

LA MAMMA ITALIANA

Il più bel dono di Dio è il cuore della mamma- "God's greatest gift is a mother's heart."

On Sunday May 23, Gioventù Italiana President Giovanna Scala arranged a lovely Mother Daughter Brunch at Caffé Donatello which was enjoyed by over 40 mothers and daughters. During that Brunch, guest speaker Patrizia Cinquini Cerruti spoke about the Italian Family and the celebration of La Mamma in Italian Culture. In response to many requests we are publishing her message below in honor of all mothers.

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As an Italian, born in Italy and raised there by my Italian mother and my *tre nonne* (2 grandmothers, and "*nonna vecchia*" my maternal great grandmother) I drank for a long time at the breast of Italian motherhood, both figuratively and literally.

It is there (in Italy) that I first learned about *la famiglia Italiana*, but as a child I took this all for granted and didn't recognize any particular message. The message was, nevertheless, crystal clear: family is the center of all things, family is the only institution that can be trusted.

Italians are suspicious of all other institutions; they believe in friendships, but family is supreme. Family comes first, before the individual, before anything else.

At the head of the Italian family is *la mamma*. The Italian proverb is, *Il padrone di casa sono io , chi comanda e mia moglie-* "I am the master of the household, but my wife is in charge." The mother's position in the family gave her stature in the community. She was in charge of her families' position in the community and of their every activity. And mothering was an important art form passed down by each generation. Italians believed that *casa senza donna, barca senza timone-* "a house without a woman is like a boat without a rudder." Children who had lost their mothers were *povere creature perse nel mondo-* "poor creatures lost in the world."

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Certainly without the mother to protect and guide the child was considered truly lost in the world. The mother was the person that would always provide, *che si levava il pane di bocca-* "who would take the bread from her own mouth" to nourish the child.

Although in today's world these ideas seem old fashioned, I believe they are the essence of a loving relationship between mother and child. They come from a natural order of family in which the mother protected and provided for the child and then the child respected and cared for the aging mother. This was the Italian way as described in popular songs like "*MAMMA.*" *Mamma son tanto felice perche ritorno da te-* "Mamma I am so happy because I return to you." *Mamma sarai con me e non sarai piu sola-* "Mamma you'll be with me and you won't be alone any longer." The song is a love song to *la mamma*. Perhaps the idea would be strange in the United States, but there are hundreds of songs dedicated to *La Mamma* in both traditional and modern Italian song.

There is this connection: a bond in the Italian family, "*un fascio*" (a core) that is held together by the mother and ties all family members together. Some may think this sense of duty too heavy to bear, but it goes to the very heart of the family being the most important thing. Family is something all members can count on. The family is strong, it is refuge and haven, it is the security that allows us to go forth in the world, sustained and strengthened by *la mamma*.

L'educazione dei figli si deve incominciare nelle braccia della sua madre- "A child's education begins in his mothers arms."

And the Italian mothers did a superb job in the education of their children. They were the teachers of skills, values, customs, and social graces. In fact the Italian word *educato* refers not to schooling, but to being well mannered. Even today I am amazed when meeting young Italians how well mannered and respectful they are. When visiting Italy a few years ago, I was pregnant and traveling with my 14 month old son. I never went anywhere that a seat on a bus or train was not offered to me, and that people didn't offer to help carry something for me.

There was a special attention paid both to me, as a young mother and to my son. People everywhere made wonderful fusses over both of us. These were people in the streets, at bars and caffés and in the *passeggiata* (the promenade).

This speaks both to how well the youngsters are raised and to the respect Italians seem to have for both mothers and children.... a respect for the family in general.

Throughout Italy there is a fascination with *La Madonna e Il Bambino Gesù*. This respect and adoration for the Mother and Christ Child is a definite reflection of the status of mothers and children in Italy.

"We as Italian Americans have a tremendous wealth of culture, tradition and heritage to pass on to our children."

An Italian will evoke his mother's name at very important, difficult or trying times in his life. "*Oh mamma*" are the most frequent last words uttered by Italians. So even as they die, even if it has been decades since there own mothers lived, an Italian's last breath is sweetened with his mother's name.

I don't think this is by accident. The ties that bind Italian children to their mothers are not only strengthened and reinforced within the family unit, but they are central in the society as well. Italy is a matriarchal society. *La mamma* is both the core of

the family, and hence of life, and she is the one who maintains order (*l'ordine della famiglia*) and anchors her children to the only institution deemed worthwhile by Italians: the family structure.

