

**\* Please click on the ‘Supporting Material’ link on left column to access images\***

## **Rituals of Charity and Abundance: Sicilian St. Joseph’s Tables and Feeding the Poor in Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>**

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*In memory of Virginia Buscemi Carlson*

*(Villafranca Sicula, July 9, 1935 – Downey, Calif., Jan. 28, 2007)*

### *1. Introduction*

This essay explores the mid-Lenten *Tavola di San Giuseppe* (St. Joseph’s Table) in Los Angeles, situates this tradition within its historical and geographic cultural contexts, and seeks to interpret its various meanings. The custom of preparing food altars or tables in honor of St. Joseph is an expression of Southern Italian (conspicuously Sicilian) folk religion with various elements at its core. On the one hand, it represents a propitiatory sharing of abundance and the cultural exorcism of hunger. On the other — within its Italian Christian matrix — it is an affirmation of the patriarchal family, as well as an intertwining practice of hospitality and *caritas*. Finally, in its

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<sup>1</sup> These conjoined phenomena have been researched and reported in various formats and settings: “St. Joseph’s Tables and Feeding the Poor in Los Angeles” (American Folklore Society annual meeting in Lafayette, Louisiana, Oct. 1995; Culinary Historians of Southern California, Los Angeles Public Library, Mar. 13, 2004; All Saints Church, Pasadena, Women’s Council, Mar. 5, 2005; Academy of Sciences, Ljubljana, Slovenia, April, 2004); “Joseph Among the Angels: St. Joseph’s Tables and “Feeding the Poor in Los Angeles” (Dept. of Cultural Affairs, *Living Roots* ‘97 Conference, Los Angeles, April 12, 1997); “Italian Folklife in California: Continuity of Tradition” (Conference on *Italian Migration in the United States*, Los Angeles, Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Feb. 7, 1998); “Food and Ritual Performance: St. Joseph’s Day Tables and Feeding the Poor in Los Angeles” (annual meeting of the American Italian Historical Association, San Francisco, Nov. 11-13, 1999); “The Invisible Made Visible: St. Joseph’s Day Tables and Applied Oral History in Los Angeles” (International Oral History Association meeting, Istanbul, June, 2000); “Food and Ritual Performance in the Sicilian American St. Joseph’s Feast” (Symposium on *Women and Food*, Women’s Studies, The Huntington Library, Nov. 23, 2002); “The Invisible Made Visible: Food and Ritual Performance in the Sicilian St. Joseph’s Day Feast” (Series on *Art and Ritual*, UCLA Dept. of Art, Mar. 3, 2005). This paper will soon be published in a collection of my own food and wine writings entitled: *In Search of Abundance: Mountains of Cheese, Rivers of Wine and other Italian Gastronomic Utopias*, “Sicilian St. Joseph’s Tables and Feeding the Poor: Ritual Food Practices and Social Advocacy” (Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Feb. 23, 2010).

I wish to thank for their assistance in documenting tables over the years: Virginia Buscemi Carlson, Kenneth Carlson, Doug De Luca, Jennifer Pendergrass, Kenneth Scambray, Raymond Skelton, Steve Weimeyer, Erica Turley; to all those who have participated by being interviewed for this study (too many to mention), opening their parishes, their homes, and their hearts. I especially thank those who helped make the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum, “St. Joseph’s Table and Feeding the Poor” exhibition possible, to my co-curator and friend (to whom this study is dedicated and who is no more), Virginia Buscemi Carlson, as well as to: Carmen Alongi, Matteo Alongi, Robert Barbera, Maria Battaglia, Charlie Campo, and Kenneth Carlson, Vita Circo, Gaetano D’Aquino, Celestino Drago, the Federico Bakery, Stefano Finazzo, Maribel Gonzalez, Lucy Guastella, Concetta and Antonio Pellegrino, Sam Perricone, Carlo Piumetti, Mimmi Pizzati, Joseph També, Edward F. Tuttle, Elena Tuttle. The table was blessed by the Rev’d Father Vincenzo Buccheri while the chants were offered by members of the St. Joseph Society of Mary Star of the Sea Church, San Pedro.

I also thank colleagues and friends who have read and commented on earlier versions of this essay: Elizabeth Bisbee Goldfarb, Edward F. Tuttle, Dorothy Noyes, Joseph També, Charlene Villaseñor Black and the journal’s reviewers.

diaspora manifestations, it presents a symbolic representation of the migration narrative itself, transposed in the Josephine dramatization of the Holy Family's *Flight into Egypt*, along with an "immigrant success story" codicil.

