



Christmas in Italy

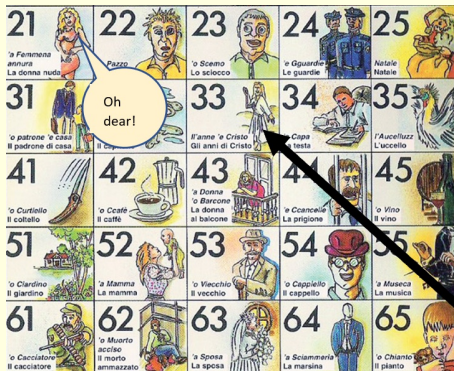
Let's Celebrate an Italian Christmas

Christmas is getting closer and the festivities continue. The Nativity scenes are up and special foods that require advance preparation are in the works. In this third installment of Christmas in Italy, we're going to be covering Christmas Eve traditions, Tombola, Babbo Natale, and St. Stefano.

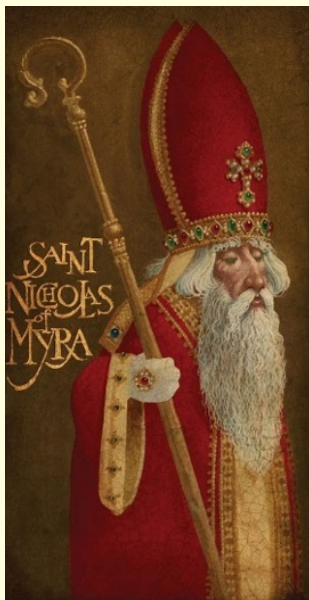
December 24—it's Christmas Eve! The Feast of the Immaculate Conception is over and the Novena of prayers is done. Now it's time for some fun and family time!

Are the kids busy writing out their wish lists for Santa? Absolutely not. Children in Italy do not write letters asking for gifts. They write letters to their parents to tell them how much they love and appreciate them. The letters are placed under the father's plate for the Christmas Eve dinner and ceremoniously read after the meal.

After the big Christmas Eve meal, (we'll talk about the food later) tombola is brought out for some family entertainment. Tombola is very similar to Bingo and playing the game on Christmas Eve is a "must." Numbers range from 1 through 90, with each number represented by a symbol or picture with a particular meaning.



Many of the pictures are rude or sexual and a religious picture might be right alongside a very naughty one (see the "Oh, dear!" nude girl on square #21)! There is also some symbolism involved. For example, #33 on the tombola board has a picture of Jesus. He was crucified and died in 33 AD.



Let's explore the story of Father Christmas, or, as he's known in Italy, Babbo Natale. Santa Claus is not the main feature in Italy.

But where did Babbo Natale come from?

All modern versions of Santa Claus are derived from St. Nicholas of Bari. It was Clarence Moore's poem, "Twas the Night Before Christmas" that secured the spot for Santa Claus, who delivered presents on December 25. San Nicola's feast day is December 6. Forget the North Pole, snow, and reindeer. San Nicola (St. Nicholas, the original Father Christmas), calls the San Nicola Cathedral in the heart of Bari his home.

That's right, a sunny spot on the Adriatic, not the North Pole. St. Nicholas was a Greek and he had a reputation as a defender of the Christian faith--not a popular stance at the time so he spent many years in prison. And he was no jolly, red-nosed, rosy-cheeked guy either. He was rather solemn.

Nicholas's reputation for generosity and kindness were reflected in the miracles he performed for the poor and unhappy. He gave marriage dowries of gold to three girls whom poverty would otherwise have forced into lives of prostitution and he's said to have restored life to three children who had been chopped up by a butcher and put in a tub of brine. He was a giver of gifts and these acts of kindness started the tradition of giving gifts--and helped to fire up the legend of Santa Claus.

Christmas is barely over and there's a holiday the next day. Yet another saint! The holiday of San Stefano, or St. Stephen. He was named by St. Peter as one of the first seven deacons of the newly formed Christian church. (34AD.) He brought many Jews into the fold but after a dispute with members of the synagogue, he was denounced for blasphemy. He was condemned to be stoned to death. He is famous because he was the first Christian martyr. Unlike other martyrs that followed, when he arrived in heaven, Jesus rose for him. Saint Stefano was the first and only saint for whom Jesus rose. (Don't know who confirmed this.)

St. Stephen's day is a cause for celebration—after all, another holiday with no work. It's a day where people go out with friends and family; they visit churches and make small donations and some visit hospitals to also make a donation. Portraits of St. Stefano show him with a rock stuck to his head, symbolizing his death by stoning. Appropriately, he is the patron saint of stonemasons.



The stoning of St. Stefano



Portrait of San Stefano with rocks

Our next message will be covering the story of La Befana, Christmas markets and decorations and one special gift.

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