

Mario Cuomo: 1932-2015. Some Personal Reflections

Anthony J. Tamburri (January 02, 2015)



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In my eight years in New York I have had the distinct pleasure, indeed the privilege, of having spent a number of occasions in conversation with Mario Cuomo. They were moments of all sorts, such as the following three: an interview under the spotlights of Italics during a NIAF New York event; a private moment outside the large dining room before he was to celebrate Geraldine Ferraro at a



NOIAW luncheon; close to an hour chatting with him while we waited for the arrival of Italy's then prime minister Mario Monti.

During all of these occasions and others, two things stood out: one, he gave you his undivided attention, contrary to some others who often look over your shoulder as they react to something you have said; two, he truly listened to what you said, not just to react to it, but indeed to parse what you said in his response to you, in his attempt to uncover, together with you, the essence that undergirded the argument at hand. These are my first reactions to hearing of his death a few hours ago.

Among the many things he is known to have said, his statement to the New Republic, "You campaign in poetry. You govern in prose," seems one of the more demonstrative, lyrical phrases of who he was. The rhetorical beatitude of poetry and the practical elegance of prose perhaps best exemplify his profound understanding of the human condition. He was, for sure, the last big-hearted liberal of our times.

He sprang onto the national scene in 1984, with his famous speech at the Democratic Convention. It was then, in that speech, that the entire United States finally saw the elegance of his rhetoric and the substance of his humanity that New Yorkers and their surrounding neighbors had already witnessed on numerous occasions. It was then, on that national stage, where he rebuked the individualism of the 1980s that was beginning to insinuate itself into the social fabric of the US; he especially underscored said social ill with his "Tales of two cities" reference, defending instead the "family of the United States," in which we should all look out for each other. Such an idea he defined in his 1984 Iona College commencement speech, as he described "what a proper government should be: the idea of family, mutuality, the sharing of benefits and burdens for the good of all, feeling one another's pain, sharing one another's blessings — reasonably, honestly, fairly, without respect to race, or sex, or geography, or political affiliation."

He was, surely, an inclusive liberal, believing in the freedom of the individual as well as the government's guarantees of individual rights and liberties: a form of government, namely, that was free of prejudice and bigotry, and that allowed freedom of action with specific regard to issues of personal expression and beliefs. He underscored as much in his 1983 inauguration speech as governor of New York: "I believe government's purpose, basically, is to allow those blessed with talent to go as far as they can on their own. But I believe government also has an obligation to assist those who for whatever inscrutable reason have been left out by fate — the homeless, the infirmed, the destitute — to help provide those necessary things, which through no fault of their own they cannot provide for themselves."

Indeed, he believed in the power of individuals to achieve, as we saw above. But he also believed in the power of individuals to practice their own beliefs in concomitance with others. Cuomo's insistence on such liberties of religious expression was, one might say, stronger than his own Catholicism. Or, better still, we can say that he saw the former as an issue regarding the polis, whereas the latter was an issue regarding the individual, and the polis in this case should prevail. Challenged by his own archbishop in this regard back in 1984, Cuomo delivered yet another landmark speech at the University of Notre Dame that same year. In underscoring his distinction between the individual and the whole, he stated: "I protect my right to be a Catholic by preserving your right to believe as a Jew, a Protestant, or non-believer, or as anything else you choose. We know that the price of seeking to force our beliefs on others is that they might some day force theirs on us. This freedom is the fundamental strength of our unique experiment in government. In the complex interplay of forces and considerations that go into the making of our laws and policies, its preservation must be a pervasive and dominant concern."

I shall leave it to the political pundits to tease out his legacy in that regard. I shall also leave it to my



reader to ponder the fact that my citations come from Mario Cuomo's talks in 1983 and 1984.

Those years were, for sure, changing times; and Cuomo's voice was much needed. He was undoubtedly convinced of his Democratic ideals, but he was also open-minded and not bound by convention. He was, by all we have seen of and heard from him, that beacon of light for acceptance of all during an era when the shadow of self-absorbing individualism was looming ever so widely, overcoming notions of common or collective interests, and the inclusive pronoun "we," which Cuomo so often underscored, was losing out to the exclusive singular pronoun "I". With his death, we lost our true liberal lion, someone who always put the "we" before the "I."

It is said that when he was once asked what he wanted on his tombstone, he responded with two words: "He tried!" Indeed, he did! And in so doing, he succeeded like very few have. We shall miss both the eloquence and elegance of his speech and action.

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