I will reconstruct the cartographies and stratified meanings of this food ritual in Los Angeles, largely employing the methodologies of oral historical and ethnographic research, but, as this narrative moves into the twenty-first century, I will consider the Sicilian American tradition as it confronts further demographic shifts and diverse re-contextualizations, and I will extend my analysis to encompass contemporary initiatives of inter-ethnic understanding and social advocacy. While this essay builds on previous writings on concepts of abundance and gastronomic utopias, on food practices among Italian immigrants (Del Giudice 2000, 2001a, 2001b), and on the capital role played by food in Italian cultural identity, this study of food altars and communal rituals of charity also seeks to integrate a newly-embraced "ethnography of compassion" (Del Giudice 2009a; cf. Behar 1999, 1996; González 2003), which bridges academic discourse and social engagement.

I first saw a St. Joseph's Table in 1989 while mapping the Italian community of Los Angeles for the City's Cultural Affairs Department's Folk and Traditional Arts Program. The department wanted to know *who* and *where* the Italians were in this sprawling city, for they appeared to be invisible, despite the fact that, according to the latest 2000 census, Los Angeles counts itself the fifth largest city in the U.S. for population of Italian descent. While earlier Italians had been amply documented by California historian Gloria Ricci Lothrop,<sup>2</sup> the more recent presence of Italians had yet to be fully assessed. My ethnographically inclined *A Preliminary Survey of Italian Folklife in Los Angeles* (Del Giudice 1990), which metamorphosed in 2005 into [www.ItalianLosAngeles.org](http://www.ItalianLosAngeles.org),<sup>3</sup> helped continue the documentation effort. I especially looked at Italian social and ceremonial life, the community's associations, foodways, markets, traditional arts, games, and so forth. Lothrop's research helped fuel the Italian community's effort to reclaim the Historic Italian Hall in the heart of the Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument, beginning in 1990. The community's visibility or self-awareness has grown considerably since the early 1990s, thanks to many diverse efforts and initiatives.<sup>4</sup>

Searching for Italian life and community in a city without a traditional "Little Italy"<sup>5</sup> was challenging. I discovered though that there were *many* Italian communities — diverse, of course, in their regional provenance, but even more so in socio-economic status, in migration experience (including the most recent "transnationals"), and in their ways of expressing ethnicity — in short,

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<sup>2</sup> For an extensive bibliography of Lothrop's writings, including her recent *Italians in Los Angeles*, 2003, see: "Further Readings: Italians of Southern California," <http://www.italianlosangeles.org/index.php?1&223&224>. On the early Little Italy of Los Angeles, cf. forthcoming Gatto, *Los Angeles's Little Italy*.

<sup>3</sup> The Web site [www.ItalianLosAngeles.org](http://www.ItalianLosAngeles.org) was a project of the nonprofit Italian Oral History Institute (IOHI) — which I founded and directed from 2000 to 2007 (formerly known as the Italian Oral History Project, 1994-2000) — and was conducted in collaboration with UCLA students and community volunteers. For the genesis of the IOHI, an outgrowth of my Italian folklife courses at UCLA, and the evolution of this project, see: "About Us" (<http://www.italianlosangeles.org/index.php?20>). The IOHI, a unique institution which bridged academic and public sector, produced many innovative conference/festivals, and publications. It was dissolved in 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "Italians in Los Angeles: Guide to a Diverse Community": <http://www.italianlosangeles.org/index.php?1&221>.

<sup>5</sup> On the question of Los Angeles' "Little Italy," see Del Giudice 2007. Although resident Italians have now become rare in the area, the community in and around St. Peter's Italian Church, Casa Italiana (in present-day Chinatown) and across the Los Angeles River, in Lincoln Heights, are sometimes considered to have formed the city's historic Little Italies, while the very heart of the Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument counted among its business owners and residents many Italians in the nineteenth century (cf. Los Angeles Historic Italian Hall: <http://www.italianhall.org/history.php>). See note 2.

they represented all phases along the Italian-Italian American continuum. Yet, amidst all the variety, one community celebration most captured my attention: St. Joseph's feast and its tables, the evolution of which I have been observing and documenting for two decades.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Description of Los Angeles tables

