Duty calls!

Anthony Julian Tamburri (September 29, 2010)





We simply can no longer sit back and react with a “tsk tsk,” a “Mamma Mia,” or a shake of the head and then go about our own business, when some of our co-ethnics contribute to negative imagery of Italians and Italian Americans.

I sent our a brief informative notice as a message “From the Dean’s Desk” of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, which is by nature, and shall remain, a politically independent and bipartisan entity. As I wrote then, when ethnic slurs are thrown about, and especially within a gubernatorial campaign, it is the duty of all of us to bring such derogatory language to the attention of members and friends of the Italian-American community. It does not matter how indirect they may seem, they are detrimental to the overall image of Italian Americans. Indeed, I would submit that such journalistic and non-fictional references are in fact more damaging than any fictional representation may be, though these too have their deleterious effect. I had, in fact, blogged about this a few years back with regard to a journalist [2].

That said, I thought it most propitious that in Sunday's (26 September 2010) New York Times, in its special section celebrating its Op. Ed.'s fortieth anniversary, two inclusions from years past are so a propos to the issue at hand. In discussing "gossip and speculation" about stars, Frank Sinatra stated in 1972: "...it is complicated in my case because my name ends in a vowel. There is a form of bigotry abroad in this land that allows otherwise decent people, including many liberals, to believe the most scurrilous tales if they are connected to an Italian-American name." In fact, with regard to the difference between fiction and reality, Sinatra closed with most acute remarks [3]: "But it is one thing to watch a fantasy on a movie screen. It is quite another when the fantasies are projected on real, live human beings, because it doesn't say 'the end' when they are finished. Those human beings have to go on living with their friends, family and business associates in the real world,"

Such references to certain aspects of our Italian culture and/or behavioral patterns in an unflattering manner will certainly continue, as it comes in all forms. It can be the "joke" that some ignorantly insensitive non-Italian will make by asking if you "are connected" or if you know "anyone in the Mafia." It can also be that not-so-funny question, "How did the day go?" It can, yet still, appear in unexpected places, such as in the very mouths of some of our own public officials, as we have witnessed in the past—the one who bragged about being "John Gotti's assemblyman [4]," for instance; or the other who used imagery that aped The Godfather in order to advertise one of his campaign dinners [5].

More recently, in "City Hall," an on-line municipal publication that also shares some of its articles with "State Senate Watch," a statewide publication, we found the following paragraph [6]:

"They [the Carl Paladino campaign] will keep slinging mud. They will keep bringing up the Democratic nominee's father. They will keep pushing and needling him for not running an active enough campaign, complete with sly Italian references and whatever else they can cook up under the belief that they are getting under Cuomo's skin, convinced that they can make the candidate his own worst enemy" (my emphasis).

It is precisely the expression “sly Italian references” that is troubling; the very use of the adjective “Italian” in this phrase conjures up images of unsavory behavior attributed to, obviously, Italians and Italian Americans. Some questions that come to mind include: Why would one insert an adjective that refers to a candidate’s ethnic and cultural heritage, if not to make the reader think of his heritage in unsavory terms? Have we not had too much of this already with regard to Italians in the United States?

Does it matter that in this case the candidates are of Italian origin? Indeed, it is this very fact that should make them and others more sensitive to the issue of stereotyping. Here, be it the Paladino campaign or the author of the article (Edward-Isaac Dovere) as the phrase’s point of origin, Italians are not well served. (By the way, “dovere” is the infinitive in Italian for the modal verb “to have to do something” or for the noun “duty.” Ironic? Indeed!) We expect better, and we should demand better. Let us hope that all of the candidates in this race run a clean and, equally important, stereotype-free campaign, especially when it comes to one’s ethnic and cultural heritage.

The second op. ed. included in the Times’s anniversary Op. Ed. section was penned by then Mayor Ed Koch in 1987, following the Howard Beach tragedy. In that piece Koch first wrote [7]: “…we must restate certain truths about the evil of racism, the need for racial tolerance and the importance of the fight against discrimination. But we will not advance racial understanding unless we also attempt to come to grips with the fear of crime in general and white fear of black crime in particular. // How do we acknowledge understandable fear of crime while condemning inexcusable and intolerable racial stereotyping?” The expressions “racial understanding” and “come to grips” underscore the necessity for us as a community of human beings to become better informed, more greatly aware of the intricacies and complexities of the social condition and, more specifically, the ethno-racial social contract we all need to respect.

The more informed we are of both our own history as well as that of other ethnic/racial groups, the better off society is, as Mayor Koch then continued to write: “Stereotypes lose their power when the world is found to be more complex than the stereotype would suggest.” In the end, we must work to disenfranchise the stereotypes, as they rear their ugly heads. In so doing, however, we need to be sure that we do not commit the same offense in stereotyping others. Indeed, we have seen some of this from our own co-ethnics in their complaints about other ethnic groups. This notwithstanding, at times, such disenfranchisement of the stereotype will ask us to buck horns with our co-ethnics [8], as the above-mentioned Howard Beach and its analogous episode in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, two years later required. Or, more recently, as we witnessed across the estuary here in greater New York City [9].

