Opinion
Guest Voices



Members of the Newark Italian Apostolate carry the statue of la Madonna della Fontana in Newark. The organization has helped to grow several saint feasts in Northern New Jersey and organize other events. (Italian Apostolate of the Newark Archdiocese)



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For the Catholics of New Jersey and New York, Italian saint feasts are a summer staple. Known for their processions, Masses, music, zeppoles and sausage and pepper sandwiches, these lively festivals were initiated by southern Italian immigrants, most of whom made their way to the United States around the turn of the 20th century, in an attempt to keep the traditions from their old *paesi* (villages) alive.

As the generations that propagated these traditions die, maintaining the legacy is easier said than done. But the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (OLMC) in Newark, which celebrated its 135th anniversary in July, is not just maintaining but expanding its reach; and much of the feast's growth can be attributed to the Newark Italian Apostolate.

The apostolate has served predominantly Italian parishes in the Newark Archdiocese since the 1970s, but in the last few years has experienced something of a revival. While based in the Newark Archdiocese (with OLMC as its home base), the apostolate has helped to grow several saint feasts in Northern New Jersey and organize other events as well, attracting numerous young Italian Americans as well as non-Italians in the process. They have even helped parishes outside New Jersey start, or revive, Italian saint feasts.

Much of this new life can be credited to Eric Lavin, a 30-year-old teacher and the first lay coordinator of the apostolate, who has been a member of OLMC Newark

since childhood. Lavin remembers being told about the immigrants who, feeling watched over by the statue of Our Lady as they sailed out of the Port of Naples in the late 1800s, vowed to build churches dedicated to her once they arrived in the United States. With such a history, Lavin says, being involved in the apostolate is an honor as well as a great responsibility.

The apostolate's main mission, says Lavin, is to meet the spiritual needs of its members. Though the apostolate helps run and promote numerous saint feasts, members also plan a wide variety of initiatives open to people of all ages, ethnic backgrounds and faith traditions. They include monthly member meetings, sacrament preparation, pilgrimages and an annual Mass at the Basilica Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. There are even social events: Cigar nights are regularly hosted in the OLMC Newark garden, maintained by Apostolate members.

Among my own favorite memories is a "Sunday Sauce" competition, where five judges (myself included) tasted and ranked tomato sauces made by apostolate members. I was impressed by the diversity of the crowd, which extended beyond Italians to include Brazilians, Portuguese and Ecuadorians from the neighborhood.

Yumilka Ortiz, another judge for that event, is one of several apostolate members who is not of Italian heritage but is an "Italophile." From a Dominican background, Ortiz became interested in the apostolate because some of her relatives moved from the Dominican Republic to Rome. Furthermore, her work in the food and wine industries had brought her to Italy several times. Getting involved enabled her to learn more about Italian culture. She says she has felt embraced without prejudice by the members of the apostolate.



Members of the Newark Italian Apostolate pose at the feast of St. Gerard at St. Lucy's Church in Newark. (Italian Apostolate of the Newark Archdiocese)

Louis Nicastro, a 33-year-old whose family has been involved in organizing saint feasts for generations, says that "God serves all." He says it's important that parish feasts "reflect the community and be a sign of Christ to all who attend," an attitude he believes is "emblematic of Italian culture, which is known for hospitality."

This openness to intercultural exchange is especially remarkable given the history of racial tension between Italians and communities of color in Newark, and the subsequent "white flight" into the city's suburbs. In addition to maintaining the Italian presence in the formerly Italian-majority parishes in Newark, the apostolate has been working to keep the traditions alive in Italian parishes in the suburbs.

When she first immigrated to Paterson, New Jersey, from a small village in Campania in the 1970s, 62-year-old Anotonia Lazzaro enjoyed going to saint feasts that made

her feel like she was back home. But "as the grandparents died and the generations went on, [the feasts] started to go away," she said

Lazzaro values the way the apostolate keeps Italian cultural traditions alive and fosters space for intergenerational interactions. She also says the apostolate helped revive her faith, which began to falter when she first came to the U.S.

As much as the U.S. boasts being a melting pot of cultures and religions, it's often the case that the allure of the American Dream severs an immigrant community's ties not only to their cultural heritage, but also to their faith. The Italian community is hardly immune to this dynamic. "The more materialistic a culture becomes, the more marginal God is," says Paterson, New Jersey, Bishop Emeritus Arthur Serratelli, who grew up at OLMC Newark and has supported the apostolate's efforts.

Michael De Marco, a 22-year-old law student and one of the apostolate's youngest members, says that he sees a lot of people his age "looking for an identity or something to participate in that can make them feel bigger than themselves. For me, there's nothing better than Italian feast culture … it's a reminder of all the sacrifices my ancestors made for me to be here right now."

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While saint feasts may be a nostalgic cultural experience for some Italian Americans, Lavin insists that his faith and culture "are inseparable." Serratelli, seeing the feasts as a way to carry out the New Evangelization, has encouraged Italian Americans whose faith has lapsed to participate in them, as they are "an excellent way to reach Catholics who have fallen away. It doesn't hit people over the head hard, but gently invites them back."

Fr. Danny Rodrigues, the current pastor of OLMC Newark, concurs, stating that "processions give a public witness to the people in the neighborhood. When we bring the faith outside like that, it grabs their attention … and hopefully there's some attraction to know more about what it's all about."

There's something both uncanny and comforting about watching people pray, light candles and pin dollar bills onto a statue of Our Lady that is sandwiched between stands selling Italian sangrias and arancini rice balls as Tuto Cutogno's 1983

Italodisco hit "L'Italiano" blares in the background. The peculiar sight is testament to Lavin’s conviction about the "inseparability" of Italian faith and culture.

Furthermore, it is a subtle reminder to all Christians that the sacred and secular are not two separate entities; after all, we believe that God entered the real world and ate, drank, celebrated, suffered and mourned. To a society suffering from division and rootlessness, the Newark Italian Apostolate offers hope for bridging together generations, cultures, and the sacred and secular.