ITALY

A NEW ORDER

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Benjamin Harnwell encounters the protest march from Collepardo to the monastery.

Sovereignism's new academy in an ancient Carthusian abbey

The latest front in the war on Europe declared by Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's former campaign strategist, can be found in a place of worship. The Trisulti Charterhouse, a former Carthusian monastery founded in 1204 in the heart of central Italy is situated in the mountains near the town of Collepardo, in the province of Frosinone. This monument of inestimable artistic and historical value is today the theatre of a clash between, on one hand, sovereignist forces and religious foundations hostile to Pope Francis, and on the other, citizens' associations and political currents concerned about what might be taking place at the monastery.

It all began in 2017 when the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, which is the owner of the Charterhouse, decided to hold a public tender offering a 19-year lease on the property. The successful bid came from the Dignitatis Humanae Institute (DHI) Foundation, which was willing to pay an annual rent of 100 thousand euros, with each euro spent on maintenance to be deducted from the yearly sum. The President of the Foundation is Benjamin Harnwell, previously a conservative parliamentary assistant who has now reinvented himself as a promoter of sovereignist ideas and an opponent of the work of the current Pope.

Religious paintings in a room of the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Collepardo (Frosinone). Internal view of the Trisulti Charterhouse.

The DHI project has turned out, however, to be a manifestation of Steve Bannon's more wide-ranging and structured plan to influence European institutions by supporting sovereignist movements and the spread of nationalism in Italy and other EU countries. The purpose of the partnership between Harnwell and Bannon is to use the Trisulti Charterhouse as the headquarters of a sovereignist political academy financed by Bannon and various anonymous donors.

In the words of the former Trump strategist, the monastery will become the headquarters of "a gladiator school, the key to which is to shape agents of change," therefore an Italian manifestation of the think-tank The Movement that aims to produce the Salvinis and Orbans of the future. The project also has the full support of the United States cardinal Raymond Burke, one of the most prominent opponents of Pope Francis. Nevertheless, the future of the project does not appear to be without obstacles.

The Trisulti issue, in addition to having shown up on the radar of the current Minister of Cultural Heritage (the lease agreement was adjudicated under the previous government), has also raised concern among many local associations, which have carried our vigorous protests and launched actions to verify that the correct procedures were followed in awarding the concession, and by numerous political exponents from the opposition, who have been raising the issue in parliament and with the Ministry. Meanwhile at the "gladiator school" they are preparing to sharpen their swords.

In May 2019, the Italian Ministry of Culture officially started the procedure to revoke the concession of the Certosa di Trisulti to DHI. However, a year later, on May 27, 2020, the Latium Regional High Court has rejected the Ministry's instance and DHI will thus be able to carry on with its program in the monastery.

Steve Bannon at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

A painting in the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Collepardo (Frosinone), the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Benjamin Harnwell during a visit at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Steve Bannon.

Furnishings and holy images in a room at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

The ancient pharmacy at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Benjamin Harnwell in the bedroom at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Collepardo (Frosinone), Trisulti Charterhouse. Internal view of the church of San Bartolomeo.

Steve Bannon at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Daniela Bianchi and Marco Maddalena at the protest
march from Collepardo to the Trisulti monastery.

The town square in Collepardo (Frosinone).

Benjamin Harnwell in the garden at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Steve Bannon at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Internal view of the Trisulti Chartehouse.

A piece of furniture in the ancient pharmacy of the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Collepardo (Frosinone). Aerial view of the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Benjamin Harnwell in the study.

The study at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Internal view of the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Protest march from Collepardo to the Trisulti monastery.

Steve Bannon at the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Internal view of the Trisulti Charterhouse.

In the garden of the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Trisulti Charterhouse. Benjamin Harnwell inside the church of San Bartolomeo.

Protest march from Collepardo to the Trisulti monastery.

Collepardo (Frosinone), the garden at the Trisuilti Charterhouse.

A banner at a protest demonstration.

Internal view of the Trisulti Charterhouse.

Steve Bannon at the Charterhouse.