

“Telling Naples to the World”. Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe on His Imminent Visit to New York

Ottorino Cappelli (December 11, 2010)



The Cardinal of Naples will be in New York this coming January, where he will meet the Italian community, personalities of the cultural and artistic world, academics, scholars, men of faith and laymen alike. His journey is entitled “Dire Napoli” with a slogan: “Don’t shut the door to hope.” Among the most significant moments of Crescenzo Sepe’s stay in New York will be the meeting with Rabbi Schneier and the leaders of the Jewish community, a round table organized by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute on the problems of human migrations, and a conversation at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò on the representation of Naples in cinema and the media. The visit will be accompanied by a beautiful exhibition of Neapolitan crèche art, which will be inaugurated at the Italian Cultural Institute on Tuesday, December 14 (6:30pm). i-Italy—which will be the official press



service for this journey—met Archbishop Sepe in Naples for an exclusive interview about what “telling Naples” to the world means.

You are about to start your journey entitled “Dire Napoli” and your message is that this city, although deeply hurt, should not lose hope. Why do you want to tell Naples to the world and why will you start from New York?

Dire Napoli means telling the world about the stark reality of my city: in all its darkness but also in all its splendor. Why New York? Because, due to massive emigration, today in New York you can find a pulsing heart of Naples, a pulsing heart of Campania.

Coming to New York is not only a beginning, it is also the culmination of my traveling around the world to talk about Naples—a multi-cultural, an inter-cultural city. New York is the financial capital of the U.S., certainly, but it is also the center of a world that revolves around America. “Telling Naples” there—to people who have a particular sensitivity to the subject because they are Neapolitans or descendants of Neapolitans, who have had the possibility to fulfill their potential and to contribute to the growth of that great nation in that famous city—means to give a universal dimension to our effort to show Naples as it really is.

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Your journey will be accompanied by an original exhibition of unique pieces of Neapolitan Crèche art. How can this exhibition contribute to the main goal of Dire Napoli?

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The exhibition we are organizing together with the Italian Cultural Institute is one example of our way to communicate our city, which is the world capital of crèche art. Historically, Neapolitan crèche art involves everybody: kings, queens, noblemen and ordinary people alike.

Crèche art is rooted, embodied in our territory. It isn't just the Holy Family—Joseph, Mary, Baby Jesus—represented here, but also the entire reality of our people.

Thus New York will be the scene of the first international exhibition of this very expressive art, that speaks directly and concretely to the people. When they will see these samples of crèche art, visitors will understand better the originality and the identity of the Neapolitan people.

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A couple of years ago you made the headlines by saying that Naples had entered «one of the darkest nights of its history». You are also a front man in the denunciation of your city's many sufferings as well as in the search for possible solutions. What can the Church do for Naples?

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The Church has examined deeply the situation of our city, for it is close to our people, it understands them. The Church listens to their cries for help, especially from the young people who are hungry for real, concrete signs of hope so that we avoid dejection, pessimism, renunciation and a sense of desperation where a positive answer is no longer possible.

For this reason I have invited everyone, the institutions as well as each individual citizen, to roll up



their sleeves. Only by collaborating, by working together, shall we be able to create the kind of synergy, of unity, that will allow us to overcome darkness. We need to find real solutions, beyond our day-to-day state of emergency. And these I believe lie in education: at home, in the Church, and in the schools.

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"Times New Roman"; }div.Section1 { page: Section1; } A crucial moment of your visit will be the
meeting with Rabbi Arthur Schneier, a religious leader who has made inter-faith dialogue his primary
goal. You will meet him in the same Park East Synagogue where Pope Benedict XVI paid a visit in
2008. What is the meaning of this meeting?
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I am very happy to be able to meet Rabbi Schneier in New York, because his openness to inter-religious dialogue is world renown. He dedicated his entire life to this and New York is the center of inter-religious conversation.

During my journeys as Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples to Asia, Africa, and Latin America, I had many chances to meet representatives of the Jewish communities and always developed cordial and sincere friendships.

Even the Jewish community in Naples is a reference point to me. We built committees, see each other several times a year, we dialogue. I believe it is a very interesting synergy. As the Catholic Church, we put ourselves at their disposal for every need, and at the same time we enrich ourselves from this dialogue.

Because of this it is a particular honor for me to meet rabbi Schneier, because we would like this journey to be reinforced by the contribution of a sincere and transparent dialogue with our older Jewish brothers.

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Your journey will also approach the difficult and delicate social them of human migration, of the acceptance of the "other". You will speak about this at a round table organized by the Calandra Italian American Institute at the City University of New York. You have frequently denounced the difficulties of accepting immigrantes all around the world...

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"Times New Roman"; }div.Section1 { page: Section1; } I find it particularly interesting to be able to
take part in this round-table because it deals with one of the most pressing and complex issues that
we face today. At this point, human migration is a global phenomenon. Regrettably, it seems that as
long as we are dealing with markets and products,
with the the circulation of money and goods, everything goes well enough.
Yet when it comes to receiving and accommodating people men and women in difficult
circumstances there emerge so many difficulties and concerns.
This happens, I believe, because we still lack a philosophical category of acceptance, a mentality
whereby we are able to accept the "other", men and women who are stranger to us.
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"Times New Roman"; }div.Section1 { page: Section1; } You will also be participating in another
meeting, at New York University's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò. This will be dedicated to the
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“representation” of Naples, and you will be discussing this with representatives of the world of communication and cinema that have dealt with Naples. Is the objective to communicate an image of Naples that, without hiding its pain, will also show the paths to hope?

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Naples is a postcard. It has its chiaroscuro. It has always evoked a certain interest from a cinematographical, artistic and cultural point of view. And there have been many producers, actors and artists that have contributed to a representation of Naples with a realist hue, certainly focusing on the dark aspects, but also on the potential of this city: its kindness, its openness... in other words the colors, tastes, and songs of Naples. And also its great cultural aspect. This is the way we want to tell Naples, contributing to a realistic representation of this city, with both its lights and shadows.

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You seem to be proud to speak the Neapolitan dialect—something that not everybody is in your city. And you often like to greet your followers with the phrase «'A Maronna v'accumpagna» (May the Holy Virgin be with You). What is your relationship to Naples and to being Neapolitan?

I am Neapolitan. I was born about 12 miles outside of Naples. I am very proud of my roots and I feel an intense connection to my city and I pray that God will give me the strength, through the end of my days, to continue to live amongst my people, to engage with them directly, to experience their lives in the most concrete way possible. And this also means expressing myself in the dialect of our region, our native tongue. I believe that language is a sign of culture.

When I first became the Cardinal of Napoli, at the end of my first homily in the Cathedral I used this expression that I learned from my mother... It is one of my oldest memories, when I was a kid and she prepared me to go to school, she used to kiss me on the forehead and tell me... it was also the last thing she told me before she died: « 'A Maronna t'accumpagna.»

And I want to say the same to all those who are watching us, to the whole United States, to the beautiful, famous city of New York, and to all Italians who live there, in particular to the Neapolitans of New York: « 'A Maronna v'accumpagna ».

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