

Peacemaking in the City

Jerry Krase (November 25, 2014)



The peacemaking services of Francis of Assisi have always been needed in the Big Apple, which presents glaring evidence of inter-group fear, hostility and potential for violence. No ethnic group has been immune. Italian Americans have often been in the middle of these conflicts as both victims and victimizers.

My good friend, and fellow half-Italian, Paul Moses recently published *The Saint and the Sultan* in which he wrote: "If the greatest Christian saint since the time of the apostles had opposed the Crusade and peacefully approached Muslims at a time when they were supposed to be mortal enemies, that action can inspire and instruct us today..."

The story of Francis of Assisi and [Sultan Malik al-Kamil](#) [2] says there is a better way than resentment, suspicion and warfare. It opens the door to respect, trust and peace. It needs to be told anew."

The potential for violence

The neighborhoods in which I lived as a child were noted for gang violence. Venturing out of the Red Hook low-income housing projects was dangerous as it was surrounded by Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican, and "mixed" gangs who, when not fighting each other, found kids from "the projects" an acceptable alternative to assaulting each other.

When we moved to the edge of Bedford-Stuyvesant in the 1950s, African Americans were added to the multiethnic menu of gangs one had to avoid travelling beyond the block.

The history of bias-related crimes in New York presents glaring evidence of inter-group fear, hostility and potential for violence. No ethnic group has been immune. An internet search of local newspapers for inter-ethnic violence incidents over the past two years give this partial listing of polarities: Asian-Black, Asian-Hispanic, Asian-White, Black- Jewish, Hispanic-Jewish, and Indian-White. Most recent additions are anti-Muslim.

Victims and victimizers

Italian Americans have often been in the middle of these conflicts as both victims and victimizers. The most iconic, was the murder of Yusuf Hawkins, an African American youth, in Bensonhurst in 1989. Warren Strugatch's "Bensonhurst: Cartoon Sociology Masquerades as Solid Reporting," captured the essence of the global media's view of the neighborhood "inhabited almost entirely" by unemployed 18 to 22 year old men dressed in "tank tops and T-shirts who were proud of their whiteness and don't like blacks." Also easily found were "... elderly ladies who sell sausages at church-sponsored street fairs and retired gentlemen who linger outside the local members-only social clubs before entering to sip cappuccino in the semi-darkness."

He asked: "Where were the people who could speak in complete sentences? Evidently, articulate community leaders were not on street corners, and so they were not interviewed." (1989). As usual, the bigoted trombones attracted the most media attention. In any case, if you asked people to list the most prominent qualities of Italian Americans "peacemaker" and "children of God," (Matthew 5:9) would not be on the top of the list.

Hawkins' Brooklyn murder almost marked the Centennial of when eleven Sicilians were lynched in New Orleans. Even as victims rather than perpetrators, the reputation of Italian Americans was less than stellar.

[Theodore Roosevelt](#) [3] considered their lynching "rather a good thing" and The New York Times agreed, "the Lynch Law was the only course open to the people of New Orleans."

However, to preserve American honor [President Benjamin Harrison](#) [4] apologized to the Italian government for the slaughter of these and other Italians in America and gave a \$25,000 indemnity to the families of 18 victims. A few years later Gaetano Russo's monument was erected as part of New York's 1892 Quadricentennial Columbus celebration.

Doing the right things

Much of the reason for seeing more [Francis Albert Sinatra](#) [5] than Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone in Italian Americana is that people don't know where to look. Assemblyman Frank Barbaro led Italian-American community leaders and an Italian American student group (FIERI) to meet with African-American protest marchers at the site of Yusuf Hawkins murder as part of a continuing dialogue. The American Italian Historical Association, Italian American Writers Association, and Italian Americans for a Multicultural United States (IAMUS) were also being active in this regard. In the more distant past, other Francis-like leaders in New York City have been Mother Frances X. Cabrini, Fiorello LaGuardia, Leonard Covello, and [Vito Marcantonio](#) [6]. [Mario](#) [7] and Matilda Cuomo have been a special couple promoting better inter-group relations.

As exceptions often prove the rule, despite his unsaintly reputation, Mayor Rudy Giuliani applauded the efforts of Community Understanding for Racial and Ethnic Equality and the Coalition of Italian American Organizations (CIAO) to build bridges between groups. He stated: "You understand all of the things that make the Italian- American community unique, and make us all so proud of our culture, but you also realize that New York City is strong because of how people from different cultures and backgrounds come together and learn about each other." (Mayor's Press Office, 1998)

CIAO's founder Mary Sansone established the first Afro American-Hispanic-Italian coalition with Monsignor Geno Baroni and Bayard Rustin, and marched with Martin Luther King Jr. As to mediating problems people thought were based on religious, racial or ethnic discrimination she noted: "As with



most conflicts or disagreements, they were based on simple misunderstandings or a lack of facts.” (2006) Like CIAO, which was established to serve needy Italian Americans, the American Italian Coalition of Organizations, that I helped to found in 1977, continues its mission of service today in Brooklyn but to others such as the Chinese elderly at its 59th Street Senior Citizen Center and the children of Afro American and Latino families at its Court Street Day Center.

Two top Italian peacemakers

If I had to choose two from among many Italian American New Yorkers who would look good wearing Franciscan robes it would be my Facebook friend Diane Savino and my ex-neighbor Mayor Bill de Blasio. New York State Senator Savino has been deftly managing ethnic divisions in rapidly changing Staten Island while leading the passage of The Compassionate Care Act making medical marijuana available especially needed by cancer patients. As to bridging ethnic, racial, and religious differences in New York City, [De Blasio](#) [8] has been applauded for simultaneously combating anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. If that’s not enough for sainthood, I don’t know what is.

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