



“Not Just a Thing of Nostalgia.” New York Celebrates Apulia. A Conversation with Michele Emiliano, Mayor of Bari

Francesca Giuliani (April 17, 2012)



Michele Emiliano, Mayor of Bari, was the guest of honor of the United Pugliesi Foundation’s Annual Gala, celebrated on April 15. In an exclusive interview with i-Italy, Emiliano discussed the similarities between Apulia and America, and the importance of keeping the relationship between these two realities alive and passionate, for the growth and the enrichment of both.

These days and until April 26, New York celebrates its “Settimana Pugliese,” or “Apulian Week,” one of the most awaited events by the lovers of Italy’s heel in the United States.

The initiative is organized each year by the [United Pugliesi Federation](#) [2], association of the Apulian heritage bearers in New York which counts on over 2000 member families and groups all the Apulian association of Greater New York.

On April 15, the Annual Gala of the United Pugliesi Federation was held at [Russo’s On The Bay](#) [3], in Howard Beach, Queens.



Michele Emiliano, Mayor of Bari, was guest of honor of the event. Emiliano has held his position as Mayor from 2004. Before he was elected, he was the Anti-Mafia Procurator for the District of Bari, a role that he maintained from 1995 to 2003.

Invited by John Mustaro, President of the United Pugliesi Federation, Emiliano had the chance to meet the Apulian community of New York and representatives from the Italian institutions in the city, such as Consul General of Italy Natalia Quintavalle and Antonio Bernardini, Deputy Permanent Representative of Italy to the United Nations.

Michele Emiliano described the event as exciting and extremely meaningful: “It is especially meaningful for the Apulians in Apulia, as the Apulian community in the United States supports them very actively,” he told i-Italy.

Such occasions, he added, “are not just a thing of nostalgia and memories from the past, they have a very practical side: after years of hard work our fellow Apulians in the United States have acquired key positions in this country, and they are happy to put their social role to the service of the Apulian enterprises. Their support is vital to these enterprises.”

During the conversation with i-Italy, the Mayor underlined how proud the Apulians are of their fellows’ achievements abroad.

He elaborated on how New York City represents a fundamental benchmark for Apulians: “Through New York City we can reach out to the whole world. This city is a symbol of peaceful coexistence for all mankind.”

In this respect, Apulia and New York City have something in common: “Apulia is a borderland, and it has a millenary culture of tolerance, it welcomes everybody. Let’s not forget that the saint patron of the region, Saint Nicholas, was a black man.”

If Apulians are surely a warm-hearted and welcoming people, what they still don’t do enough of is venturing outside of their beautiful land. “For some of them traveling is a taboo. They should learn more about the rest of the world, learn more languages,” Emiliano tells i-Italy.

The Regional government could also be more helpful: “It could support Apulians more in their scouting activities abroad. There are so many products from Apulia that would perform very well in the global market, but they have to be promoted and presented in the best way.”

This is also true when we consider Apulia itself as a touristic destination: “Tourists really appreciate the proximity to the sea and the tranquility of our countryside, even more so when they learn that they can rent a trullo house or a masseria for their stay.”

The Provinces of Trani, Brindisi, Lecce and Taranto will be voting next May 6 and 7 to renew the composition of their local governments. We ask Emiliano about the qualities that a good Mayor should possess to help his or her community thrive. “Mayors are well know with the local notables and with children alike: they hold a community together.”

Their mission is to hold their communities together even when parts of it are located on other latitudes: “They have to represent their communities and be present in the activities of their members abroad as well. That’s the way to generate enthusiasm and to keep everybody engaged with the very important solidarity with the homeland. If they miss on this, mayors fail on a very important part of their job.”

The American authorities are also very interested in preserving the Italian heritage in the United States, Emiliano tells i-Italy: “Losing this element of cultural richness would be terrible. Homologation is the opposite of what made the US a great country: diversity.”

Emiliano is hopeful that the Year of Italian Culture in the United States, 2013, will be a valuable opportunity to reach out to the younger generations of Italian-Americans, helping them discover their cultural heritage in all its complexity: “We need to find new ways for them to reconnect with



Italian language. Bilingualism is a great chance to help both of our countries grow together.”

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