

Reflections on the World in Which We Live - Part I

Alfredo J. Valentini (July 28, 2016)



Reflections after the recent Summer Program in Italy by By A. J. Valentini, Adjunct professor of Italian at Utica College, Director of IACE Summer Program in Italy.

“Alfredo, are you OK? Everybody here is worried about you? You know with all that is happening over there, the family is scared. Did you see what happened in Nice and Germany?”

“Maria, tutto bene (everything is OK). Don’t worry. The kids and I are safe and they are having a wonderful time. Here they are asking me if it’s true that in the States they are shooting police on the street and ask what’s going on that parents have to worry that their children will be gunned down in school.”



That was a phone conversation I had recently with my wife while I was with my Italian American Committee on Education students in Italy. As a 42-year veteran of the classroom I have accompanied numerous groups on tours and language immersions in Europe and here in our own country. The electricity of fear was rampant after 9/11 as it is today and there is little to avoid it when talking to those who view the situation from different perspectives.

The threat of terror has been present in Italy since the days of the Red brigades (1970's and '80's). It was common even then to see armed military in high profile places such as airports and train stations. Today, there is an increased vigilance. Armed officers patrol the remnants of imperial Rome.

Holy sites like the Vatican and even the Basilica of Saint Francis in sleepy Assisi require visitors to go through security checks and wind their way through multiple improvised barriers prior to entering the hallowed monuments. As I led nearly 50 students and adults through the streets of downtown Rome we saw armed soldiers and military vehicles, and closer to Parliament, dozens of plain-clothes security officers wired for instant communication.

One can look at this heightened security as paranoiac or as reassuring. In either case it evokes sadness. I remember as a young student in Rome taking my free time to visit places like that, entering without encumbrance and losing myself to their awe-inspiring history and beauty. Today, those same places make me think of the enormous patrimony of Western culture that Italy holds, as well as her costly duty to protect it, and the people from all over the world who come to admire her treasures.

Should we refrain from visiting these sites in the interest of safety? Should American school children stay home for fear of being shot in their classroom? The popular response is if we hold back, the terrorists have won. They can lay claim to success just by instilling fear in the general public. Or we can choose to defy them, continue to revere our history the accomplishments of our ancestors.

My personal advice is to proceed with prudence and vigilance. The cultural gems of Italy and other great countries of the world define who we are. Certainly, the people who created these historical sites so many years ago met their challenges. Rome wasn't built in a day and it did not endure for hundreds of years because it gave into threats from outside (or even within). The human spirit is remarkably resilient. Like the weather, history has its ups and downs but somehow, after the storms, manages to produce those periods of brilliance and tranquility. Let us hope that we will soon overcome this present storm and enjoy, once again, more days in the sun.

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