

NICOLA DI BARI

Soon after moving to San Diego from Los Angeles Marlene and I were preparing to celebrate our 10th wedding anniversary. We had been to Rome once previously with my parents but rushed through the city as it was at the end of a long tour. We wanted to go back and really absorb it.

It happened at that time that here at St. James we had a visiting priest from Italy – his name was Father Sabino. He was a young enthusiastic priest who loved to give homilies. After Mass, one Sunday, we asked him to our house for dinner which he graciously accepted. While at my home I had the perfect hostage to practice some of my rudimentary Italian.

It turns out that Father Sabino, although he was originally from Bari, Italy, loved Rome and had spent some time there at the Salesian Pontifical University as a student. He said that when we were in Rome I had to meet a teacher of his, a Doctor of Social Psychology by the name of Dottoressa Lucia Monami Pompili, a seventh generation Roman. She sounded quite formidable from a distance but when I met her she was lovely, intelligent, gracious, and gave of her time to show Marlene and I around Rome.

My experiences, adventures, and lessons learned in Rome will be the subject of another meditation but let it be said that it became my favorite city in the world. Everything is there. That first trip was the beginning of multiple sojourns of returns each time discovering a new layer of history, society, religion, and not to say the least discovering new layers of myself.

Upon returning from that first trip I became curious about the city of Fr. Sabino: Bari.

It lies on the Adriatic coast and is a significant seaport for southern Italy. It is also a University city and, similar to Venice, was at the crossroads of the Byzantine and Western culture. Here Peter the Hermit preached the first crusade.

It is presently the home of the Petruzzeli Opera Theater which rivals La Scala in Milan. Fr. Sabino had neglected to mention to me there is a magnificent Cathedral of San Sabino, his namesake, in Bari dating from the 12th century.

And in the same city there is an impressive Romanesque structure, the Basilica di San Nicola. The saint's original shrine was in Myra which is now Turkey. When Myra became controlled by Saracens the relics were, shall we say "relocated" by perhaps Greek sailors to Catholic Bari. There was actually a fight who should have the relics Venice or Bari; a compromise was reached and some of the saint's relics are in Venice and some in Bari.

Nikolaos (or Nicola) of Myra was actually a 4th century Greek bishop. He was born of wealthy Christian parents Epiphanius and Johanna who died while he was young so he was raised by an uncle who was a bishop. After becoming a bishop himself people began to call him "Wonder-Worker."

He was especially known for protecting children through his actions and prayers. Famously, he would give gold to desperately poor maidens for their dowry. Secret gift giving was a reflection of his modesty and humility.

Gift giving in the name of this saint is documented in the Netherlands as early as 1163 on his feast day. And in the 12th century French nuns began leaving candy and gifts outside the doors of children in need in honor of this saint.

His name, St. Nicolaus made many permutations. In the Netherlands he began to be called Sinterclaus. Eventually he came to us as Santa Claus.

As my children were growing up it gradually occurred to them that there were a few inconsistencies about Santa Claus. They drew out the tale as long as they could because in some sense they REALLY didn't want to admit the reality. And the question was eventually asked: "Dad, is there really a Santa Claus?"

With each of them I would explain: “There actually was a Santa Claus at one time. You’ve probably heard the term ‘Jolly Old Saint Nicholas?’ Well that was him. He was a real person who loved children, protected them, and gave them gifts. When he died the people who knew him decided to continue the tradition in his name to put smiles on the faces of children, as he had done. And you will have to carry on his tradition and put smiles on the faces of your children when you have them.”

They seemed to accept this explanation.

You know, we all should invite a priest over for dinner, once in a while; it’s surprising where it can lead.