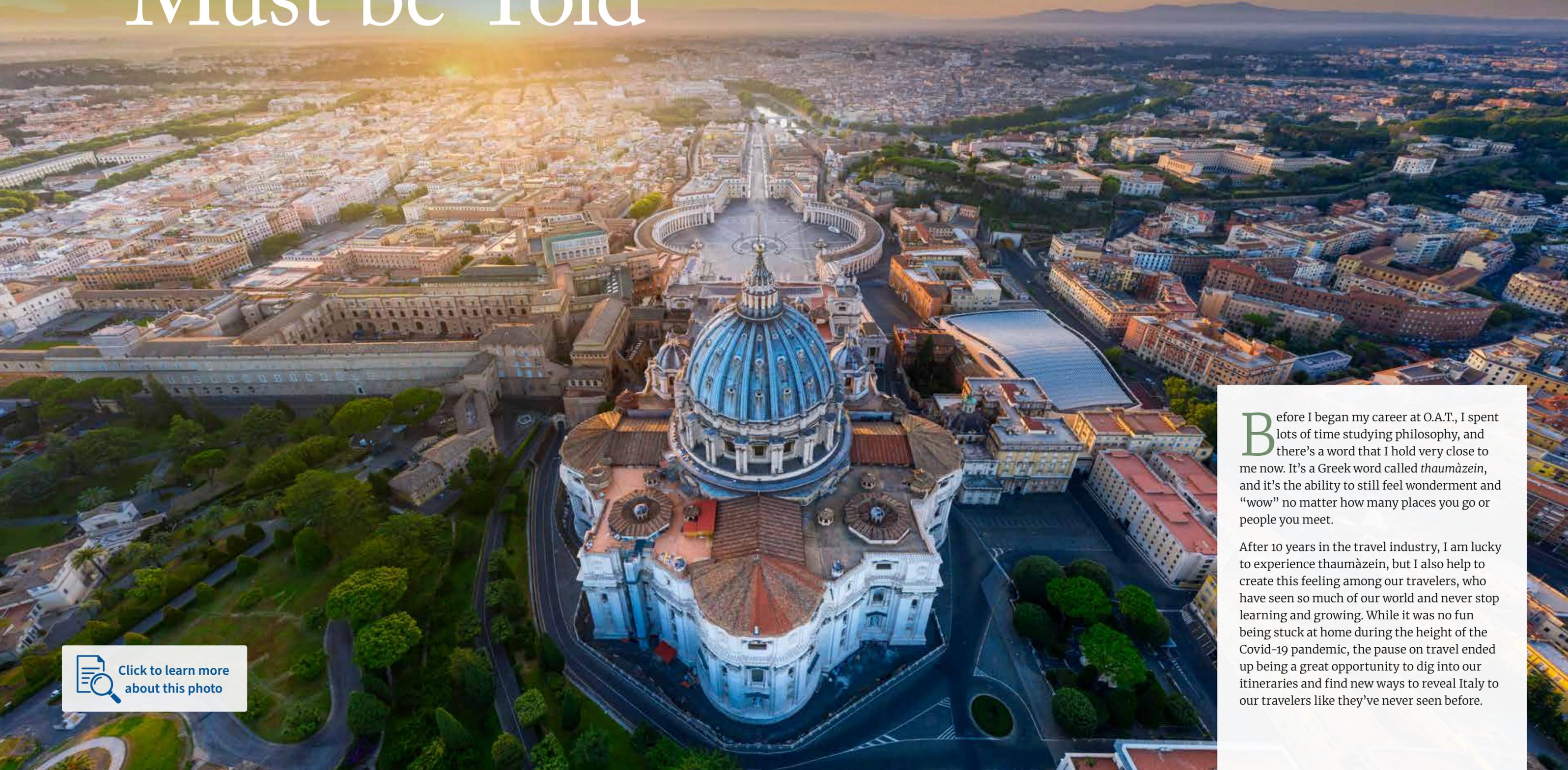


A Story that Must be Told

In Italy, one very Controversial Topic connects
travelers with the truth

By Simona Salvatori, Senior Vice President of Italy, Overseas Adventure Travel



Before I began my career at O.A.T., I spent lots of time studying philosophy, and there's a word that I hold very close to me now. It's a Greek word called *thaumàzein*, and it's the ability to still feel wonderment and "wow" no matter how many places you go or people you meet.

