A word more usually associated with the liturgical is indissolubly linked to bread in Italy, and of inestimable value is the place that bread holds deep in the soul of the Italians.

The story is a long one and – “O Tempora, O Mores!” – times do change but, despite the insidious infiltration of an aesthetic equating thinness with beauty, the encroachment of protein-biased diets and the faddish battle waged against the umbrella term carbohydrates, bread continues to be the first thing that is brought to the client in every restaurant or trattoria all over the country. All menus will state the restaurant’s service price which is called “pane e coperto”, meaning “bread and table setting”. It is taken for granted that you shall eat bread, there is no need for the client to ask for it. People working in restaurants may now be getting somewhat inured to the vexation that is a tourist ordering a cappuccino at the end of a meal (to an Italian, that would be the equivalent of someone ordering a bowl of cereal at the end of a copious meal) but will understand if a client is inclined to ask for some olive oil to accompany the bread on the table. Though not an Italian custom as such, it makes sense. And a waiter will of course understand if you want to order more bread. Bread accompanies the whole meal, from start to finish until dessert, and is not served only at the beginning as in bread-and-butter eating countries.

Apart from those idiosyncratic individuals who like to concoct their own nutrition régimes, in Italy there can be no weight watching diet without the daily inclusion of at least 100g of bread. The deluge of allergy driven syndromes is most likely as statistically significant among Italians as it is elsewhere but Italy has become a leading country in the sale of gluten-free foods, with an ever increasing number of shops and supermarkets reserving a shelf for those poor unfortunates who cannot eat their daily bread the normal way.

“Give us this day our daily bread” quoth the Lord’s prayer. In Italy one does not earn one’s bacon, one earns one’s bread: “guadagnarsi il pane” and, if you’re really not earning very much at all, then you are earning just enough to get by on a little piece of crust: “guadagnarsi la stozza”. The Italian equivalent of Murphy’s law states that God gives teeth to those who don’t have bread, and gives bread to those who don’t have teeth with which to eat it. If you are blessed with a good nature, then you are as “good as bread”, what can be saintlier than bread?. If you are not cut out for a particular job, on the other hand, then that job is just “not the kind of bread suitable for your teeth.” If you tend to be tight-fisted, then you will most certainly be known to “measure your bread”. Shall I carry on? If you “eat bread by betrayal” it means that you are earning money without having worked to earn it. But again, if you “remove the bread from your mouth”, it means that you are a self-sacrificing person who would do anything for a loved one (i.e. including giving a loved one your share of bread).

Bread is taken very seriously in Italy. It is eaten daily. It is eaten fresh – ergo it has to be bought every day, a concept that can unnerve the more northern European or American expats who come and live in Italy and are used to buying their bread as part of their weekly supermarket shop. Bread eating may be part of their culture, but buying fresh bread every day is not. In Italy, bread is literally, and not metaphorically, the bread of life – and life is, by definition, “fresh.”