But what exactly is a St. Joseph's Table? Here follows a description of tables observed in the Los Angeles area from 1989 to 2009. St. Joseph's feast day is March 19 but often lasts from one to three days — sometimes causing a conflict of loyalties and social scheduling for Irish-Italian American households, since St. Patrick's Day falls on the 17th. St. Joseph's Tables include a devotional altar with a statue (or image) of Joseph holding the infant Jesus [Figure 1 - 3]\* rising up, or separate from, a table. The table is always blessed by a priest before the foods are consumed [Figure 4]. Closest to (or on) the altar is the highest concentration of sacred objects and foods, where the large traditional ritual braided breads (often referred to as *cucciddati*), weighing from three to seven kilograms and dedicated to the Holy Family, are placed. These largest votive breads represent: a cross [Figure 5] or crown for Christ, a palm frond for Mary, a staff (*vastuni*) for St. Joseph.<sup>7</sup> Implements of the Passion (ladder, tongs, and so forth) are sometimes present [Figure 6], as are *emblemata* of Joseph the Carpenter's trade (saw, nails, plane), e.g., as in Salemi (Trapani). The table is laden with elaborate food displays and more randomly distributed smaller and fanciful, zoomorphic, and phytomorphic breads, e.g., birds, flowers, animals, fish, fruit, grapes, wheat [Figure 7]. These smaller breads also hang among verdant festoons of foliage (in Sicily laurel, myrtle, and here citrus).<sup>8</sup> Because it falls within the meatless season of Lent and is something of a mid-Lenten festive reprieve during a period of deprivation and fasting (although in post-Vatican II times and in some parts of Sicily meat is prepared for St. Joseph's feast day), the tables feature vegetables [Figures 8 - 11] (fried or stuffed cauliflower, artichokes, zucchini, eggplant, peppers, cardoons, *frittate* [omelettes] of every sort, fava bean, asparagus, peas, peppers), literally and symbolically prominent fish [Figure 12 - 14], fruit (the season's finest first fruits — *primizie* — in baskets or arrangements replicating cornucopias of plenty [Figures 15 - 17]), and sweets: e.g., *persiche* [Figure 18] (cream-filled pastries made to look like peaches), *cassadini/cassadeddi* (sweet ricotta filled ravioli or panzerotti), *sfinci* (most frequently cream-filled puffs with cheese, chocolate, and orange zest), *cannoli*, *cucciddati* (also referring to fig and nut-filled cookies; cf. Piccitto 1977), *cuddureddi*

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<sup>6</sup> The collections of the IOHI are currently housed in the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive. The finding aid for this collection can be accessed at: <http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt7870289c&chunk.id=dsc-1.2.6&brand=oac>. See "Audio and Video Tapes" in "Bibliography" for a listing of field materials on St. Joseph's Tables. I continue to add to this collection.

\* Please note that all images and descriptive captions are found in the Supplemental Content files through CIS/CDL.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. [http://www.sicilyland.it/festa\\_san\\_giuseppe\\_sicilia.htm](http://www.sicilyland.it/festa_san_giuseppe_sicilia.htm) for greater detail on the actual breads, as they are found at Acate (Ragusa): e.g., "*u vastuni do Patriarca*," *il pane di Maria* with a rose, as well as a palm frond; and finally *il pane di Gesù*, "*u Bamminieddu*," decorated with jasmine, birds, and symbols of his Passion. In Puglia instead, the votive breads for the altar are basically large and donut-shaped (known as *tòrtini* in Uggiano). On the breads themselves are imprinted the various symbols identifying each saint: three circles for the Christ child; a rosary for Mary, and a walking stick for Joseph (see: Arcano: [http://www.prolocosalento.it/docs/index.shtml?A=c\\_uggiano2](http://www.prolocosalento.it/docs/index.shtml?A=c_uggiano2)).

<sup>8</sup> E.g., in Salemi, entire chapels "sono rivestite interamente di mirto, alloro e adorne di pani, arance e limoni" (Giallombardo 1990 [1981]: 24). Since March 19 coincides with the pruning season, these greens are fairly easy to come by. Our UCLA Hammer Museum exhibition featured greenery from orange trees and kumquat bushes from my own backyard.

