

Tom DiNapoli: Knight of the Italian Republic

Marco Falzoi (May 27, 2011)



The high honor of the Italian Republic (Cavaliere dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica italiana) was given to Tom DiNapoli in front of a large audience and a lot of prominent persons. It was an important moment for the entire Italian-American community.

Last Wednesday, the hall at the [Italian Consulate in New York City](#) [2] was filled to capacity. It was a truly important occasion in the Italian-American community. The first Italian-American New York state comptroller received the honor bestowed on behalf of the Italian Republic by Consul General Francesco Maria Talò. Members of DiNapoli's family, including his father Nicholas, were besides him as he accepted the honor.

Consul General Francesco Maria Talò opened the ceremony with a thoughtful discourse.

Here are a few excerpts from his remarks:

"The Consulate is, of course, your home, the home of your friends, a place where we are very honored to host prominent public figures, friends of Italy, and, of course, Italy's great friend: Tom DiNapoli.



“Tom DiNapoli is someone who wins, and when he wins, he doesn’t do it for himself, but he does it for an entire community – this can be the Italian-American community, but it is also the larger New York state community, the American community, and the Italian community. We all share the same values, we are all moving in the same direction, and that’s why it’s so important to have moments like this to meet and come together, especially as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of Italy’s unification.”

Bestowing the honor, Talò turned to DiNapoli and said:

“This decoration is not only based on what you have done before, but also on what we are confident you will continue to do.”

DiNapoli responded, visibly moved. We report several highlights from his acceptance speech in front of a warm and attentive audience.

He began by recalling that “the 150th anniversary is really an incredible moment, a moment in time to look back and see what an incredible success the Italian nation has become.” He continued by remembering and reflecting on his own family’s cultural roots.

“I might have a royal title, but the royalty, obviously, are my ancestors. I’m delighted that my dad and other relatives are here, and I’m delighted they can be here along with you to witness this. I do think of the real royalty in our family, the men and women who, at a very different time in the history of Italy, and a very different time in the history of our family, made that choice, not so much because they had a choice, but for necessity, to leave that nation and build a life here.

“My family story is not so different than your family story, as well. Families were split, they had nothing; they had to come over because of economic necessity. As I think back, they really are the ones who deserve an honor like this. Whatever I’ve had to deal with in my life is nothing in comparison to being a youngster, as most of them were when they came over, and to start with nothing, to not be able to speak the language, and to think that not too many years later, their great grandson is serving in a public office, this great opportunity I have to be state comptroller, and as many of you know, the first Italian-American to be elected state comptroller. [...]

“I mentioned earlier the grandfather who I’m named after, the one grandfather I never got to know, Tommaso Pellegrino DiNapoli, who became Thomas Peter DiNapoli. He was born in Paduli, Benevento, and my friend Mario Mignone (professor at [Stony Brook](#) [3]) thinks that I’m only from Benevento – he never acknowledges the other parts of my family. But I’m very proud to say that I’m also from Avellino. So one grandparent was born in [Benevento](#) [4], two in [Avellino](#) [5], and the fourth one, my dad’s mother, was born in an obscure province most people don’t know – it’s called Portsmouth, Virginia. But just to make it still official, so that they don’t take the medal back, her mother, as I recall, was born in Salerno and her father was born in Calabria. I only began to appreciate, as I became a teenager and when I was in my 20s, what they went through, and I wish I had appreciated it more when they were alive.

“I feel very strongly that whatever acknowledgment I am receiving, and I am really honored, I know I could have not succeeded in life and politics if it wasn’t for the values I was raised with. You play by the rules. You do things right. Your faith and belief in God is important. Family, and friends who are like family, are very, very important.”

And at the end, amidst a loud round of applause, he repeated: “It is a great honor, and it’s a beautiful medal, but for me, it’s more like a symbol.

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