

From Nola to Brooklyn. Dancing with the Giglio in Williamsburg

Carmen Cutugno (July 05, 2010)



i-Italy met Carl Bonomo and Steve Acunto, two representatives of the Italian-American community. They told us the history and the meaning behind the Festa del Giglio in Williamsburg, the Lily Feast, that is today at its 123rd edition. “We want to keep this religious and popular tradition alive, and make people feel proud to be Italian”

It is more than a century that the Italian-American community in Williamsburg celebrates one of its most ancient and heartfelt traditions, the Festa del Giglio, the Lily Feast bringing the streets to life with their faith, colors, music and food.

Today at its 123rd edition, [La Festa del Giglio](#) [2] will take place from Wednesday July 7 to Sunday July 18.



I-Italy met [Carl Bonomo](#) [3], Chairman of the Annual Feast “Il Giglio” and Steve Acunto Honorary Vice Consul of the Republic of Italy and President of the [Italian Academy Foundation](#) [4], two eminent Italian-Americans who told us what this feast represents today for the Italian American community of Williamsburg.

“Founded more than 100 years ago, la Festa del Giglio has always been an important moment to carry on a tradition that our grandparents brought to America and to celebrate our Catholic faith. When Italian immigrants settled down in this part of the city the Church tried to keep them together as a community, that ended up growing so much that it occupied a considerable portion of Williamsburg.

At first Italians mostly populated this neighborhood and the Church had a preeminent role in keeping them together: Sunday, as an example, was a day completely dedicated to Church and food.

Today things have somewhat changed: many second-generation Italians moved out to other areas of the city and non-Italians settled down in Williamsburg. Still nowadays if you walk around the neighborhood you find a good deal of the history of Italian-Americans here in New York. The Festa del Giglio, that honors Saint Paolino and the Madonna del Carmelo - Our Lady of Mount Carmel -, is part of this history. What we continue to celebrate nowadays is the essence of what it means to be Italian, a communion between tradition and faith”.

This is essentially what Carl Bonomo told us about the origins of this feast that was started in Brooklyn by the immigrants coming from Nola, a city in the Region of Campania, Southern Italy.

It is in that city that this feast was first founded to celebrate the return of Saint Paolino, bishop of Nola. When in 410 B.C. a band of North-African pirates invaded the city of Nola, bishop Paolino escaped with some local children and found shelter in the countryside. When he returned to the city, though, he met a widow whose child was enclaved by the pirates. Moved by deep compassion, Paolino offered to take the boy's place and was brought to North Africa as a prisoner. A Turkish sultan who came to know his story and the great sacrifice he had bravely made, intervened to free him and his fellows.

The whole city joyfully welcomed Paolino back, saluting him with bouquets of lilies, symbols of love and purity. From that moment on, Nola celebrates every year the return of Saint Paolino with a religious commemoration and feast. The “lilies” are nowadays represented by a large wooden structure decorated with flowers and transported all around the city by hundreds of men.

“When people from Nola immigrated to New York, they brought along with them this tradition. If this festivity still exists nowadays and is so deeply important for a great number of people it is thanks to the Italian Americans that live in Williamsburg and to commitment of families such as Carl Bonomo's, whose contribution to this community has always been considerable and praiseworthy”, Steve Acunto told us.

As a matter of fact, the Festa del Giglio is one of the most appreciated events by the Italian-American community of Brooklyn. Every year in the month of July, it stops for twelve days and commemorates both Saint Paolino and, as we said before, the feast of the Madonna del Carmelo, (July 16), that marks an important date in the Catholic calendar.

“The Festa del Giglio is both a meaningful and committing moment for us”, continued Mr. Acunto. “A group of voluntaries works with constancy for an entire year to set it up, and during the days of celebration we benefit from the collaboration of New York's Police Department and emergency units”.

As Carl Bonomo pointed out, “the outcome of the event is the result of the efforts of all of those who work ‘behind the curtains’. There is indeed an executive committee that, starting from January, meets every week to discuss and organize the various aspects of the celebrations.



The committee is hierarchically structured and is headed by the Capo Paranza. It is only thanks to the constant commitment of all of the volunteers who contribute to the organization of the feast that we are able to set up it up every year”.

According to Mr. Acunto “This is the aspect that more than any others differentiates Festa del Giglio from the Columbus Day Parade. While ours is an old traditional feast, product of the work of volunteers and entirely connected to the Church, the latter is much more recent and can be considered a commercial operation carried on by regular employees in regular offices and supported by very rich sponsors.”

One of the most significant moments of the twelve-day-long Festa del Giglio is the procession, also called “Questua”. As Carlo Bonomo explained us, “it starts very early in the morning, as at 5:30 am groups of men go to different local bakeries to get loafs of bread that will be distributed later in the day.

After a mass given in honor of Saint Paolino at 9 am, a hundred or so members of the committee have breakfast together at 10 am. The bread is then blessed and distributed to a group of volunteers made of presidents, cashiers, kids who carry the bread in big handbags, a music band and some police men who steer this big group through the traffic of Brooklyn. The worshippers who receive a piece of that bread make generous donations to the Church.

The apex of the Festa del Giglio, however, is the Domenica del Giglio (Lily Sunday), that starts with a march during which some members of the community, following a predetermined road, pick up the “VIPs” who participate to the feast. As it is easily imagined, this moment culminates with the arrival at the house of the Capo Paranza, the head of the organizing committee

The unquestioned protagonist of the Festa is the Danza del Giglio (Lily Dance). What was originally a flower has been transformed in a gigantic tower, called Torre del Giglio (Lily Tower): it is a 72-foot tall structure that weights more than 4 tons. Brightly colored, it is decorated with flowers and angel statues and features a statue of Saint Paolino at its top. 112 men carry it and make it “dance” in the streets of Williamsburg. They follow the directions of the Capo Paranza, just as the other hundred or so men who carry the other enormous structure, a reproduction of the galleon by which Saint Paolino returned to Nola. Both the dances are accompanied by the music of a band and the performances of the singers invited for the occasion”.

When we finally ask Mr. Bonomo and Mr. Acunto what is the ultimate mission of the Festa del Giglio, they give us one and only answer: “Our mission is to carry on the traditions that our parents and grandparents brought to this country, renovate our faith, and invigorate our pride to be Italian!”

July 7th-July18th
Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NY

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