Party affiliation in this sense is irrelevant. Regardless of which party the candidate may be, neither of the two campaigns should be launching anti-Italian rhetoric. Anzi, they should be acting to the contrary! Given what we have seen thus far in this electoral season, the upcoming New York gubernatorial campaign might very well test our patience and, in the end, call us to duty.

Postscript: In addition to an illogical, incoherent, and grammatically incorrect ranting that came from lower Manhattan, penned by a member of a small group that seems to have waged what can only be considered an anti-Calandra campaign for some time now and to varying degrees, the Institute received the following comments Monday:

To:
calandra@qc.edu

From: Email withheld

Date: 09/26/2010 06:07PM

Subject: Re: From the Dean's desk of The John D Calandra Italian Amer Institute

anthony, i cant tell what you object to. am i missing something?

all best,
Signed

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To:
calandra@qc.edu
From: Email withheld
Date: 09/26/2010 06:25PM

Subject: Re: From the Dean's desk of The John D Calandra Italian Amer Institute

Very good alert, Anthony.
Signed

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To: calandra@qc.edu

From: Email withheld

Date: 09/26/2010 06:46PM

Subject: Re: From the Dean's desk of The John D Calandra Italian Amer Institute

Thanks Anthony good info and will look out for more of these type of slurs. Signed

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To:
calandra@qc.edu
From: Email withheld

Date: 09/26/2010 11:19PM

Subject: Re: September 2010 Comments

Dear Dean Tamburri,

Thank you for your E-mail and bringing this issue to my attention.

I was totally unaware of this negative "Italian-baiting", not from lack of interest in issues political, but rather from not having sufficient time to read everything I'd like to regarding things Italian in general and Italian-American in particular.

This is especially troubling when both gubernatorial candidates are of Italian heritage. This perhaps points to an endemic weakness of too many Italian-Americans who harbor a deep lack of respect, knowledge, and appreciation of their rich culture and heritage.

In addition, I believe Italian-Americans as a group are much too polite and genteel (i.e. passive) with respect to the continuing stereotyping/ethnic-baiting that is still much too prevalent in the mainstream media. That, however, is the subject for another discussion.

Thanks again.

Respectfully,

Signed

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To: calandra@qc.edu

From: Email withheld

Date: 09/26/2010 09:07PM

Subject: Re: From the Dean's desk of The John D Calandra Italian Amer Institute

Is there still an anti-defamation league? Is there any recourse to this kind of slur?

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To: calandra@qc.edu

From: Email withheld

Date: 09/26/2010 06:30PM

Cc: Emails withheld

Subject: Re: From the Dean's desk of The John D Calandra Italian Amer Institute

Well said Dean Tamburri!!!

However I do think that "labeling" is becoming part of the American way of life. We are experiencing a cultural decadence "world wide" and America (unfortunately!) is following the pattern.

Ignorance is dictating human relations by measuring success upon the amount

When we are too busy to listen to those (like you!) who do the thinking for us, we may make more money as I am not sure if we become richer.....

With my warmest personal regards,

Signed

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To: calandra@qc.edu

From: Email withheld

Date: 09/26/2010 06:13PM

Subject: Re: From the Dean's desk of The John D Calandra Italian Amer Institute

I would think that it would be helpful to call this to the attention of those responsible for the brochure. With all the Italian organizations that exist, from how many do you think there will be an outcry? What really can individuals do when the Italian American organizations that purport to encourage Italian culture say and do nothing when things like this occur in the media? They have all let the Italian community down, in my opinion.

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From: Email withheld
Date: Mon, 27 Sep 2010 11:33:06 -0400 (GMT-04:00)
To: Anthony Julian Tamburri <anthony.tamburri@qc.cuny.edu [10]>
Subject: To the Dean's desk/Paladino

Dear Prof. Tamburri:

In addition to your statement concerning Paladino's "ethnic slurs", he was denounced this morning on "The View" for sexism and racism.

Also, Joy Behart claimed "He could win the election if all of his illegitimate children voted for him."

Regards,

Signed

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------ Forwarded Message

From: Email withheld

Date: Mon, 27 Sep 2010 17:10:52 -0400

To: Anthony Julian Tamburri <tamburri@bordigherapress.org>

Subject: Grazie. Well said! Good message. From the Dean's desk of The John D Calandra Italian Amer Institute

Good, Anthony,

Well said! re. “sly Italian messages.”

Glad you sent this out. I couldn't agree more.

Signed

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From: Email withheld

Date: Sep 27, 2010 2:44 PM

Subject: Re: From the Dean's desk of The John D Calandra Italian Amer

Institute "sly I...

To: H-ITAM@h-net.msu.edu

Dear Anthony:

I am truly grateful to you for taking this stand and speaking out. I

totally agree with you.

I can only imagine also, the cartoons and jokes running around the Internet

about New York having three Italian Americans as gubernatorial candidates.

Saluti, Signed

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[6] http://www.cityhallnews.com/newyork/article-1561-paladino-campaign-aims-to-needle-cuomo-into-repeat-of-2002-self-immolation.html
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[10] http://ftp.iitaly.org/anthony.tamburri%40qc.cuny.edu