

“DireNapoli.” The visit of Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe to New York to tell the world about his city’s pains and hopes.

Ottorino Cappelli (January 07, 2011)



This January the Cardinal of Naples Crescenzo Sepe will be in New York, where he will meet the Italian and Italian-American 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.” In this interview Mons. Gennaro Matino, professor of theology, author of numerous books, and Cardinal Sepe’s vicar for communications, tells us about the reasons and the goals of this journey.

Let us start with Naples, the city is known for its contradictions—moving beauty and sheer violence, pain and hope.

Naples is too much. It is an exaggerated city, a society typified by the use of excessive adjectives. It is too disorderly, too warm, too beautiful. Too much of everything—and of nothing. And this exaggerated dimension says much about its particular ability to narrate itself for good or bad. It is all



but an anonymous city. It isn't one of many cities. Because of its destiny and its own history it cannot be common. It is deeply different, in every case and every situation. In all, its thousands of years it has been different. It shares such diversity with very few cities of the world. Very few cities are this famous for so many things: the music, the songs, the landscape, the climate; the fascination with its crèche art and the blood of San Gennaro – the only one among many curdled bloodstreams to have that particular consistency... Also, for the Neapolitans themselves who, like the Jews, remain Neapolitans always, never completely integrated in any part of the world, because their being a people takes precedence over anything else in defining their sense of belonging. And so it is easy for a Neapolitan to have emigrated to America and learned English, without having ever learned Italian.

And Naples is “too much” also because of its beauties—not only natural but historical, architectural, archeological. It is difficult to imagine other places like Herculaneum or Pompeii, where you bend down to pick up broccoli or friarelli and find amphorae. Too much of everything. If one travels around the world, one sees many places where a museum is built around a single memory of a Latin past; it could even be a column. In Naples there are so many treasures on every corner that they are usually abandoned. And the walls of Pompeii are crumbling! It is simply too much. An excess of beauties, which paradoxically causes the incapacity of managing them. Excess itself becomes unmanageable. I remember what Goethe said in his “Italian Journey” when he arrived in Naples. He was surprised by its heavenly beauty and by the difficulties in managing this beauty by the “devils”, meaning the Neapolitans. Not to mention how Stendhal, in the early Nineteenth century, spoke of Naples as one of the most beautiful capitals of Europe... and when Italy was unified he said that “Naples is the only capital of Italy.”

This excess generates passion, loose living, affection, an extraordinary emotional capacity, but also envy, jealousy, a wish to deport, to take away. Therefore, except for a brief moment in the 1700s, Naples never had a government “of its own.” It always had one from the outside. Others who came and conquered it. And the most dramatic aspect is that since Italian unification 150 years ago and throughout its history, including the democratic republic, once again others came to take—without giving. While many funds were brought to Naples, the city's true tragedy is that the Neapolitans themselves were the first to betray the city they are supposed to love so much. This is because we do not respect it entirely, as our mother. This is the pain of Naples.

Doesn't this depend on what was once called the “model of development” that has been chosen for Naples? Many say that this city has been pushed towards a type of social and economic development that is grossly inconsistent with its culture, and this has created intractable contradictions.

Certainly. Since the early 1900s, in the times of Nitti, in trying to decide whether Naples's future was to be based on tourism or industry, the latter was chosen. This choice brought some results, but buried the city's vocation, its being typical, unique, unrepeatable, by trying to make it common. Afterwards, the policies of Neapolitan politicians always tried to pull Naples northward, while they should have given Naples its rightful collocation as a Mediterranean city. This is the crucial point. To truly develop, to have its own future, Naples cannot be common, it must stay different. And any type of development must go hand in hand with the originality of Naples.

Today, in the globalized world, Naples suffers more because globalization is not part of its culture. An example: globalization brings the supermarket; but the supermarket offends the small shops of Naples, and the dynamics of that economy. At most, Naples could have a casba, a broader term for the southern market, a place where, in other words, individuality goes hand in hand with community—not a community imprisoned in a service structure that helps few and hurts many.

It would take a lot of political courage to assert this view and translate it into action...