Some have called children of Italian mothers "mamma's boys" or used other terms that intend to place a negative connotation on

the love and closeness of an Italian mother and her children. I, as I am sure most of you, feel that the love, respect and admiration of the mother in Italian society, when understood in the context of the society, is not only healthy but essential to the formation of strong families. Certainly it speaks well that Italians have among the lowest divorce rates in the world and that more than 90% of Italians live in families.

"Ours is a culture of family"

Italian mothers create an environment in which the family can survive and they protect and nurture their families.

I have wonderful memories of *la ninna nanna* my mother sang to me and of the simple, delicious foods she prepared. We were poor and came from the *contadini* (peasant) class, so there were no fancy cultural experiences, but there were wonderful

days spent together working in the fields during the harvest. I learned to respect work and the simple things life has to offer. I remember picking grapes and making and bottling wine, setting corn out to dry and then husking and grinding it into the *farina* for polenta, gathering and drying chamomile for tea and home remedies. I remember the wonderful *carnevale* and how my mother would let me wear lipstick and all her jewelry. There are so many wonderful times that I remember and the memories follow the seasons and the crops and the processions and celebrations that marked special times of the year.

And somehow, in between all of this, I learned to read by the age of 5, and I learned about Dante and *La Divina Comedia*, (although it would be years before I would read it) and about the Marriage of Figaro, and about manners and certainly catechism from *le suore*- "the Italian nuns."

As is true of all Italians, it was important for us to make *la bella figura* whenever possible. This meant simply that we should always put our best face forward. Cleanliness was therefore next to godliness, and beauty, in a country that holds more than half of the world's art treasures, not including the beautiful *mamme* (mothers), was also important. I remember that every morning as my mamma combed my hair into a bun she called a *cipolla* (onion) she would say- "*per bella apparire si deve soffrire.*" -"To appear beautiful one must suffer." Today we say "no pain no gain."

I remember doing my homework and having my mother check it upon completion. This daily ritual continued, by the way, even after we came to the United States. My mother would review each night's assignment and sometimes make me do it over. I should mention that at that time she neither spoke nor read English. But it didn't seem to matter. She would make me read out loud in English to her and tell me that I needed more practice reading these words that she did not understand, she said that "*inchecavo*," (dialect slang) meaning I was stumbling on the words.

These are the ways of an Italian mother. I felt her presence and her guidance always. Even when she felt unsure herself, she was there for me. She knew that an education was important, and she knew that her daughter loved learning and even though my mother could not understand the materials, the wisdom she had been handed down from her mother still held true, even after so many years and in a different country they worked.

I'd like to share one of my mother's wisdoms when it came to education. This one could be under the heading of "*guai*" not to be confused with "guy." *Guai* is the Italian word for problems, although as a teenager my mother convinced me that *guy* and *guai* were one in the same. Her proverb went something like this. 'Boys and romance were incompatible with studying, and that once I became interested too much in boys I would lose interest in my studies.' Pretty good advice for any teenager, I'd say.

The proverbs and *le novelle* (the stories) never stopped, and today as a mother the challenge is to keep alive the goodness, the love and decency of the Italian family in a world that is very different and often not supportive of mothers and families.

We as Italian Americans have a tremendous wealth of culture, tradition and heritage to pass on to our children. The importance of the family is one of our legacies. We have the values that were passed on to us. These are the values of *la via vecchia* - "the old ways. Even when we do not live out the old ways, they are important to us. It is impossible to be an Italian American, even third and fourth generation, and to be untouched by *la via vecchia*. Understanding cultural heritage (our roots) we can better understand ourselves. The proverb is, *Chi lascia la via vecchia per la via nuova, sa quel che perde e non sa quel che trova*- "Who leaves the old ways for the new ways knows what he is losing but not what he will find."

"Family comes first, before the individual, before anything else."

Ours is a culture of family, a culture that respects mothers and the special position they have in the community. As a mother of three young children, I have an important place in my family. I, like the many generations of mothers that came before me, have the duty of preparing my children for this world and of teaching them the lessons that my mother passed on to me. In today's community the task is sometimes overwhelming.

It is an every day process, *Roma non fu costruita in un giorno*- "Rome was not built in a day." This mothering work is the labor of a lifetime.

To teach our children the importance of family, we must create for them the security that being a part of a family group provides; we teach them their heritage and to respect the work of mothers, the day to day things that will in the end make the child.

So today I celebrate being the daughter of an Italian mother, and I celebrate my own three beautiful children, Vincenzo, Gina and Marco, who allow me each day to do what is certain to be the most important job of my life...That of creating a family.