After 10 years in the travel industry, I am lucky to experience *thaumàzein*, but I also help to create this feeling among our travelers, who have seen so much of our world and never stop learning and growing. While it was no fun being stuck at home during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the pause on travel ended up being a great opportunity to dig into our itineraries and find new ways to reveal Italy to our travelers like they've never seen before.

 [Click to learn more
about this photo](#)



Hear a video message from Simona Salvatori, Senior Vice President, Italy, about this story.

Watch video

Smart Travels with Rudy Maxa: Rome



Explore Rome, including a visit to Vatican City with travel journalist Rudy Maxa.

Watch film

Right: Francesco Zanardi stands with a portrait of himself at the age of his abuse along with his message to the Catholic Church.

At the time, our country manager, Francesca Russo, and I were working from home, and one of our projects was perfecting the four Pillars of Discovery. The Pillars, consisting of Controversial Topics, Home-Hosted experiences, a *Day in the Life*, and the Grand Circle Foundation, are the enriching people-to-people encounters that form the heart and soul of every O.A.T. adventure. Italy is filled with so much beauty, but we also have our challenges and to gloss over them would not do justice to the stories that should be told.

In Rome, we had a Controversial Topic discussion on immigration that we thought could be improved. We needed a topic that went deeper—something that Italians absolutely did not want to talk about. As Francesca and I bounced ideas around during a virtual happy hour, we thought about the many issues that plague Rome. That’s when Francesca suggested, “what about the priests?”

The Catholic Church has faced thousands of child sexual abuse allegations around the world, but in Italy, it is particularly bad due to

the presence of the Vatican. Priests who are accused of abuse are shuffled from one church to the next, and it’s nearly impossible for survivors to get justice of any kind. Talking about it is incredibly taboo, too—many conservative Italians choose to turn a blind eye.

Once we decided on this topic, our search began to find someone who would be willing to talk with travelers about this issue. We called anyone we knew who worked for associations connected with the church but had little luck. A search on the web brought up *Rete L’abuso* (the Network of the Abused)—the only Italian network of survivors of clergy abuse. We found the phone number of the president of the organization, a man named Francesco Zanardi, and decided to give him a call.

A survivor himself, Francesco was very reluctant to speak with us at first. We explained to him our goal of bringing meaningful conversations to American travelers who wanted to learn the good, the bad, and the ugly of Italy. It took nearly a month of building trust, but we finally got



Left: Simona breaks bread with travelers in Italy.

“A survivor himself, Francesco was very reluctant to speak with us at first. We explained to him our goal of bringing meaningful conversations to American travelers who wanted to learn the good, the bad, and the ugly of Italy.”

somewhere. On the phone, he shared his story of how he was sexually abused by a priest at just 11 years old and the trauma he still endures to this day. It was very emotional to hear.

So many Italians do not want to accept or believe that abuse really occurs within the institution that is at the center of their lives. Because most of the accused priests are moved from city to city, Francesco’s organization keeps track of where they are. There are more than 350 denounced priests on the map. Talking with Francesco drove home our goal of connecting travelers with the truth and giving a voice to those who have not been heard before. When he agreed to work with us, we set up his Controversial Topic discussion in an art studio where he could feel comfortable sharing his story and answering questions.

Whether it’s through a Controversial Topic discussion or during a Home-Hosted meal, we want to give the people of our country the opportunity to speak about themselves and share their lives. We even encourage Trip

Experience Leaders to be as open and honest as possible on the good and bad of Italy. This may seem unusual for a travel company, but I believe so much magic happens when we connect travelers with authentic people and their stories.

Editor’s Note:

After more than 14 months, we finally began resuming departures in Italy, and the first travelers on Italian Coastal Odyssey: Hidden Italy, Sicily & Malta had the opportunity to hear Francesco Zanardi’s heartbreaking story in person. Joining them was journalist Stefano Pitrelli of The Washington Post who covered O.A.T.’s Controversial Topics and the evolving travel industry in the following article.

Italy’s Western Coast, Sicily, and Malta



Experience this adventure through the lens of Roger Gee, 13-time traveler from San Diego, CA.

Watch slideshow