

Saving Christopher Columbus's Statue

Riccardo Chioni (August 25, 2017)



Among many other figures, the Great Navigator has found himself caught in the mad rush to seek out detested statues dedicated to controversial individuals in American history. Columbus has more than 5 monuments in the city, one of which being the centerpiece of Columbus Circle that is currently the center of controversy. We went to the rally at City Hall organized by City Councilor Joseph Borelli.

Judging from the uproar on social media, one would have expected to see a large turnout of Italian-American supporters at today's rally at City Hall to "save Christopher Columbus's statue." Many, however, must have preferred to watch it on television. The number of New York and national media present was, in fact, greater than the number of local politicians and representatives of community organizations protesting on the steps of City Hall.



This is not by chance. In the middle of New York's election climate, some "purge-worthy" statues, local elected politicians, and candidates vying for Mayor Bill de Blasio's seat were thrown in the storm. This all following the proposal of City Council President Melissa Mark-Viverito to remove statues of hate and racism, including the one of the Great Navigator found in Columbus Circle.

Among many other figures, Christopher Columbus has found himself caught in the mad rush to seek out detested statues dedicated to controversial individuals in American history. Columbus has more than 5 monuments in the city, one of which being the centerpiece of Columbus Circle that is currently the center of controversy. Meanwhile, de Blasio, who loves to emphasize his Italian roots, is buying time. He decided to appoint an ad hoc commission, which will have 90 days to evaluate the statue situation and propose the removal of any "undesirable" ones.

"Leave the Christopher Columbus statue alone," said actor Joe Piscopo, who participated in the rally. "Let's stop this political correctness that is killing us," he added.

The rally was organized by City Councilor Joseph Borelli with the support of other council members. The rally also saw the participation of State Senator Diane Savino, State Representatives Ron Castorina, Matthew Titone, and Edward Ra in addition to John Viola, President of the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF), Joseph Guagliardo, President of the Federation of Italian-American Organizations, and other representatives of community associations.

"Twenty-seven million Italian Americans-strong, to this day, we still hold [Columbus] in a place of honor. We will continue to fight to make sure that Columbus Circle remains Columbus Circle," said assemblyman Ron Castorina; and Senator Savino added, "That statue in Columbus Circle does not represent the explorer, it represents the experience of the Italian immigrant population in the United States."

The Columbus Circle statute is 76-feet high and sits in the center of the most heavily-trafficked intersections in the city. Sculpted by Gaetano Russo, it was inaugurated in 1892 on occasion of the 400th anniversary of Columbus's arrival. The statue was donated by Italian immigrants who participated in a fundraising begun by the popular newspaper at the time *Il Progresso*. The statue was restored in 2005 when trees and fountains were also added.

For many people, the Navigator from Genoa is a great explorer. However, for others, he represents the destruction of the indigenous American populations and their cultures. The controversial question is also arousing the Caribbean islands, including Puerto Rico, as the President of the City Council, who is of Puerto Rican origin, highlighted.

"This is a monument that was erected and paid for by Italian immigrants, one of the biggest communities in the United States, and it symbolizes our contribution to the making of this country," said John Viola of NIAF, the powerful Italian-American organization headquartered in Washington, DC. "It's important that our community reacts to the arbitrary choice of the Mayor and the President of



the City Council” he added.

Joseph Guagliardo voiced his harsh criticism of the politicians “who followed the crazy initiative to take down the statue. Our national organization has over one million members, and we’ll all mobilize if necessary.” Guagliardo, who is also president of the National Council of Columbia Associations of Civil Service, acknowledged the lack of participation at the rally and added, “If the President of the City Council hadn’t taken this initiative so suddenly, if meetings and discussions were held in this regard, then perhaps we could have organized the rally better. But she acted in a stealthy manner with a sudden attack in the middle of August.”

After the vandalization of a monument to Christopher Columbus in in Baltimore just a few days ago, the whole country is now overtaken by the frenzy of “undesired” statues and monuments, either for racial reasons or for their connection to the period of slavery. Columbus Day, on the other hand, has been quite controversial from coast to coast in recent years. In some areas, Columbus Day festivities have either been renamed or eliminated entirely.

Councilor Joe Borelli from Staten Island concluded by signaling to the Mayor and the President of the City Council that the idea of removing the Columbus statue “sounds very divisive, in a city and a nation that are in desperate search of unity.”

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