

US anti-abortion leaders join Rome's March for Life

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) American anti-abortion leaders will be in Rome on Sunday (May 12) to participate in Italy's third March for Life and lend their expertise to the nation's small anti-abortion movement as it tries to learn from its American counterpart.

Jeanne Monahan, president of the March for Life Education and Defense Fund, and Lila Rose of Live Action will be among those who will march through central Rome on Sunday morning, from the Colosseum up to Castel Sant'Angelo, a few hundred meters from the Vatican.

While the annual March for Life in Washington — which celebrated its 40th anniversary in January — attracts hundreds of thousands of people and heavy media coverage, in Europe anti-abortion movements have often kept a lower profile and haven't been able to shape social discourse as in the United States.

Polls regularly show high levels of support for abortion rights throughout Europe. A January poll by Eurispes found that 64 percent of Italians favor legalizing abortion pills.

In Italy, abortion is currently legal in hospitals up to the third month of pregnancy.

Last year, Italy's March for Life was held for the first time in Rome. In 2011, the very first march wended through the small northern town of Desenzano del Garda.

Around 15,000 people took part in the 2012 March, according to organizers who predict significantly larger attendance this year.

The president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, praised the initiative in a letter.

The march is a way of “reawakening consciences” and “mobilizing men of good will” against abortion, he wrote.

Italy’s March for Life is part of a wider movement that has seen European anti-abortion movements become bolder in recent years.

In 2012, anti-abortion groups from 20 different countries launched a petition asking the European Parliament to recognize that life begins at conception. They aim to collect 1 million signatures from each of at least seven of the 27 countries of the European Union by November.

In an interview with Religion News Service, Monahan said that while some of what makes the March for Life successful in the U.S. can be exported to Italy, “each culture is unique,” and this must be taken into account when trying to replicate the American model overseas.

Monahan, who will be honored by the organizers of Rome’s rally, said that what the American experience can teach Italy’s and Europe’s anti-abortion movements is “getting the grass roots together” to “put a little bit of bully pressure on our legislators.”

“We can do something through our legislators and really feel results; it really makes the difference,” she said.

For Virginia Coda Nunziante, chief organizer of Italy’s March for Life, the idea for an Italian rally came from her several years of participation in the Washington march.

“We saw how it really mattered for (American) civil society, and we decided to try to fill this void,” she said.

Coda Nunziante said Italy’s anti-abortion movements want to learn from their American counterparts’ success in “creating a culture of life, mobilizing youth and getting across to the wider public that abortion really kills innocents.”

But she acknowledges that funding for Italy’s march falls far short of that for the American anti-abortion movement.

“We have been able to get some politicians on board. We want to pressure politicians, because they are the ones who change the law,” she said.

For Monahan, American and European anti-abortion movements “can help each other and learn.”

Her main advice for the organizers of Italy’s March is to avoid trying to “twist people’s arms” in getting their messages across: “We don’t have to manipulate people or convince them. Truth is very attractive and our role is only to bring it into the light.”