Thinking Out the Box

JOSEPH SCIAME* (March 12, 2012)



An Italian American proposal for the future of Old Lady of Loreto and its statues. How reading a recent New York Times article may stimulate some creative reflections and maybe a call for talented Italian American artists to save part of our cultural patrimony.

A friend has recently called to my attention an interesting article by Dan Barry on the New York Times entitled "Religious Statues Left Behind Find Their Own Patron Saint" (click to read the article [2]).

The author tells the story of Mr. Lou McClung, a makeup artist in Lakewood, Ohio, who has become the savior of religious statues left behind once churches close. He gathers them in a former Catholic church that he owns, and restores them to their former state. Mr. McClung even created a not-for-profit museum for the statues of closed churches. The plan for the Museum of Divine Statues [3], which opened a year ago in Lakewood, has been supported by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland.

This made me think of the long battle that some exponents of our community, including especially Charles Piazza and my cousin Frank Sciame, have waged to maintain the structure of Our Lady of Loreto in Brownsville (Brooklyn). [4]

Indeed, there were many statues there, as there are in other churches of the various surrounding dioceses. Having served on the Archives Commission of the Diocese of Brooklyn for some time, I do know that when churches are closed it is the "patrimony of

the church" that is then preserved by the diocese, which includes the statues, the altars and any other appropriate pieces. I understand that there is a huge warehouse of artifacts towards this preservation.

One interesting note is that a number of months ago, a request from a second or third generation family member of a former parishioner of Our Lady of Loreto was attempting to track down a statue that had been brought over to America by his grandparents. He described it at the time, but it was a 'dead end' in terms of what actually happened to the statue once Our Lady of Loreto was disassembled.

Some readers of i-Italy may recall the rally to help save the structure, and it HAS BEEN saved, thank God. One can recall the people there, the hopes of those representatives of the community in the area and many Italian Americans. It is well documented by Dr. Anthony Julian Tamburri, Dean of the John D. Calandra Institute, CUNY.

Yesterday (and unrelated to this article but what perfect timing for the discussion I had), I learned at a function for Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Brooklyn that the Church of Our Lady of Loreto continues to stand, needs repair particularly with regard to the roofing and steeples, but it remains. That was and is a win-win for the Italian American community, for our words were heard.

At the same time, a structure is being built adjacent to the church site that will house people once completed, and it is anticipated that although this structure was held up owing to the lack of funds last year, it is NOW progressing. While it is a tough area at present to live in, it was once a nice, calm and ethnic community of Italian Americans who sacrificed to have the church and parish built, step by step.

Yesterday, in speaking with a diocesan official, he asked me: "And so now what will the Italian-American community do once the structure and housing are complete?" I surmise that he was referring to our call to keep the Church up and now that it continues to stand, what more can be done. It has been suggested that it be turned into some form of community center, what with its space and all sorts of creative plans.

In reading the article by Dan Barry one just thinks and imagines that with some creatively, and undoubtedly some other talented painter artist in the general Brooklyn area, perhaps even an immigrant with such talent, the statuary of the surrounding closed churches might once again find a home. And imagine a such a museum here in Brooklyn, NY!

Perhaps at some point in the future, one could obtain from Mr. McClough in Lakewood, Ohio some information as to how he commenced it all and any suggestions and/or recommendations he might share with us in NY. Again, some herein are those of the thinking that there is "always hope" and thinking out the box does not hurt anyone.

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