

New Motivations for Italian Americans in the 21st Century. ILICA. Interview with A.J. Tamburri

Vincenzo Marra (November 01, 2010)



Ilica in its 7th year of activity. On November 9, 2010, they will celebrate the painter, Maestro Alessandro Marrone from Arezzo. Illustrious guests on the evening of November 10 are: the talent of Cristiana Pegoraro, the vision of Anthony J. Tamburri, and the innovation of the Italy America Chamber of Commerce with Claudio Bozzo. You will read all of their opinions in the next few days within i-Italy. Below you will find the first interview with Anthony J. Tamburri, Dean @ John D. Calandra

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Professor Tamburri: "I have a tough job, but I love it!"
He arrived in New York four years ago, but it seems as though he has always been here. After all, Dean Anthony Julian Tamburri was born in Stamford, Connecticut, studied in Italy and has taught



Italian in Connecticut, Indiana...in short, we are very fortunate (especially in this particular day and age) to have a person of his cultural caliber in the Big Apple. Anthony Tamburri receives this year's Stella Award, after only one month since Frank Stella's passing. Stella, starting with Dr. Frank Monteleone and Antonio Miele as well as his protégé Antonio Rugiero, always chose who would receive the award that bore his name and represented his cultural legacy. To interview Professor Tamburri would have been presumptuous, so we preferred to engage in a friendly exchange touching upon some of the themes that both Frank Stella and Jenò Paulucci have lived for and dedicated their lives to: "The Success of Americans of Italian Descent in an American Social, Political, and Economic Context". Professor Tamburri's office is always well organized amidst the chaos of papers, files, and folders which reveal his constant commitment to fighting the cultural battle for Italians in America. He offers us an espresso which he personally prepares and we begin our meeting...

Vincenzo: The 20th Century was full of motivations for Italian Americans. What are their motivations in the 21st Century?

Anthony : I believe there are numerous motivational stimuli in the United States today. Even if we find ourselves in a economic time which is not exactly rosy, America continues to welcome new waves of young Italians who, in contrast to those immigrants who came in the last century, are so highly qualified that in Italy there is talk of a mass exodus of "brains" and talent. It is my hope that these new intellectuals, upon encountering the third and fourth generation descendents of Italian immigrants from the last century, find a common denominator so that they might look ahead to a positive evolution of our ethnic group. Americans of Italian descent have little or nothing of the "Italianness" that they would like to have, and while the Italians that arrive in the USA speak English well, they are still only Italian. Italy, for an American who chooses to study Italian, should be a "geocultural" reference point that should be understood in its current context. The young Italians represent best this new aspect of Italy. However, I am certain that the majority of both groups is unaware that more than 50% of their predecessors returned to Italy. It is misunderstandings such as this that lead to cultural and generational gaps between the Italians and the Italian emigrants in the USA.

I would like to inform you of the impression I had from visiting various groups of Italian students and researchers in some of the most prestigious universities in the USA. In general, they have formed Clubs which are politically colored and which condition these students and researchers in Italy today. Do you think that something similar could be conceivable amongst their American peers?

Politics is a cultural phenomenon. I believe that the most devastating event for the Italian language occurred after Italy declared war against the USA in December 1941. The subsequent "Enemy Alien" Act urged the US population not to speak the enemy's language, Italian being one of the three (German and Japanese the others). Prior to that date, America had a series of daily, weekly, and monthly publications including "The Atlantic" which was written 90% in English and addressed all of the issues that we no longer discuss today. NIAF has "Ambassador" and OSIA has the "Italian American": these are the only organizations that have 30 page magazines that are published four times a year, and there is also "Primo"...But this is too little!! In the Internet age, we only have two truly active portals, i-Italy and another one located in the Mid-West in St. Louis. It is very difficult to establish oneself in this manner. Paulucci and Stella's great intuition led them to create "Attenzione", a monthly national magazine that informed America about the Italian Americans. The magazine only lasted for 2 years thanks to Jenò's investments because he truly desired the existence of such a publication. Even today we need such a meeting point; Jenò and Frank Stella asked for our "attention" and there was no response... Today we have electronic means such as Google to read in Italian and, as I recently wrote in an article on i-Italy : "It is never too late to learn Italian."

I don't want to speak exclusively of the Italian language. Let's go back to the motivations: if I were born in America in the 1980s, today I am 25 years-old, play basketball and love football. For what reason should I be interested in a country where young people like me emigrate because they are not motivated? Then we move on to Columbus Day and we see Campania in the parade and the following year we see the Veneto region. The commercial and diplomatic representatives from Italy

propose a different region every week. In the last century, no one seemed to ever ask where Bialetti espresso pots or Vespa scooters were manufactured. Is Italy, as a Country, present?

I believe that history will determine whether those who receive these “regional” messages perceive them as referring to Italy as a whole or simply as elements of distraction. After all, the regions have always sponsored this or that Italian American organization. Italy gave the world the Renaissance, a cultural phenomenon so unique and grand that it seems to have obscured much of what followed it.

Yes, but Italy continues to promote wines such as Montepulciano d’Abruzzo or Falanghina from Avellino and in the meantime the entire world knows that Beaujolais comes from France but they have no idea where Abruzzo or Avellino are located.

France has always been able to “sell” its culture while we Italians, no matter where in the world we may have found ourselves, have most often been reactive. We have individuals that have attained levels of wealth worthy of note in “Forbes” magazine and those that have become elected officials a few of whom refer to Mexicans in the same manner that their grandparents were once referred to, basically because they are not aware of our history. We



know very little about our own culture otherwise we would be more circumspect. Tony Lo Bianco once said to his detractors, who complained that he only accepted “Mafioso” roles, that unless we could offer cultural/financial support we would have to accept roles decided by those who pay us. We Italians don’t even have a commercial publishing house (except for Bordighera Press) and we cannot address this issue synergistically. We at the Calandra Institute organized a symposium two months ago where we discussed the problems of the 21st century. I agree with you in that if we continue to speak solely of our past that we will not be able to establish our future. Tragic as the events were, the Jews have had the Holocaust, the African Americans have had slavery and the Hispanics have their language as a common denominator. We are in great difficulty because although Italy seems to be disconnected from its communities here in the States, we must still transmit our current status to Italy. For example, in 1991, Fred Gardaphè, Paolo Giordano, and I edited “From the Margins”. People would ask us how they could “get a copy” our book rather than where they could purchase it. It was difficult for us to explain that the book had to be ordered in a bookstore and purchased because, as we would sometimes respond sarcastically, “Culture doesn’t fall of a truck”. I might add that with all of the money that our leaders have, they should at least inform themselves about the reality of a culture which they intend to represent. I would only propose to hold a big conference on neutral territory. We should try to gather all of the major foundations, perhaps at the Italian Embassy, to discuss how we can better serve this great culture that we have in common.

I would like to add that it has now become necessary to better organize our actions in order to preserve what is perhaps the strongest identity in the Western World.

This year China distributed a commemorative book at the Shanghai Expo and, of all the people who influenced China, they chose to mention only two people: Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci. Now we must confess that all we have, we have inherited perhaps without deserving it. I believe that the moment has arrived, aside from all the rhetoric of the



orators-of-the-moment, to show if we can still make a difference.



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