

Columbus Day Parade: An Italian Day?

Simona Zecchi (October 14, 2009)

Walking around the Columbus Day Parade while listening to People's Points of View

Autumn was already at hand when the parade at Fifth Avenue started.

NYPD barricaded the streets from 44th up to 60th along Fifth Avenue to protect all the Italian and Italian-American associations, groups, clubs and high schools parading in the celebration of Christopher Columbus Day on October 12th.

Among the various organizations participating in the parade, there was the Sicilian delegation A.N.F.E. (Associazione Nazionale Famiglie Emigrate), also here for a series of symposiums and conferences related to Sicily and legal issues mostly regarding the Mafia.

The Italian minister of Defense, Ignazio La Russa, was among the special guests of the parade led by Grand Marshall Kenneth G. Langone, co-founder of the "Home Depot" .

He answered some questions from the various media present and confirmed the will to maintain the Italian presence in the annual event, notwithstanding the controversies on the meaning and righteousness of it. "In fact", Minister La Russa declared, "this celebration unites Americans and Italian Americans the like, even though it is important to take into consideration other forms of celebrating this day according to the changing of times."

Italian and American politicians enjoyed the parade too, i.e. Michael Bloomberg, Gov. David Paterson, and the General Attorney Andrew Cuomo. Whereas on the Italian side, besides from Ignazio La Russa, also attending were Senator Mirko Tremaglia, the Governor of the Campania Region, Antonio Bassolino and the Director of the Italian Trade Commission Aniello Musella.

The various people we interviewed during the parade, families, groups, Italian tourists, Italian American citizens and American citizens, shared some common views on the meaning of the celebration, i.e. to maintain the unity of the Italian American community and make new generations proud of their Italian heritage.

Among them, Jocelyn, 35, an elementary school teacher, fourth generation Italian-American, told us how her whole family (even the one from Italy) reunites every year for the celebration, taking the chance to visit New York as well. She also explained us that for many Catholic people this celebration has a double meaning since, in her opinion, Catholicism was brought to the United States thanks to Christopher Columbus.

She understands the reasons why the late controversies on the historical meaning of the parade have shed clouds on it. "Anyway", she said, "many Italian-Americans feel attached to it as a natural continuum to their origins."



Paolo, 27 year of age, member of the “Club Circolo Italiano”, the oldest language club of NYU, likes participating to the parade with his club and is especially proud of his origins on this occasion!

Whereas, Concetta, 50 years old, who migrated to the Unites States 41 years ago together with her family, looks at the celebration as a fundamental opportunity for both her and the Italian Community in New York to safeguard traditions and ethnical identity: “I’d never give it up, no matter what the latest controversies want to highlight”.

However, not everybody likes the parade. The most critic were the Italians who stopped by while touring around the city. Carla, 45, told us that “this kind of celebrations does not help raising the image of Italians in America. The costumes used, the decorations of the carriage, the music played...they represent an Italy that does not exist anymore, or that has never existed. Many interesting comments came also from our I-italy readers. Monica, as an example, said that “there is nothing to celebrate about Columbus Day.” “Correspondence archives reveal Columbus as a treacherous man who for his own profit encouraged the Spanish crown to exploit the Americas and its inhabitants as subhuman beings...As descendants, we need to think of a more just name for this day, from a balanced and realistic perspective.”

Of course, Monica’s point of view probably reflects her level of education and willingness to reflect upon history in a critical way but it's still a different point of view that must be taken into consideration. However, we must say, her opinion clearly stands out from those of most of the people who attended the parade waving the Italian flag, and the greatest part of them were Italian-Americans or Americans...fondly in love with Italy.

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