

## Carnival in Venice

Jamaica Plain, February 6, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

Our Renaissance Feast today is set in Venice in the year 1580. Venice has been a personal interest of mine for a long time. When I was a teenager, a good friend told me tales of his years living in the city, and how the aged Ezra Pound would shuffle down the steps, greeted by ordinary people, "Buon giorno, poetta." After college, I visited Venice, the city that has the watery beauty of "the World's unconscious," as Mary McCarthy wrote. I wanted to visit the grave of composer Igor Stravinsky on the island cemetery of San Michele, but the cemetery was closed by a strike. Luckily I found a gravedigger who showed me the tomb for 500 lira (worth more back then).

During my Lilly Endowment-funded sabbatical in 2001, our family had a sense of the mystery of Venice, when, after an evening performance, we got lost for a time in the nighttime passageways of the city. Later during Easter Week, we spotted in a bakery a large colored sugar version of Da Vinci's "Last Supper" in a larger sugar egg. "That's not the "Last Supper," quipped one of my children, "that's the last desert." When King Henry III visited Venice in the 16th century, his welcoming banquet had similar sugar creations.

I have another reason for affinity to St. Mark's city. Mark is my middle name; originally it was to be my first name, but my parents didn't like the sound of Mark Burke. When I visited Central America in the 1980's, I found that Terry has no Spanish cognate. "You name is what?" So I started using "Marcos" there instead.

Before Venice was Mark's city it was Mary's. Tradition says that Venice was founded in the year 421 on the Marian feast of the Annunciation; the birth of Jesus was associated with the birth of Venice. Since then, the Venetian attitude to Mary has been both devout and familiar. At some point after that traditional date, people fled the armies of conquerors like Atila and Pepin by heading out to protection of the lagoons and islands of the then Byzantine province.

Venice came into its own as a city through crime. In 821, two Venetian merchants stole the body of St. Mark, the Gospel writer, a priceless relic, from a mausoleum in Alexandria. Venetian legend held that Mark had once been on a storm-tossed boat near Venice. An angel appeared to the saint in a dream and told him, "Pax tibi, Marce, Evangelista meus" (peace be to you, Mark, my Evangelist). While the legend would seem to refer to the threatening storm, Venetians understood the saying to be prophetic: Venice would provide a final resting place for the saint.

The merchants brought St. Mark's body not to the church authorities, but to the ruling Doge. The relic was enshrined under his care in San Marco, his private chapel, as a palladium or protection for the city. Mark's symbol, the Lion, became the symbol for the city, and the famous relic added to the prestige of the Venetian empire of trade.

The other defining crime of Venetian history was its participation in the Fourth Crusade, which instead of attacking Muslim rulers in the Holy Land, instead captured and looted Christian Constantinople. The 95-year-old Doge Enrico Dandolo led the assault on the sea walls when Frankish soldiers faltered. As a result, Venice gained much of the Byzantine Empire's territory for a time, and vast quantities of art and religious relics.

Author Gary Wills writes in his book *Venice: Lion City* that the greatest creation of Venice was "the myth of Venice," that the empire was most favored by Mary, Mark, Christ, and after an 11th century heist from Myra, St. Nicholas, patron of sailors. Likewise, the Doge was the best and most religious of rulers and Venetian women, their hair bleached blond by chemicals and the sun, were the most beautiful of in the world. (At the time of our feast, 1580, there were 11,000 courtesans in Venice.) Wills describes Venice as perched on the mythic edge between Byzantine East and Gothic West, German North and Papal South.

Our American Founders looked to the then extant Venetian Republic for a model for our country's government. American patriots even adopted the tri-corn hat that was standard

Venetian mask attire. Venice was really an oligarchy after its voting was limited to the male nobility in the 13th century. The noble guys numbered about 2,500 in the 16th century; gradation of rank was not allowed in this group. The election of the Doge was a 10 Step Program.

First, from the Larger Council of all nobles, thirty were chosen by lot. Then nine from that thirty were chosen by lot. The nine voted for forty. Twelve by lot were chosen from the forty. The twelve voted for twenty-five. Then nine were chosen by lot from the twenty-five. Then the nine voted for forty-five. Then eleven were chosen by lot from the forty-five. Then the eleven voted for forty-one. Then the forty-one elected the doge. Got that?

The Doge was considered to be the heir to Roman virtue, Roman republican virtue. The Venetians didn't want any would-be emperors around. Wills describes their fundamental fear of power; it would be bad for business. The Venetian government lacked a strong center, and was based on endlessly shifting committees. Fortunately, the noble elite had a strong sense of duty. The average Doge began his job at the age of 72, so the politically minded had to stay active for a long time. Still, Venice was the "Serene Republic," suffering few invasions or rebellions.

