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Madonna Dei Martiri
80th Anniversary
1926 – 2006

A History

T*his history is a compilation of information gathered from books, periodicals and oral traditions. Our intention is to be as accurate as possible. Many times in our research we have come upon conflicting facts, especially in the oral tradition. We have put forth what we believe is a fairly accurate account of the Madonna Dei Martiri Tradition in Hoboken. We apologize for any unintentional errors.*

Born in Molfetta

The tradition of the Madonna Dei Martiri goes back many years. It was in the year 1399, on the orders of the King of Napoli, Ladislao di Durazzo that the Street Festival and Religious celebration were first combined to celebrate the "Miracle" and blessings of the Madonna. This celebration is traditionally held on September 8, which is the Universal Feast of the Nativity of Mary. The actual "Miracle" of the Madonna occurred many years before this date.

The Miracle

Molfetta, situated as a port town on the Adriatic Sea, has historically been a maritime community. In 1188 a boatload of Crusaders returning from the Holy Land found the Icon of the Madonna floating on the water. They brought it to the Hospice in Molfetta which was constructed in 1162 on the orders of the Norman King, William II. The Crusaders would return to Molfetta, many of whom were wounded and dying. It is for this reason that Molfetta had built the Hospice. Those who were returned to health went on their way, while some died in Molfetta as Martyrs of the Faith. Everyone prayed to the Madonna of Martyrs who was symbolized as a Mother and Child with Angels, in a Byzantine style Icon. The Madonna in 1840 became the town's patron along side San Corrado. Especially devoted were the fisherman who asked for her protection. Annually, the Molfettese people, where ever they are in the world, take time to celebrate this Miracle. Traditionally, there is Novena with a Mass and procession through the streets. At some point the Icon (now statue) is placed on the fishing boats for veneration. A plenary indulgence is granted by the Pope to anyone who attends the Mass of the Madonna Dei Martiri and the Mass the Sunday following Easter.

La Societa' Madonna Dei Martiri & the Feast in Hoboken

During the late 1800's many people from southern Italy emigrated to the United States to seek out a better life for themselves. As was the custom, when someone found work they sent for their family who then sent for their extended family until there were enclaves of Italians from the same city in one place. The Molfettese people found Hoboken to be

similar to Molfetta in many ways. It was a maritime community, with shipping as the largest industry. Work was plentiful and housing was cheap. It is estimated that at the turn of the last century the Madonna Dei Martiri Feast has been celebrated in one form or another. The first Statue of the Madonna, which came to the US on October 4, 1928, and still resides in St. Ann's Church. There is a film that exists of the Statue being brought out of St. Ann's into the Procession in 1930. (Complements of the Nick Menenti Family.) Each year the festival was held in the downtown section of Hoboken, mostly on 4th & Adams Street.

The Society was incorporated in the State of New Jersey on October 31, 1927 and was located at 230 Willow Ave. in Hoboken. The Society stayed affiliated with St. Ann's Parish up to 1938 when the feast was moved to an open field in Moonachie returning back to St. Ann's in 1946. With the arrival of a new Statue in 1948 the Society then switched affiliations to St. Francis Church where the Statue currently resides. In the year 1950 the Society, under the leadership of President Corrado DePinto and Chairman Anthony Cilento (Honorary President,) arranged to buy the property at 332 Adams St., where the Society now resides.

Over the years the Society's membership has swelled and contracted but the goal was always to produce the best Feast possible. The decade between the mid-sixties through the late seventies seemed to be the height of popularity. Busses of the Faithful would come to the celebrations. Many dignitaries from Molfetta would come to Hoboken to add to the celebration. These people included mayors, bishops and priests from Molfetta. More recently, we have enjoyed the company of the Papal Nuncio to the United Nations. During the 1980's Hoboken was changing and no longer was a first destination for immigrants. The Italian community began to move out to the suburbs and the crowds that were once a certainty no longer could be counted upon. The Feast was traditionally held on Labor Day week-end, which was the unofficial end of summer. Many in the Molfettese Community chose to stay "Down the Shore" thereby diminishing the tradition further. During these years a handful of Societa' members kept the Tradition going. Without these members our Tradition would have gone the way of other Hoboken feasts namely; Santa Febronia, Our Lady of Libera, St. Lucy, Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Our Lady of Montevergine, which was the last of the feasts not emanating directly from a church. The few most responsible members were; Vincenzo "Jimmy" DePinto, Saverio Sciancalepore, Dominic DePinto, Gennaro Capelutti, Francesco Altamura, Dominic Tulipiani, Dominic DeCandia, Modesto Mezzina, Aldo DePinto, Ignazio Cinnamea, Michele Minervini, Pietro DeSario, Jimmy Lanzetti, Corrado Azzolini and Sabino Sciancalepore.

During this time the only other Feast was that of Saint Ann which was experiencing a rebirth of interest. Under the leadership of Marie Totaro, the festival had grown in popularity and success. Many in the Molfettes community would ask rhetorically, "Why can't we be as successful?"

Old Tradition / New Birth

It was around 1996 when a few new younger gentlemen began to join the Society. It was fresh blood with new ideas. With the cooperation of the “old guard”, a few changes were implemented to try to bring the Feast to the Level of success that it once enjoyed. The first changed happened tin 1998 when the week-end of the Feast was changed to the following week after Labor Day. When this failed to turn the tide it was decided to remodel the entire Feast to attract patrons from outside of the Molfettese Community. It was agreed to move the festival to Sinatra Park and promote it as The Hoboken Italian Festival in honor of Madonna Dei Martiri. It was hoped that it would attract crowds and sponsors. The entire plan was based on attracting a different audience each of the 4 nights. Thursday would be for the college crowd, Friday would be for the Disco crowd, and Sunday for the 50’s music crowd. All of this was planned so that Saturday would be “our day,” with the Mass and Procession and fireworks on the Hudson. Trying to be as true to the Feast in Molfetta as possible the Procession went right up to a waiting boat where the statue was loaded along with the faithful and cruised in the Hudson River just like it is does in Molfetta.

That day in 1999 was truly a turning point for the Feast ensuring that it will go on for many years to come. It was estimated that over 45,000 people attended. For the Society, gratification was the enormous turn out of Molfettese who came back. There were many tears of joy. Many times one could hear in the crowd, “I have not seen my Madonna on the water since I was little, back in Molfetta.” Since that watershed year the festival has grown in success and the Societa’ has enjoyed a rebirth of members ensuring the future of this Beautiful Tradition.

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