasons for this are obvious: the CEI has now become a collateral organisation of the Democratic Party, which staunchly supports and finances illegal immigration. With its daily newspaper, *Avvenire*, the CEI sides in favour of gay unions, gender culture, and adoption for homosexual couples. This cannot but provoke a reaction of rejection from many ordinary Catholics.

The numbers tell a clear story, just look at this graph:

Fig 1 - Ripartizione delle scelte espresse dai contribuenti dell'otto per mille dell'IRPEF (euro, 2004-2021)



Fonte: [Dipartimento delle Finanze](#)

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From 2013 to 2021, the number of Italians signing up to the Catholic Church declined

sharply: from over 15 million in 2013 to less than 12 million in 2021 — a real collapse that has certainly continued in the following years. The decline would be even greater if the mechanism for recovering unallocated funds did not render abstaining from signing almost pointless.

Cardinal Zuppi and the entire CEI would therefore be wise to reflect on this silent protest by the faithful instead of amplifying it politically.