

Sending a Telegram to the Pope

Joey Skee (August 20, 2008)



Power, Humor, and the Triumph of the Lower Bodily Stratum.



As long as I can remember, this 6" x 6" square ceramic plaque hung in the family bathroom. It seems that even before I could read, and well before I learned (standard) Italian, I knew what the words meant:

There will be great popes,
there will be powerful kings
but they are just like me
when they sit here.

Recently, I asked my mother, Anna, about the plaque's provenance. She told me she'd bought it in Naples in the summer of 1958 on a return visit to Italy. "Why?" I asked. "I liked what it said," she replied. "Everyone is equal." What better expression of Gramsci's concept of a counter hegemonic national popular culture as augmented by Bakhtin's notion of the lower bodily stratum than this unassuming souvenir?

My mom has always displayed an anti-authoritarian feistiness. As a child during the early 1960s, I witnessed her repeated resistance to representatives of state and church power, taking on cops and priests alike. Her contumacy was not untypical of many southern Italians, as authors and scholars such as Carlo Levi and Richard Gambino have noted. (After World War II, Italian-Americans became increasingly compliant as they bought into a white, middle class, and ultimately politically conservative agenda.)

As a returning emigrant, my mother may have found the plaque's piquant adage particularly appealing. Having left Maranola, a hamlet (frazione) of Formia (Latina province) in Lazio in 1951, where she had experienced both the splenetic fulminations of a malevolent stepmother and the terror of World War II, my mother may have felt empowered by her new and invigorating status as an (Italian-)American woman - married, with a male child, and flush with dollars - to confront the waning powers from her past.

At some point, the plaque had fallen and for years the broken pieces sat forgotten in a drawer. Eventually, my father glued them together and I reclaimed the family heirloom. Today, it rests on a miniature pedestal in my family's bathroom.

Last year at a family house party, my father Enrico unexpectedly exclaimed: "I'm going to send a letter to the Pope," as he strode to the bathroom. My kids were amused at their grandfather's irreverent proclamation. Later I asked him about his scatological reference, one I have never heard my father utter. He explained that when he was growing up in Carunchio (Chieti province, Abruzzo), male family members would state, "Vado a mandare un telegramma al Papà" as they made their way to the weeds behind the house to defecate. "There was no bathroom, not even an outhouse," my 86-year-old father told me. "Everything changed after the war."

My unbaptized, heathen children, my "spiritual" wife, and I - an apostate and born-again atheist - have since modernized the expression: "I'm faxing the Pope." (The public announcement of one's evacuation is a ludicrous yet enduring family tradition well-suited for a small Brooklyn apartment with a single bathroom.) At times, we update the Italian peasant epigram to suit our political leanings by simply stating, "I'm emailing George Bush;" feculent offerings and a ribald statement. And this, my dear friends, is one way Italian-American culture is reproduced.

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