

*Our Italian Heritage*

# Christopher Columbus: Saint, Sinner or Hero

by John Peter Curielli  
Vice President for Cultural Affairs

Here we are, amidst the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America by **Christopher Columbus**. The Italian government is spending \$470 million on this event. There will be a massive "Colombo-92" Exposition in Genoa, Italy, in the old port area. The theme of this Expo will be "Christopher Columbus: Ships and the Sea." 37 countries will participate; 15 from Europe, 18 from the Americas -- the United States among them -- 3 from Asia and 1 from Africa. They expect 3 to 4 million visitors.

The United States will commemorate the event with the arrival of the tall ships, reminiscent of the Bicentennial in 1976. Yet, on our shores, the situation is meeting with much more opposition.

Our brothers, the American Indians, are looking upon Christopher Columbus as some sort of a devil and defiler, who cruelly mistreated the native Americans he encountered. The Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans of Chicago met this challenge head-on by

immediately forming a bond with the Indian community in the Chicagoland area. They have been invited to break bread with us many times over. Their ire over Columbus has considerably subsided. They have marched with us in our parades and attended our holiday celebrations.

We must all sit back, stop, and think of Columbus within the context of the time. Too often, history is judged by today's standards and not by the standards of days gone by.

One must remember that the world of



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Christopher Columbus' day was a very class-oriented society. The upper classes virtually had the privilege of life over the lower classes. This was thought of as simply a way of life.

Furthermore, women of

that time would have many more pregnancies than today's women; there was much greater infant mortality than in our day. Life was considered much cheaper then; particularly for the lower classes. Let us not judge Columbus' conduct within the context of today's day and age, and be so harsh on the man who opened the gateway to the development of the New World.

Some may argue that the Vikings found America first. The question is not so much who found America first, but whose discovery triggered its development. Remember, up until the time of Columbus' discovery in America, everyone was positive that the world was flat. Copernicus was put to death for espousing the theory that the world was round and not the center of the Universe. Think of how courageous Columbus had to be to discover the New World.

If someone tries to tell you how bad Christopher Columbus was in his actions toward the natives, ask them if they are considering those actions in relation to history within the context of the time. Don't let anyone try to lessen the brilliance of our Shining Italian Star, Cristoforo Colombo.

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