(*ciambelle* or donut-shaped cookies, but also referring to round breads with a hole in the middle, variant: *cucciddati*; cf. Varvaro and Sornicola 1986) and increasingly today, commercial baker's confections [Figures 19 – 21] and even store-bought *biscotti* or *panettone* — normally a Christmas specialty originating in Lombardy. To have traditional Sicilian sweets and breads for the diasporic table today, one relies largely on home bakers: women and men in the community who know their family traditions and contribute to the tables.<sup>9</sup>

Although the votive breads are the key ingredient on the table, breads are increasingly giving way to cakes and cookies. Do we attribute this to an acquired American taste for sugar (cf. Del Giudice 2001a)? Actually, Sicilians themselves seem to have the sweetest tooth of all regional Italians and have a long tradition of artistic marzipan confections, ritual cakes, and cookies and a particular genius for creating faux fruit (and fish: e.g., *pesce d'uova*; *pesci di funghi*),<sup>10</sup> along with candy figurines (*i pupi*) of lambs, human figures, horses; sweet bones (for *i Morti*) or eyes (for St. Lucy). Marzipan fruits in realistic shapes and colors trick the eye and beckon from pastry shops every Christmas and Easter.<sup>11</sup> This penchant for sweets may have been formed, in part, by the Arab presence on that island centuries ago. *Nota bene*: the word for “sugar” (*zucchero*) in Italian comes to us via Sicily, which received it from the Arabic “*sùkkar*” (Caracausi 1983: 407; Mintz on history of sugar).

The table tradition also features a pageant of the costumed Holy Family (*i santi*), with the addition of an angel or two, who process from door to door, are twice turned away, and then ultimately find shelter and food at the home of the family sponsoring the table. While private tables are normally given by one devotee and his/her family, friends, neighbors, business associates, and others may make donations of food or money to the host-family. A devotee must “beg” for these donations. The public feast in such a multi-ethnic environment as Los Angeles also frequently becomes an expression of ethnicity (Italian or Sicilian), in what, in the jargon of folklorists, is called an “ethnic display event” (e.g., with flags, ethnic costumes, banners). One of the most fully articulated celebrations occurs at Mary Star of the Sea Church in San Pedro. A procession with saint's niche [Figure 22] is accompanied by women (and men) of the St. Joseph Society, with Vita Gracchiolo† or other members, periodically rallying the devoted with the traditional cry of: “Viva Gesù, Maria, Giuseppe, evviva!” [Figures 23 and 24] and followed by

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<sup>9</sup> In Los Angeles, the input of traditional Sicilian bakers is waning, as many have retired or passed away, so that it is difficult to find bakers who know how to make these artistic breads and cakes. Vincent Gambino was one such baker who was known for his elaborate cakes for Casa Italiana. His cakes apparently made the front page of the daily *Herald Examiner* and the *Los Angeles Times* (oral reports). He is remembered for once making a cake in the form of the Italian peninsula, one of Sicily, and of the leaning tower of Pisa in all its detail. His pastries are missed by the Sicilian community. Virginia recalls the huge personal energy invested in these activities on the part of the women involved. E.g., she herself worked for two months on her table, making all the breads for display and for distribution herself. She had three freezers set up for this purpose and gave away 150 kilos of bread and nearly “killed herself” in the effort.

<sup>10</sup> Given the Sicilian genius for creating *trompe l'oeil* foods of one sort and another, it is interesting to note that bread and breadcrumbs, mixed with vegetables, frequently are modeled to imitate fish (another sacred symbol of the St. Joseph Table) — e.g., *pesci d'uova*; *pesci di funghi* — continuing in savory dishes the delight of sweet marzipan faux foods (cf. *frutta di Mortarana*). Cf. Field 1997: 395.

<sup>11</sup> Uccello's 1976 seminal work on Sicilian breads and sweets include many beautiful photographs of Martorana fruits, Easter and Christmas hearts, jellied candies, bones of the dead for All Souls day, eyes of St. Lucy and many others for a variety of nature and life-cycle occasions. Another valuable and exhaustive study, including visual documentation of Easter ritual breads can be found in Ruffino 1995, which features: Easter wreaths concealing eggs in a variety of fanciful shapes: e.g., doves, pineapple, baskets, donkey, horse and cart, etc.

children in ethnic costumes [Figures 25 - 27], a marching band [Figure 28], with guilds, societies, and confraternities behind their banners [Figures 29 -31], and ending in a large banquet including *pasta e ceci* (a chickpea soup with small noodles) and seafood salad (or fried calamari), courtesy of the fishermen of this port city.<sup>12</sup> This was (and still is) the parish church of two Italian island fishing communities — the Sicilians and from farther north, off the coast of Naples, the Ischians — as well as of the Croat fishermen of San Pedro.<sup>13</sup> The church has its own St. Joseph Society, founded by Sicilian women (Figures 32 and 33), whose yearly task it is to organize the public charity event and feed hundreds from the church kitchen. In Sicily, confraternities played a large role in the public celebrations. In 1998, when we curated the UCLA Hammer Museum table, the Society was celebrating its 25th anniversary and was present to sing novenas. Indeed, along with elaborate foodways, a significant number of Sicilian oral expressions (songs, orations) dedicated to St. Joseph have also been maintained among local Sicilian women.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Among the obligatory dishes at a Pugliese table are instead fish and *lambascioni* (wild onions) — along with ritual breads in the shape of a large donut (Beatrice Arcano, Japigia.com) ([http://www.prolocosalento.it/docs/index.shtml?A=c\\_uggiano2](http://www.prolocosalento.it/docs/index.shtml?A=c_uggiano2)).

