



Christmas Celebration & the Italian Community in Chicago

Sigrid Lupieri (December 29, 2007)



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Small beads of sweat glistened on the soldiers' foreheads in the opaque light of the nave. The light seemed to drip from the windows and evaporate in the humid air of Vietnam. The silence within the church enveloped the spectators as Dr. Di Nello positioned the painted figures. His expression of grim concentration finally relaxed as he admired his first crèche in the Cathedral of Notre Dame of Saigon on Christmas 1968.

Almost forty years later Dr. Di Nello still vividly remembers that Christmas Day in Vietnam, though his interest in collecting nativity scenes actually dates back to his childhood. Like many others from the Italian-American community in Chicago, his memories of the importance of crèches and their central role in the celebration of Christmas are closely tied to the traditions of his native town in Italy. Before the introduction of the Lutheran and Germanic Christmas trees in the 1950s, the small chalk or clay figures were set up in every house to commemorate the birth of Christ. In most cases the miniatures also included different characters that depicted the every day work of the inhabitants of the specific geographic area. Today Dr. Di Nello's nativity scene collection includes five works sculpted by different artists, one of which is on display at the Museum of Science and Industry until January 6. This medium sized crèche consists of figures made of wood and carved in Valgardena by the artist Ulrich Bernardi.

The Christmas celebration within the Italian community also includes other events such as the "Christmas Around the World" exhibit, which displays over fifty Christmas trees decorated by the different ethnic communities of Chicago at the Museum of Science and Industry. Following the paths in this forest of pine trees, visitors encounter trees from Romania, Finland, France, and even the somewhat improbable decorations of an African Christmas tree, before reaching the Italian evergreen. In order to dispel any doubts regarding its nationality, the tree is not only shrouded in Italian tri-colored banners, it is also loaded with panettoni, soccer balls, and green plastic grapes. The writing on a large red stocking wishes all passersby a Buon Natale (Merry Christmas).

On December 24, many Italian-American families in Chicago also follow the tradition of the "Feast of the Seven Fishes." According to the community, this is a typical Italian custom which consists of a dinner where seven different types of fish are served. Some of these dishes include fish antipasto, fish soup, pasta with fish, and roasted eel though the menu can vary considerably. It is



interesting to note that, although this tradition is well established in Chicago, as a resident in Italy I had personally never heard of it. Among friends and relatives in northern Italy I could not find a single person who knew of the “Feast of the Seven Fishes.” And even among my Sicilian acquaintances, I was unable to uncover any trace of this custom. It thus appears to be a tradition which has been mostly abandoned in modern Italy, but as often happens, continues to survive within the immigrant communities in the United States.

Other celebrations include mass in Italian held at the Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii, the oldest Italian church in Chicago. On January 6, the arrival of La Befana, a wrinkled old woman dressed in tattered garments, is also commemorated in the same venue. Even in this case, several differences from traditions in Italy can be observed. In the American version the figure of La Befana is surrounded by a series of legends that have become quite rare in Italy. These tragic myths connect the pagan origins of the tradition of the old woman to the religious dimension of the Epiphany. The legends of La Befana mostly tell the story of an old woman who, instead of following the Three Magi to Bethlehem decides to stay home because she is too busy. She soon realizes that she has missed a great event and immediately attempts to find Baby Jesus on her own. However, her efforts are in vain, for she loses her way and is destined to wander the earth. One of the American versions offers an even more dramatic and detailed account, in that La Befana is in reality a mother who lost her baby during the “Massacre of the Innocents” perpetrated by King Herod. The bereaved mother cannot accept her son’s death so she packs his belongings in a big sack and sets out to search for him. During her travels she meets Baby Jesus and offers him the sack with her child’s belongings. Jesus then rewards her by allowing her to return to earth on one night every year for eternity.

Other Christmas festivities celebrated within the Italian community of Chicago mirror Italy’s regional traditions and, with the passing of time, they tend to acquire a universal dimension. For example, the “Feast of the Seven Fishes” is most probably a southern tradition, limited to a specific geographic area, which is now representative of Italian-American celebrations of Christmas Eve. These regional customs are thus kept alive by the immigrant families in the United States.

In a country where wishing someone a Merry Christmas has become politically incorrect, the typically Italian tradition of the crèche appears to be on the wane. Dr. Di Nello in fact laments the increasing secularization of religious icons, such as the depiction of the birth of Christ. Perhaps this is why the collector, who emigrated from Italy when he was sixteen, has pursued his passion for nativity scenes and after over sixty years in the United States, he maintains Italian traditions within his family. And even today, after many years of marriage, he adds with a smile, he is still trying to Italianize his Canadian wife, from a gastronomic point of view.

(Edited by Giulia Prestia)

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