

1-29-2007

Our Lady of Constantinople, Wally, Bob and the Sannicandrese Jews

Michael C. Vocino
University of Rhode Island, vocino@uri.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lib_ts_pubs



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Citation/Publisher Attribution

Vocino, Michael C.. "Our Lady of Constantinople, Wally, Bob and the Sannicandrese Jews." , (2007).
https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lib_ts_pubs/15

This Article is brought to you by the University of Rhode Island. It has been accepted for inclusion in Technical Services Department Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu. For permission to reuse copyrighted content, contact the author directly.

Our Lady of Constantinople, Wally, Bob and the Sannicandrese Jews

Bells control Sannicandro and the Church controls the bells. Every quarter hour the bells ring to remind citizens of the time. There are at least seven churches in this town. Each one has its own bell tower. They all ring at different times, so one can imagine that an unsynchronized chorus of bells every fifteen minutes can be unnerving at first. One becomes accustomed to them and even dependent on them.

In addition to the time, the bells notify every one of deaths, funerals, baptisms, marriages, holy days, confirmations and every time a priest consecrates the bread and wine during a Mass. When it is time for a Mass there is a special chorus five minutes before the ceremony. If one were trying to sleep on a Sunday morning it would be difficult to do when some of the churches have seven a.m. Masses and then every half hour after that the other churches call the faithful to their Sunday Masses.

The bells also make it clear that, though many of the Sannicandrese are indifferent at best to their Catholicism, the Church is central to the life of this town. Although the state is no longer officially Catholic, Catholicism is still taught in the schools but non-believers can now opt out of religion classes. The crucifix still hangs in all classrooms and offices. The Church marks all of life's rites of passage: birth, baptism, marriage, communion, confirmation, and death.

There are many schools controlled by the religious orders. One sees religious sisters and Franciscan friars in the town frequently. The local priests all walk the streets

in black gowns. I have yet to see a priest -- and there are at least four here -- in anything other than the traditional black gown worn by diocesan priests.

Even if you weren't inclined to visit the churches in the town, it is almost impossible to interact on a personal basis with other members of the community without doing so. I visit the churches every night to listen to Italian spoken by the local priest. The repetition of the prayers also helps me to hear the nuances in the language and to use them in my attempts at spoken Italian. I also meditate during the Masses. It's a unique place to collect one's thoughts, even thoughts that have nothing to do with religion. No one speaks to you for an hour and your mind is free to wander to the brightest and darkest places it holds whenever one so desires. It is a great place to be alone and yet still be surrounded by hundreds of people (at least on Sundays.) Weekday Masses are populated by maybe fifty or so people with most being older or middle-aged women. I was actually amazed to see so many men of all ages, and younger people in their twenties and thirties at Sunday and holyday Masses. They may be irreverent toward most of what the Church stands for, but they still come and listen.

I went to a special Mass on the feast of St. Rose of Lima. It is the feast day of Rosanna (Italians still mark name days) and the local Church of St. John (Giovanni) has a statue of St. Rose and they make a big deal out of her feast. Over the main altar of San Giovanni is a statue of the blessed mother. She is dressed totally in a white gown, hand-sewn and decorated with hundreds of gold-thread flowers. She is holding her baby Son who is similarly dressed. She and her Son are both wearing gold crowns.

Several years ago, the state of Italy gave money to each of the Churches here to repair and renew their physical plants. Statues, paintings, whole buildings were recreated

into what can only be described as pre-Vatican II splendor. There are statues of a number of saints, candles, draperies, wall and ceiling paintings, all beautifully restored. Each altar and every alcove in every church has a saint. It is as though Vatican II was translated here in a totally different way than say for Catholics at Christ the King Church in Kingston who now have a Church devoid of virtually any statuary and certainly of any statues of saints. In comparison to any Church here in Sannicandro, the Church in Kingston could easily be seen as a Protestant edifice. All the pomp, circumstance, and ceremonial trappings are gone from Christ the King. They all remain here in Sannicandro. All the Masses are still said with the priest facing the altar except in the Chiesa Madre where that change is determined at each Mass by individual priests. Most still face the altar.

Anyway, while at the Mass for St. Rose of Lima, I was meditating on the statue of the Blessed Mother and her Son all dressed in a real and quite stunning dress. One of my cousins leaned over to me as I smiled at my thoughts on the Blessed Mother. He said to me, "You really love her, don't you?"