Though a 15th c. Doge warned against land conquests, arguing that they would require large armies and drain the treasury, subsequent rulers ignored the advice. The jealous League of Cambrai, which included most of Europe, allied itself against Venice in 1508-9. The Venetians survived the combined forces, and later triumphed at the great naval victory of Lepanto against the Turks in 1571. The victory was not followed up militarily because of the jealousy of the other European powers.

The Venetians always felt beleaguered and one step away from disaster. Wills writes of the sense of urgency, threat, and social unity many Americans felt during WWII, comparing it to the way Venetians felt throughout their history. They had to be the innovators to survive. In *Venice Observed*, Mary McCarthy lists some of the Venetian

creations: the income tax, statistical science, floating government bonds, state censorship of books, anonymous denunciations, gambling casinos, and the ghetto. Even with its two ghettos, Venice was a far better place to be Jewish than most of Europe. Many Jewish doctors were graduates of the Venetian university at Padua, and Venetians published many of the first printed books in Hebrew.

The Venetian 'live and let live so long as we can trade' attitude often angered the Popes, especially when Venetians traded with enemies like the Muslims. Twice the city was placed under papal interdict, the last time in 1606. Worship services continued as usual. Venice came to the brink of a break with Rome, flirting with Protestantism, but mostly got its own way in the end, and stayed Catholic. The intellectual leader of the Venetian resistance, Fr. Paolo Sarpi, was later attacked by assassins and left for dead, with a dagger through his skull. Before it was certain he would live, Sarpi looked at the dagger and punned in Latin, "That has the "stilus" (meaning both style and dagger) of the Curia." A VERY Venetian comment.

The Venetians thought they were simply better Christians than the Popes. And if he had St. Peter, they had St. Mark. It's worth noting that the good Pope John XXIII had been a Patriarch of Venice, and saved his city's Jewish community during WWII. The Venetians, as Wills points out, were both very worldly and very religious; they would have no problem with today's lesson from the Gospel of Mark, their evangelist, in which Jesus says to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and give to God the things of God. For Venetians, the things of Venice and the things of God tended to blur.

New trade routes to the Orient by way of southern Africa, and continual Turkish encroachment brought about a long, slow decline to Venice. As political power decreased, the length of the festive Carnival season before Lent increased. By the time of Voltaire's novel *Candide* in the 18th century, which has a scene at the Venetian Carnival, the celebration began in October and lasted five or six months. Many people went around continually in mask. Finally, religious leaders asked that the disguises be removed when

attending church. The Venetian Republic ended when Napoleon conquered the city in 1797, building a land mole.

What do we learn from the Serene Republic? Venice gave our Founders the courage to create a republic without a king. The Venetians combined beauty and utility. They had a strong sense of civic duty. Though they tried to conquer through trade, they didn't try "to conquer souls," as Wills puts it, or try to create other countries in their image, and they are a cautionary warning about the dangers of imperial overreach. The Venetians also remind us that other societies have viewed themselves as highly "exceptional" and chosen.

The long Venetian Carnival would finally end with the beginning of Lent, a time to take off the masks and disguises. While our feast tonight takes place during the time of Carnival, Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent for Venetians, and for us. Lent is a time to take off our masks and be honest with ourselves and to God. It's a time to go deeper spiritually and ask the questions 'Who am I?' 'Who am I called to be?' 'How have I hurt people?' 'What should I do, or what should I stop doing so that I can grow?' 'How can I love God and others more?' And humbly, we need to ask as a country, 'who can we be as a nation?'

From Venice: Lion City by Gary Wills

Venice poses a special problem for Americans, since we sometimes criticize ourselves, or feel uneasy about, what has been called our "exceptionalism" - the belief that we are better than other nations, specially blessed, with a right to do things forbidden to lesser peoples. If that strain ever did exist in our history, it is infinitesimal next to the Venetian sense of superiority to other human beings. The whole myth of Venice is simply exceptionalism writ large. According to it, Venetians were the favorite of Christ, Mary, and Saint Mark. Their city's birth was miraculous. The doge was a spiritual leader better than the clerics who conducted religious service elsewhere, and a temporal leader better than the monarchs who ruled elsewhere. He stood above popes and emperors-though not

above the republic he served. . . . There was one tempering element to the Venetian exceptionalism: at least it did think of itself as the exception among nations, not as a model for them. It had no missionary sense that it should spread its values to other people. Americans believed that we should not be an exception but a pattern. Others should emulate us. . . . Though Venice praised republicanism in general, a sense of its unique birth and circumstances meant that it never seriously thought there could be another Venice. . . . It had this virtue in its megalomania, that is was not a redeemer nation, not a savior of others, only of itself. It was not out to convert or crusade, only to trade. . . . People's souls were left alone as the merchants of the Rialto went after their purses.