

Peeking into Italy's Christmas Stocking

Judith Harris (December 21, 2012)



With a careful look, the boot of Italy actually resembles a Christmas stocking. It's appropriate, then, that we take a peek inside to see what Santa will tuck inside it for Italians to find on Christmas morning.

ROME - The first and perhaps most important gift is the reduction in the spread (the comparative interest rate difference between German and Italian 10-year bonds). On New Year's Eve of 2011 the spread stood at 519. At this writing it has shrunk to a manageable 288, the lowest since 2010. The drop in the spread confirms that Premier Mario Monti's 13 months in office have restored confidence in Italy itself and have avoided bankruptcy or an exit from the Euro.

The second of this year's gifts of Christmas is that Premier Mario Monti remains exceptionally popular, with 33% preferring him to any other politicians as premier. Monti has yet to state that he will run to succeed himself in next year's election, but he has admitted that he does not intend simply to sit back and enjoy life (and a salary) in his cushy role as senator for life. He is expected to toss his hat into the ring on Christmas Eve while the announcing of new national general elections, already decided for February 22, will be formalized on New Year's Eve. If so, these will be important gifts of certainty, and, as President Giorgio Napolitano has pointed out, it is best at this point to cut



short the election campaign, which is already well underway despite the uncertainties of timing and candidates both. Monti is expected to become the head of a centrist group. If so, this will plunge him into a three-way race of direct competition with both Pier Luigi Bersani's Partito Democratico (PD) on the left and with Silvio Berlusconi's party - whatever it will be called - on the right. On the outskirts, Beppe Grillo remains the fourth main player.

Fortunately, politics do not tell the whole story, which is of a society that is still generous, talented and kind, including, increasingly, to the newest Italians--the immigrants. A third gift, therefore, is the letter written to the editor of an Italian daily to recount the author's gratitude that his lost wallet was found and returned by an Albanian immigrant worker, who moreover did not want to accept a reward for his courtesy. According to the preliminary findings of the 2011 census, out of a total population of almost 60 million, 4 million are foreign nationals, or about 7% of the population. Two-thirds live in the North. An estimated half million work on farms, where many are treated poorly and grossly underpaid. However, "Immigrants are an important part of Italy's population, contributing their work and vital energy to an aging society," to quote President Napolitano. This is all the more true because of Italy's twin problems of an aging population and low birth rate. In the past decade the foreign population has almost tripled.

A fourth gift is, once again, the good work of Italy's Guardia di Finanza (tax police) and the fine arts sleuths in the paramilitary Carabinieri Corps in preserving the Italian heritage from looters. On December 6, during what was described as a "casual" check, the tax police found in the back of a truck a cache of stolen archaeological objects including, most importantly, a fine ancient Egyptian sphynx over 4 ft. long carved of stone. Imports to Italy of Egyptian materials began in the 1st C. AD and were common during the following century, especially after the cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis was spreading throughout the Italian peninsula. It is believed the valuable sphynx was from a hilly area near Viterbo, at Monterosa. (To see a video of the find, go to: <http://multimedia.gdf.gov.it/video/Attivita%20operativa/2012/recuperata-sfinge-egizia-di-eta-tolemaica-iv-i-sec.-a.c./>)

A fifth gift to Italy is the extraordinary contribution which orchestra conductor Antonio Pappano has made to building the worldwide prestige and popularity of the Santa Cecilia Symphony Orchestra in Rome. Pappano's Italian parents, who hailed from Castelfranco in Miscano near Benevento, lived in Great Britain before moving to the U.S.A. His father trained singers, and from childhood Antonio accompanied these singers on the piano. He is now Sir Anthony, and passes his time between conducting at Covent Garden and at Rome's bustling Auditorium, where he is always dressed in a loose-fitting black smock. He was the youngest conductor ever to lead the orchestra of the Royal Opera House in London, and his audiences always include many young people as well as the more traditional audience for classical music. (See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Pappano)

Sixth among the stocking gifts is the work of the Sant'Egidio Roman Catholic Community in fostering peace in troubled war zones and in helping the poor in Italy and elsewhere. Forty-five years old in February 2013, the Community of lay men and women is just now opening a boutique in Rome where volunteers can bring quality vintage clothing - preferably with high fashion label - for sale for the benefit of AIDS victims in Africa. The Community was born in 1968 in the U.S. Today the Italian Community, whose chief churches in Rome are at Santa Maria in Trastevere and in St. Bartholomew's Church on the Tiber Island, is also concerned about the increase in poverty in Italy itself.

Seventh, Fabiola Gianotti, 40, holds a PhD in experimental sub-particle physics from the University of Milan and has been described by none other than the magazine New Scientist as "the woman in charge of the world's biggest experiment." This November she was awarded Milan's Gold Medal for her work and on Dec. 11 she received the Special Fundamental Physics Prize for 2012, awarded for her work on the Higgs Boson, known as the "elusive particle" because scientists had been hunting it for half a century. Time magazine has described her as "legendary" and named her as "runner-up for Person of the Year: Fabiola Gianotti, the Discoverer." (See: <http://poy.time.com/2012/12/19/runner-up-fabiola-gianotti-the-discoverer/>) She manages a 3,000-member team of researchers and colleagues at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). Working under her leadership, the team made a worldwide sensation in science for at last discovering the particle, whose function is to catapult construction of the mass of other particles. She shares the prize with colleagues Joe Incandela and Rolf Heuer. "It was the work of thousands of scientists," she said this



week.... The prize was to Italy."

And with this, best wishes for a Happy Christmas to all our readers.

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