I said, "Yes." What I really was smiling at, however, was what Wally would say if he saw the dress on this statue. He and I know gay men who would kill to get their hands on that dress! I was also thinking that Wally and Bob would be reminded of Wally's joke of the statue of Mary and the purse being held by the Blessed Mother! The three of us would be sitting among all these penitents trying to hold back our laughs. This statue had no purse and, I thought as my cousin returned to the Mass, "Whatever gay man created this incredibly creative ambiance forgot to give her a purse!"

My mind then pushed me to another internal laugh as I remembered the story of Al and Mary Ann's wedding night. Al's friends had taken a life-sized statue of the Sacred Heart and placed it in their wedding chamber!

During the last week, the Church in Sannicandro has opened the oldest of its structures: San Giorgio. It is a small edifice in the oldest part of the town. The Church itself dates back to the 12th century. It has also been restored and it is absolutely beautiful. Statues everywhere and where there are not any saints, there are candles or paintings. The ceiling has one large gold chandelier with smaller versions placed geometrically around it. The altar has a statue of St. Dominic on the left and another male saint I don't know on the right. In the center is a golden statue of our Lady of Constantinople. She is one of the patrons of the town. Every year at this time they have a special novena in honor of her. Incense, candles, the works, it is just amazing. A Franciscan priest from the local monastery gives a novena for seven days. Last night the local priest apologized for not being able to attend the final days of the novena because he is going to Lourdes. He invited the entire town to submit "una busta" (an envelope) with requests for intentions to Our Lady of Lourdes. He would transport them with him if people would like him to do so.

One night as we walked out of the Church of San Giorgio, I asked my cousin Michele why Our Lady of Constantinople was the patron saint of this small Italian town. I thought is strange that a woman who supposedly appeared in Istanbul would be the patron of this out of the way Italian village. When I expressed to him my surprise, he asked me if we had any churches in the U.S. named after Our Lady of Lourdes. I said, "Of course," to which he replied, "Why would a town in the United States have a church

dedicated to an apparition that occurred in a small, unknown French town?” He made his point and then went on to say, “It was probably the only statue the Sannicandrese of the 12th century could find or afford of Our Lady!” he laughed.

If the Church is omnipresent in the town, it still has not stopped the growth of other religions. The town has an evangelical protestant church on Via Gramsci and it has a Jewish synagogue built by the Jews of Sannicandro as described in the book, *The Prophet of Sannicandro*.

I first learned of the Jews of Sannicandro from Bob Weisbord. One day at lunch, “the boys” at the Faculty Club were talking of where their ancestors came from, I responded “Sannicandro Garganico.” Weisbord jumped with surprise and said, “You’re kidding.” I said no, that I wasn’t kidding and he told me the story of a group of Sannicandrese who thought they were the only Jews in the world.

At one time they were Catholics, but their “prophet”, a fellow by the name of Donato Manduzio, began to read the Bible and to practice a rudimentary form of Judaism. He collected a number of followers and they began to practice Judaism thinking they were the only people to recognize that Judaism was the faith to be followed. During World War II, the group came into contact with a Jewish soldier, Pynchas Lapidis, who later became a famous historian and he put them in contact with the Chief Rabbi in Rome. Lapidis later wrote their history in a book titled, *The Prophet of Sannicandro*.

After World War II, the group went to Israel *en masse* but the founder and a few followers remained behind and some are buried in the local cemetery including Manduzio. I met one of the group from the local synagogue in a store she runs on Via

Gramsci when I noticed that her daughter was wearing a Star of David. I, of course, asked if they were part of the Manduzio group and she said “Yes,” and told me where the synagogue was. The group is very self conscious and they don’t like to talk of their beginnings. They have been paid large sums of money by the press, including the BBC which produced a “special” about them, but they remain wary of any publicity. She told me this when I told her I was interested in seeing the synagogue. She did invite me to meet with the rabbi (yes, they have a rabbi!) and her husband, but I never had the time to follow-up. I hope to be here repeatedly over the next few years, so I will meet her again.

Although isolated from most of history’s forces, Sannicandro Garganico has created history on its own.

michael vocino
Sannicandro Gco.
August 2004