

Telling Naples to the World

Ottorino Cappelli (May 28, 2015)



Genaro Matino is launching a major cultural exchange project that he has been working on for years. Evocatively named “Naples in the World,” it will provide an innovative platform for talking about Naples—a city of solidarity and hope, rather different than the one stereotypically depicted in the media. And he has chosen New York as the site to lay the foundation for his project. In this exclusive interview Gennaro Matino discusses the details of his trip and his view for the future.

I sat down with Mons. Gennaro Matino in his office in Naples before his departure for New York where he was invited to participate, together with the Mayor of Naples Luigi de Magistris, in an international conference on immigration at the Calandra Institute entitled “The Gold of Naples” (June 3 at 6 pm). But that’s not all. Matino is also here to launch a major cultural exchange project that he has been working on for years. Evocatively named “Naples in the World,” it will provide an innovative platform for talking about Naples—a city of solidarity and hope, rather different than the one stereotypically depicted in the media. And he has chosen New York as the site to lay the foundation for his project. In this exclusive interview Gennaro Matino discusses the



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Why “Naples in the World?”

Naples has an extraordinary wealth of cultural, historical and humanitarian resources. Thanks in part to the massive waves of southern emigration that, in a way, Naples epitomizes. To the rest of the world, this city is synonymous with Italy; Italy is Neapolitan. I remember many years ago, in honor of a President of the Italian Republic traveling to Moscow, the Soviets sang “O sole mio,” as though it were our national anthem. To be Naples, to speak of Naples, means to tell the world the story of this population’s culture, its identity. In his Italian Journey, [Goethe](#) [2] wrote that to “enter” Italy you had to pass through Naples. By necessity. Vienna, Paris and Naples were the European capitals.

You have to start there to understand how, in recent decades, Naples could turn into Gomorrah, into a symbol of criminality, the Camorra and unspeakable violence. A city with two thousand years of history reduced to a hopeless image of hell. That is where you have to start in order to reverse course. Because this city has enormous cultural potential. It is profoundly humane and deeply spiritual. Naples possesses many virtues. It’s an incubator of social ferment, a multicultural city with much to offer that lies at the heart of the Mediterranean, the cradle of civilization. We have to communicate that to the world. Naples is making its comeback and wants to occupy its former standing in the world.

Which Naples do you mean to describe?

The authentic Naples, the city as it is, with all its contradictions, the dark and the light. There’s a lot of light in Naples. And that light doesn’t just come from the sun that strokes—and occasionally blinds—the city 300 days out of the year. Naples, the center of the Mediterranean, has a message to bear, one of peace, integration and acceptance that today’s world desperately needs to hear.

‘Naples in the World’ begins in New York. Do you see a vital connection between the two cities?

It’s no coincidence that Naples and New York are both on the 41st parallel. A penchant for the new is written in their DNA. The ancient Greek name for Naples is Neapolis, the new city. ‘New’ because it was born of diverse civilizations, of the combination of cultural sensibilities that produced “the new” almost naturally. It was a Greek city, a Roman city, an Arab city, and later Norman, French, Spanish. It was a major capital and a land of conquest. It was a point of departure for the great waves of southern emigration, and today it receives immigrants from the southern part of the world. It’s almost a natural symbol of the melting pot that, in Naples as in New York, doesn’t assert itself on its own—we have to work at it, partly to keep people from merely assimilating into an indistinct dominant culture. Like New York, Naples gains strength not by smoothing over its differences but by its ability to coexist and commingle. The mission of “Naples in the World” couldn’t begin anywhere but New York. But then we’ll travel far. We’ll get as far as New Delhi, another city with “new” in its name.

The project has a broad scope. But, as you get ready to leave for New York, tell us more about what you’ll do and how you’ll do it. Where will you start?

First I’ll be participating with the Mayor of Naples in an international conference on immigration at the heart of which is the parallel between Naples and New York, both past and present. I have known and admired the Dean of the [Calandra Institute](#) [3], Anthony Tamburri, for many years, and I’m grateful that he thought to invite me to be among their guest speakers. Then we’ll go to Little Italy, where we’ll launch our project.

Historically speaking, Little Italy is a Little Naples, insofar as Naples has played the role of representative for primarily southern immigration in the US. It’s no surprise that Little Italy and Naples share the same sad fate of becoming a vague and confusing “brand” in recent decades. In the United States, Italian immigration has been associated with the mafia and crime; with a traditional, even medieval culture. And yet Italian immigrants—southerners and their



descendants—are the ones who can convey the message of peace we’re launching from Naples and get through to the world. Through a series of initiatives, Naples in New York seeks to contribute to rebuilding a relationship between the two cities.

The foundation of your project is spiritual.

It all began with the twinning of your parish and the Church of Most Precious Blood, historically speaking the church of “San Gennaro” in Little Italy. And that’s based on the special relationship you developed with the new pastor, Donald Sakano, who is also a quarter Italian.

Yes, one of the reasons people come together and learn to coexist and appreciate one another is spiritual in nature. You don’t have to be a believer to know that. We met Monsignor Sakano, and the admiration was mutual. He’s a very active and practical man. He wants to revitalize Little Italy. He wants to reverse the current trend by which this historic place is losing its identity.

He appealed to Naples, and we listened.

By twinning the two parishes, we are building the first bridge. We are creating an opportunity for all Neapolitans and New Yorkers—not only people of faith—to get to know one another. We’re starting with spiritual exchange, but we’re casting a wider net—cultural, laic. We’re organizing something brand new for the [Feast of San Gennaro](#) [4], as well as a big event in December: an exhibit of the Neapolitan nativity scene in New York. There will be a lot of side events too, involving the culture, arts, food. But that’s just the beginning.

Through “Naples in the World,” we’re bringing hundreds of Americans and Italian Americans to Naples to get married (for civil and religious ceremonies), see the city—its hundreds of churches as well as its museums, piazzas, sidestreets and theaters—and get to know our thousand-year-old culture, its rich contemporary scene, and the terrible and fascinating underbelly of Naples. We are gearing up to bring American guests to visit the villages where their ancestors emigrated from. We’re bringing Naples to New York and New York to Naples. It’s a major intercultural exchange project that begins from afar and will ultimately travel far.

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[3] <http://www.qc.cuny.edu/Academics/Centers/Italian/Pages/default.aspx>

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