

# Death comes for the archbishop, the St Tropez blues and beware Berlusconi

The death of Cardinal Martini, formerly the archbishop of Milan, has deprived the Catholic Church of its foremost intellect and leading moderniser. He would have made a great pope but suffered three disadvantages: he was a Jesuit, always cause for suspicion to Vatican plodders; he was an Italian at a time when the consensus was that the Church needed to shake off the impression that the papacy was Italy's by right; and he showed early signs of the wasting disease that finally killed him.

None of this should have deterred an institution that over the centuries has been broad-minded enough to elect a British and (probably mythically) a female pope.

## De profundis

Cardinal Martini's final interview, in which he described the Church as being two centuries behind the times in its social attitudes, should reverberate beyond his tomb and encourage radical rethinking in the Vatican, particularly about contraception and women priests, if the Catholic Church's relevance in the modern world is to be assured.

For my part, I am heading for Milan to pray at his tomb in the company of countless thousands of others. I hope his death will convey a message to the powers that be in the Church. To me, he left a very simple message – that you can have a deep faith but that you can be religiously lay. Let's hope his boldness will not be lost in the bog of Vatican bureaucracy.

## Much ado about il Papa

One of my favourite pope stories, told by a Vatican friend, is about the day when the pope summoned the cardinals to his private quarters high above St Peter's Square. While they were milling around, one of them looked out of the window and, to his astonishment, saw Jesus Christ coming up the steps of St Peter's.

He summoned the other cardinals to look while they decided what to do. Confirming that it was indeed Jesus Christ, they rushed in panic to tell the pope and ask his advice. "Look busy," was the terse reply. Another message there for Vatican bureaucrats.

## Future looks laborious

Italy's non-political prime minister, Mario Monti, and his cabinet of technocrats have been

grappling with the country's economic problems – which are serious but in fact no worse than the UK's – with some modest success. And with another able Italian, Mario Draghi, as president of the European Central Bank, who is determined to give the Mediterranean countries the chance to restore growth, the outlook is improving a bit.

The worst problem that Monti has yet to tackle is that of Italy's absurd labour laws, which give exaggerated protections to those who have jobs and make it harder than ever for new entrants to obtain them. The sufferers are the young and a very sad feature of modern Italy is the drain of talented young Italians to other countries as they despair of ever changing the system.

## Springtime for Florence – and Italy?

The blackest cloud on the horizon is formed by Italy's antediluvian political class, which is already beginning to salivate over its return to power when Monti has to stand down in the middle of next year. They seem to have learned nothing from past failures. The same old folk are manoeuvring to get their hands back on the privileges and spoils of power.

Even Silvio Berlusconi seems to think he still has a chance, though I have not found anyone except the man himself who takes the idea seriously. Younger talents, such as Matteo Renzi,

the bright young socialist mayor of Florence, are being elbowed off the pitch by the old guard. Meanwhile, the Italian parliament refuses to make any reduction to its scandalously generous privileges and pay, even though it costs more than the British and French parliaments combined.

At least the Middle East has had its Arab spring, bringing in new faces and new policies. What wouldn't we give for an Italian spring!

## Gold standard

London's successful Olympics and Paralympics have given all of us who hold British passports a sense of pride. We are walking tall. But we mustn't kid ourselves that other countries have been as impressed with us as we are with ourselves. And the test will be the use to which we put our renewed self-confidence.

In my experience, foreigners envy London its life as the most creative and attractive in Europe, but contrast it with the sense of renewed economic decline. Let's see a bit of Olympic spirit in our export performance and in the City of London, so that we get back among the medals in other parts of our national life, too.

## Mais adieu, jeunesse dorée...

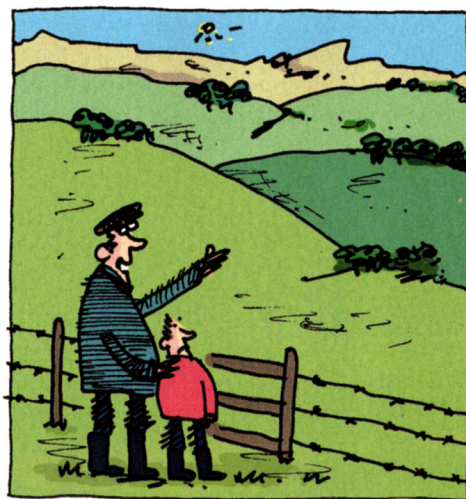
Back in St Tropez for the first time in many years, I find it sobering to think that names such as Brigitte Bardot and Roger Vadim don't mean anything to people under 50.

At least Club Cinquante-Cinq is still flourishing, and there are enough Jean-Paul Belmondo lookalikes to raise even a grandmother's heart rate. But the town seems to have lost some of its elan and naughtiness as the yachts have become ever more mega and the restaurants more notable for their astronomic prices (though it still boasts Europe's best street market in the Place des Lices).

The mood here is part of the general gloom that is affecting the French as much as anyone else and President Hollande's 75 per cent tax rate won't do anything to alleviate it. All the same, it's hard, as I approach 70, to think that the ultimate cool destination of my youth will soon be viewed like the Dolomite spas favoured by the Hapsburgs and other relics of the once-upon-a-time high life. ●

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## GRIZELDA



"One day, son, all this will be dead badgers"