

Italy Ends its 150th Anniversary Celebrations

Judith Harris (March 18, 2012)



As Italy's celebration of the 150 years of Italian unification draws to an end, it's time for a summation and a forward look.

ROME - The first reflection is that despite efforts by antagonistic Northern Leaguers to have it put aside, the Italian national anthem, "Fratelli d'Italia," is still being sung. Many will appreciate this, and also the good news that the exhibition of Quirinal Palace documents on view inside the residence of the president will remain open through April 1 this year. Already, over 100,000 visitors—many of them Italian and foreign students—have seen its fascinating selection of documents, portraits and illustrations. Those who can enjoy an early Spring break still have a chance to see it and to walk through the great halls of state of the palace, normally closed to the public, open weekdays from Tuesday through Saturday from 10 am to 1 pm and 3:30 to 6:30 pm; and on Sundays from 8:30 am



through noon.

In his remarks this week, which concluded the anniversary celebrations, President Napolitano said that, “The celebrations that began in 2010 and end now have been an important event in our national life,” for their offering a time for taking stock and reflecting on where the country is going. Going beyond the usual generic phrases, he went on to address the country’s problems today: “the need to balance the national budget, to address the problem of the sovereign debt weighing on the state, and the very future of our country.” A large part of the Italian population has shown “great maturity” in its new awareness of the grave problems facing today’s Italy, he went on to say, even as “the principal political forces have taken cognizance of the fact that the electorate is tired, and that public opinion has grown weary of an exasperated and paralyzing conflict, in a time when the emergency is obvious, and would require instead our making the utmost efforts towards rapprochement and convergence in the common interest.”

Moreover, while honoring the specific Italian past, the President also spoke in favor of the European Union and its “far-sighted project for integration and unity” launched in Paris sixty-two years ago. “We will do our part, in the conviction that we must cultivate, not showy, but authentic and vital social and public action, in teaching and national participation that will help to raise to new heights the Italians’ civic consciousness, cohesion and the desire for progress.”

These were strong words indeed, and thoughtful—and just in time for the Tuscan comic Roberto Benigni to steal the scene with an offer to take over the Italian presidency, with a “seven-year technical administration.” Benigni had already marked the anniversary by plunging onto the stage of the San Remo song festival, Garibaldi style, riding on a horse and waving the Italian flag. But then Benigni too turned serious, reading letters from three young men who had been condemned to death during the World War II Resistance. One, age 29, wrote his mother that, “Your little boy is dying without fear.” The actor’s voice broke when he continued from the letter, “There are children who have given their lives for us. It has taken all this death and horror so that I could be here today to write these words.”

Not least, novelist Dacia Maraini spoke of the contributions women made to the battle for Italian unification.

All told in the past year of celebrations there have been 9,700 conferences and meetings; 10,600 schools have been involved. Some 4,500 requests to use the celebration’s logo were received, along with many thousands of letters from ordinary citizens. But what would be Italy if there were not also food involved? From Cuneo, in honor of the celebrations, a gigantic white truffle (tuber magnatum pico) weighing 260 grams was sent to President Napolitano last October. All previous recipients had been from show biz.

Finally, the Accademia Italiana della Cucina took the trouble to pull together 250 unpublished

menus from state banquets held during the past inside the Quirinal Palace. The menus were collected by Academicians Maurizio Campiverdi (primarily), Domenico Musci, Franco Chiarini and Giovanni Chiriotti, with supplementary material culled from the Historical Archives of the Quirinal. They are now published with a forward by President Napolitano himself, in which he comments that, “this book illustrates the evolution of the Italian table and examines the gastronomic culture and the customs of official protocol.” The documentation shows sophisticated Italian cuisine, with all its regional diversity, as it changes from 1861 to the present. The menus are “elegant testimonials to the numerous political and cultural events that were held in the halls of the Quirinale over a century and a half.”

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