



Is it possible that we just can't help ourselves?

Anthony Julian Tamburri (September 20, 2011)



A television host invites an Italian American to come and speak about the potential negativity from something like “Jersey Shore,” and yet cannot help himself from making a silly, equally offensive remark at the closing of the episode.



This past week (September 16), Andre DiMino, past president of UNICO and current president of the New Jersey group, "Once Voice Coalition," was a guest on Neil Cavuto's show. But I am not here to discuss the content of the conversation, even though it is, to be sure, one that could very much interest many of us. In the world of those who speak out vociferously against stereotyping, Andre DiMino is surely the most articulate: he is well spoken; he speaks in a linear and comprehensive manner; indeed impressive is his vocabulary ("optics" was one of the words he laid on Cavuto); and he does not necessarily shoot from the hip. In many ways, all of this makes him a very fine spokesperson. But the content of his five-minute conversation with Neil Cavuto is not the subject of my thoughts in this venue.

Instead, I wish to speak, ever so briefly at this juncture, to Neil Cavuto's closing of the segment. His flippant, apparently joking comment was, I assume, intended to be funny. But within the context of the segment, it could only result as dismissive of the previous five minutes and, consequently, offensive to both Andre DiMino qua DiMino and to all Italian Americans who believe as DiMino does—that Italians in the United States constitute the lone ethnic group that can still be publically ridiculed with no consequences. Cavuto ended the segment by turning to the camera and, while signing off, stated: "You don't want to mess with him, he's all Sicilian."

Sometimes a joke is not "just a joke"! More significant, sometimes even amongst ourselves we need to be more serious as we discuss certain issues. Are we too sensitive? The answer to the question is on an analogous scale with "beauty": it is in the eyes of the beholder.

I would have almost preferred that another of Fox TV's announcers made such a supercilious comment, one who is not Italian American, which would make more sense to us all. Instead, Cavuto, an Italian American, as one can only deduce from his closing comment, just could not take seriously Andre DiMino and his claim that New Jersey's \$420K credit to "Jersey Shore" for production costs was offensive to Italians and, as a consequence, willy-nilly (my terminology) contributes to the promulgation of a negative stereotype. With this final statement, Cavuto, for all practical purposes, as I mentioned above, dismissed both the specific claim and the basic concept that Italian Americans can be victims of a discrimination that has its roots either in individuals or in any system of various sorts; and for this last possible scenario, one need only note that, for reasons too numerous to mention here, Italian Americans are an "Affirmative Action" group within The City University of New York.

While we may not all be on the same page vis-à-vis discrimination against Italian Americans, I believe that most of us would admit moments of uneasiness with how Italians are sometimes portrayed in the various media. One need only look to some of our local papers and news broadcasts.

Cavuto's behavior, in turn, reminds some of us that of our many Italian/American sisters and brothers in prominent positions of authority in its many facets (financial, cultural, and the like), a good number seems not to boast of their Italian-ness in non-Italian venues. It reminds me of a recent segment on "The Chris Matthews Show," of Fox's mirror opposite, MSNBC. At one point, Matthews, in speaking with two guests about something not ethnically based, suddenly blurted out a statement similar to the following: "We're three Irish-American Catholics here. What do we think of...?" And he went on to underscore how they might ponder the issue at hand, during that segment, as Irish Americans. With all the Italian Americans in the various media, I have yet to hear/read an analogous statement regarding an Italian/American slant to their opinion on something not necessarily Italian/American, and not some ethnically bleached out pronouncement that seems formulaic to the umpteenth degree.



This, I would submit to you is a major part of our problem. The Italian Americans in positions of any form of "power" need to be more vocal about who they are ethnically and, when appropriate as it was with Chris Matthews during his show, put it up front on the table.

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