I think that the problem with Neapolitan politics was not being able to understand the Neapolitan-ness of politics. So when there was the famous, devastating earthquake in 1980—which was quickly transformed in a great business—others understood how to make money from it. Many came from the North of Italy in this tax-favorable area, they built warehouses in Campania, but emptied them of progress, local jobs, and brought the capital created here up North, and that is how Italy's North-East was born. It has always been this way.

An inquiry by Paolo Savona, economist and former minister of the Ciampi government in the 1990s, used the metaphor of the leaking pot. He said that while it is true that there is a flow of money from North to South, it is also true that 80% of the Northern economy is maintained somehow



by the South. We must figure out if we should only be a place in which to import the wellbeing of others, in their own interest, or begin to have a truly “Neapolitan” politics, economy and development.

Here lies the necessity of “Telling Naples” in a different way.

Therefore, with your initiative—“DireNapoli”—the city isn’t only the object of speech, but it becomes the subject that talks to the world. It speaks the truth about its pain but, as you often underline, it also speaks about its hopes...

Pain and hope are linked. I am convinced that Naples has yet a lot to say, if it can elaborate its own public discourse. Naples hosts every possible point of intervention: enormous but thrilling problems to be resolved, which would bring great satisfaction to whoever solves them. This is why Naples becomes a global challenge. Here, problems are anticipated that might hit others afterwards. We are exaggerated in everything. Also in this. I am convinced that as soon as we find the first solution the others will follow like rosary chains. One tied to the other. I am convinced that if you solve the first problem of Naples, you solve all of them, because it will give birth to trust and hope.

The real challenge is to be able to connect great debates and small results. It is possible to decipher the words of today’s widespread dissatisfaction and translate it into action with a word of hope, on the condition that small results begin to follow. Even if they are microscopic, they must show that we can make it. I am convinced that Naples itself can become a challenge for the world if we understand that in these years of globalization it pays off to be individuals, and that in complicated times it pays off to be simple, that in times of unilateral opinions, there exist different points of view. I believe we should learn to offer our history to the world as a feasible model that can work also in other urban contexts. The suburbs that advance towards the city center, the non-integration between upper-class and lower-class Naples, the occupation, the garbage, the crime rate, the unlawfulness, the corruption—and at the same time the family, the welcoming, the generosity, the creativity, the imagination ... there is too much of too much. We must find a feasible middle way that respects Naples’ originality, one that does not offend it.

So what is the role of the Catholic Church in all this? Why would the Church of Naples take upon itself such seemingly titanic socio-political challenges?

What does love mean? If the commandment says to love others as you would love yourself, and comes from the ancient root of human value that nothing must be done to others that you wouldn’t want to be done to yourself, how can I sing the psalms of the Lord in a foreign land? To predicate the Gospels I must announce love, but to live love I must be able to be true and therefore just. The Church’s is a great challenge. It cannot stay closed within its walls, in its buildings, while everything around it collapses. And then let’s think about it: if the Church intervenes after an earthquake, no one is surprised by the fact that it does everything possible, with its structures, to help those under the ruins. But are there more ruins than the ones we see, here in Naples? That is why the role of the Church becomes political, but it has nothing to do with party politics. It comes from its need to live the city according to the Gospel. That is why the Church promotes commitment in telling a different Naples. Because it loves the Neapolitans. It is the Church of Naples, it is embodied here. It is placed in this territory and cannot do otherwise.

Thus, such a “political” role of the Church becomes in these circumstances a phenomenon of communication. Politics is telling. And the Cardinal of Naples is travelling the world to “Tell Naples”.

The Gospels are communication. It isn’t an intimate fact! Also, the first to create a global communication network was Jesus, when he told his disciples “Launch your net among the peoples!” He chose twelve and sent them in twelve different directions around the known world of the time. The same was done by other disciples, who sent others somewhere else. The Gospel is a piece of news that must travel.

Therefore, it is obvious that the Church must develop its own politics of communication, neither narcissistic nor ostentatious. We need to spread the formidable word to tell the truth in a time in which lies are often more qualified. So if I want to Tell Naples, I certainly don’t hide the pain of this city, but I also want to somehow tell its hope for redemption, and its beauty. I believe that, for example, we must speak about Gomorra but also about a Naples that lives, pulsates, suffers, celebrates, waits and hopes. All this must be done, it is legitimate, but alongside the sick part of



Naples, the good side must also have a voice. That is the hope of Naples.

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