

Dear Babbo Natale

Judith Harris (December 18, 2013)



Naples is the quintessential Christmas town, and for many families its Nativity scenes - presepi - represent an accumulation of decades of collecting. The whole street of San Gregorio Armeno, in the heart of old Napoli, is a file of storefronts jammed with Nativity figures. But for 28 years another custom has developed: the wishes people of all ages attach to the 24-foot-tall fir tree known as the "Tree of Desires" in the elegant turn-of-the-century Galleria Umberto I. Their wishes are a slice of Neapolitan life.

Naples - This is the quintessential Christmas town, and for many families its Nativity scenes - presepi - represent an accumulation of decades of collecting. By tradition, each child added one figure every year to the presepe.

With timed lighting and mechanical waterfalls, windmills that urn and woodchoppers who whack at the lumber, the scene expands until it eventually may occupy an entire room in the home.



During this season (and not only; presepe shops are open year round for tourists) the whole

street of San Gregorio Armeno, in the heart of old Napoli, is a file of storefronts jammed with Nativity figures. The tradition dates back centuries, although is now somewhat endangered.

As one man in his sixties told me, "My father was specialized in carving sheep for the presepe. With his wooden sheep he maintained our family and also two widowed aunts."

Few young people follow in the sheep-carver's footsteps; they would earn too little, and so the figures in this year's presepe du jour, which shows a host of chefs standing in white coats amid foodstuffs, are lovely but are of terra cotta.

The presepe tradition reached in apex in Naples, capital of the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Cities, in the 18th Century. Supposedly it was to represent Palestine, and was placed in a chapel corner in churches; from there the custom spread into the grander homes. Because no one had ever seen Palestine, what emerged was Naples itself: its shopkeepers, fisherfolk, sturdy aproned women, shepherds and their flocks and, of course, the Christ Child and Holy Family and Three Kings of Orient. Today's popular figures begin with Pope Francis, but there are also President Barack Obama and his wife plus a bevy of Italian politicians, from President Giorgio Napolitano to a shaggy-haired Beppe Grillo and Silvio Berlusconi, this time waving a sign that says, "I'll be back."

This year Naples had an additional gift from an Babbo Natale: a gala production of Verdi's "Aida", which had its first night December 5 to open the San Carlo Opera Theater season. In the black tie audience was Bernard Osher, 86, an American business tycoon and philanthropist who is an opera lover and among the sponsors of the San Francisco Opera House. Osher, ranked by Forbes as among the 746 wealthiest people in the world a few years back, sponsored the recent tour of the San Carlo company to San Francisco.

For the past 28 years Naples has an added Christmas feature: a 24-foot-tall fir tree, this year sent from Normandy, erected in the center of the elegant, turn-of-the-century Galleria Umberto I. Known as the Tree of Desires, this year's is, as ever, a gift from haberdasher Antonio Barbaro. Onto it people attach letters addressed to Father Christmas, aka Babbo Natale. As I stood in the Galleria copying and translating some of the letters from the Italian (a few were in Russian, Portuguese and other languages), people kept coming up and begging scraps of paper upon which to write their Christmas wishes.

What did they write? Older correspondents begged for jobs. The younger set asked for toys. A remarkable number wanted to be rid of certain politicians. And now, let them speak for themselves.

"Dear Babbo Natale, fill 2014 with good news. 2013 was a complete washout."

"Love!" (on a paper napkin)

"I'd like my life to be full of success and LOTS of love."

"Help me get a good grade in my psychometry exam."

"I want nothing material but for once, for everything to go just right because I've had enough of hard times."

"Help me to go on doing yoga for my whole life."

"Dear Babbo Natale, Help me beat cancer, give it instead to all the politicians beginning with [politician's name] so they will know what it's like to walk through the valley of fire. I'm 50 years old and don't want to die just yet."

"Make [several finance ministers' names] live for one year on a social pension."

"Help me find a permanent job." Signed: Luigi



"I am a professional. Help me find a job within my profession."

"Please resolve the problem of the restaurant before we have to sell out."

"Give me the strength to do well at work, in my studies and to be good to those who deserve it."

"Dear guardian angel, wherever you are, my hand is in yours" (In large printed letters)

"We want a proper contract for our job"

"Please give me a happy life"

"A decent job for Papa"

"I want some money for a present for my best friend and a job for Mamma." (Signed: Sara)

"For us it would be enough if our Napoli team could win the championship."

"A 3-year scholarship to pay for my PhD - all I want to do is to go on studying what I love"

"Decaduto is not enough" (a reference to Silvio Berlusconi, decaduto- i.e., stripped of his Senate status)

"Dearest Babbo Natale, Play Station 3 with the game Gran Turismo" (Signed: Daniele, age 7)

"I would like a year full of surprises. PS Valeria is an idiot [scema]."

"Please bring us lots of money, we are really really poor." (Signed: Lina, Flora, Pina, Rosa and Roberta)

"A tablet and a Barbie, I am 6 years old"

"I hope all will go well for me and that the slut Flora will kick the bucket"

"Yes, dear Babbo Natale, I'm asking for a ray of hope for myself and for all of us young people. Are we or are we not the future?"

Indeed. My own wish, written on a scrap of note paper and attached to a twig, was for i-italy to continue to grow and to engage its readers and viewers. Merry Christmas to all from me, Judith Harris.

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