

TRADITIONAL ITALIAN CHRISTMAS A UNIQUE CELEBRATION



By Samuel Catanzano

As Vice President for Cultural Affairs, I thought it might be interesting to research the customs and traditions surrounding the various holidays and feast days observed by our ancestors. Many of the customs and traditions are still carried out today in Italy, but have not been carried to this country for us to follow. Perhaps some of the Alpha Phi Delta brothers may want to adopt some of these traditional celebrations for their families.

Christmas celebrations in Italy center around the birth of the baby Jesus. As a result of this concentration on the significance of Christmas, the joviality of the holiday in other countries may seem to be absent in Italy. Also, Italy has not adopted the tradition of the Christmas tree, per se, to any extent.

The Christmas season in Italy lasts for three weeks, beginning eight days before Christmas, and ending with the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. During this period, members of the family offer prayers and light candles, and a Presepio (manger with nativity scene) is prepared in every home.

The Presepio was originated by St. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century. He used people and live animals to depict the scene at Bethlehem. The popularity of this custom spread, and craftsmen and artists made miniature scenes for homes. The Presepio in the Italian home has always been the center of interest. The nativity scene appears also in the shop windows, in windows of houses and even in open doorways.

Frequently, the Presepio is arranged on the Ceppo, a pyramid-shaped wood structure with several shelves. The base of the Ceppo is reserved for the Presepio. The other shelves hold ornaments, fruit, candy, and small presents, and are decorated with colored paper and gilded pine cones. Candles are placed at the corners of the shelves. The Ceppo is in the tradition of the Tree of Light, which became the Christmas tree in other countries.

"Children in Italy receive their gifts on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany."

Christmas Eve is a family affair. A meatless supper lasts for several hours until it is time to go to midnight mass. Seafood dominates the meal, which could include delicacies such as capitone (eel), calimari (squid) and baccala (codfish).

Christmas Day dinners may include pasta, capon and various vegetables. Pizzelles, cookies and other pastries are also around to satisfy the sweet tooth. Christmas Day is a sacred day with time set aside for church attendance.

Children in Italy receive their gifts on January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany. Traditionally, on the eve of the Epiphany, the children placed their shoes on the hearth, but the modern custom is to hang stockings, in anticipation of the visit of "La Befana," an old, ugly witch. According to legend, "La Befana" was asked by the Wise Men for directions to Bethlehem. They explained their mission and invited her to join them, but she declined.



The Ceppo, the "Christmas Tree" in an Italian home.

Later, a shepherd asked her to go, but she said no again. After dark, a great light in the heavens and a band of angels made "La Befana" realize her mistake, and she rushed out to find the Wise Men or the shepherd. But she was too late to find the Christ child. Now she goes from house to house on the eve of the Epiphany leaving gifts for the sleeping children of Italy.

BUON NATALE A TUTTI!!!