In some areas of southern Puglia, nine are the obligatory dishes that the saints must eat, in this order: 1. *i lambascioni* (wild onions); 2. *i vermiceddhri* (*vermicelli*, a pasta dish); 3. *i bucatini al miele e con mollica di pane fritta* (pasta with honey and fried bread crumbs); 4. *i ceci bolliti in "pignata"* (chick-peas cooked in a terracotta pot); 5. *i cavoli lessi con olio d'oliva* (boiled cabbage dressed with olive oil); 6. *il pesce fritto* (fried fish); 7. *lo stoccafisso al sugo e cipolle* (cod with onion and tomato sauce); 8. *le pittole e i "fritti" al miele* (pittole and fried dough drizzled with honey); 9. *il finocchio* (fennel). The meal is accompanied by wine, of course. On Pugliese tables, see also: [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tavole\\_di\\_San\\_Giuseppe#column-one](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tavole_di_San_Giuseppe#column-one); [http://www.otrantopoint.com/tavole\\_san\\_giuseppe.html](http://www.otrantopoint.com/tavole_san_giuseppe.html).

<sup>13</sup> Several publications on emigrant Ischian communities, including that of San Pedro, California, have recently been published by the association Ischitani nel Mondo: *Pe' terre assaje luntane: L'emigrazione ischitana verso le Americhe*, Ischia, 2004-2008. E.g., Del Giudice 2007.

<sup>14</sup> A novena dedicated to St. Joseph hinges on "*Lu viaggiu di San Giuseppi*" (The Voyage of St. Joseph) and was sung by blind *cantastorie* (street performers) in Sicily, with the accompaniment of organ and violin (Giallombardo 1990 [1981]: 21). "A Trapani *i mercuri sulenni* furono istituiti con prediche e musica da Fra' Santo di San Domenico." For oral expressions recorded in Los Angeles, see materials in the IOHI Collections. A "St. Joseph Rosary and Song Book" assembled by Rosalia Manzella Orlando (and dedicated to her mother Paolina Manzella and to Giuseppa La Fata) for the St. Joseph Society of Mary Star of the Sea Church, San Pedro, lists 11 songs and prayers for St. Joseph and 2 for the Madonna. One of the St. Joseph's songs is in Sicilian (p. 7):

*Canzoncina a San Giuseppe*

Dio vi salvi Giuseppi  
Cu Cristu e cu Maria  
Sta bedda cumpagnia  
A vui fu data (2 times)

A vui fu cunsignata  
Maria la virginedda  
Tutta pura e tutta bedda  
A vui tuccau (2 times)

Di li santi fustivu elettu  
Di Diu fustivu amatu  
Fedeli miu avvocatu  
E pruttitturi (2 times)

### 3. History of the cult of St. Joseph

The evolution of the cult of St. Joseph in its Eastern Mediterranean, Western European and thence European diaspora contexts must necessarily consider certain key narratives with their accompanying iconographies and how these were used by the Catholic Church. With prominently Spanish leadership, Counter-Reformation theology carefully guided “Josephine” iconography and continued to shape folk religious traditions around the patron feast day of St. Joseph, in Italy and on into “New World” Sicilian devotional life. This historic overview, therefore, may help us better understand the sources of the Sicilian custom under study.

The carefully crafted image of St. Joseph as the patriarchal *paterfamilias* — of the Holy Family and the Universal Church — promoted not only the veneration of fatherhood in Joseph, but of male authority within the Catholic Church, and it encouraged reverence for paternal authority in the heart of all Catholic families in the most intimate foyer of domestic life. This patriarchal narrative was likely conceived as a counterbalance to the far more ancient and ingrained veneration of the feminine divine in the form of the Madonna. In *Creating the Cult of St. Joseph*, UCLA art historian Charlene Villaseñor Black masterfully demonstrates the theology and politics behind the cult of St. Joseph. At its most extreme, the image of Father and Son attempts to displace (literally to dethrone) the iconography upon which it was closely modeled, that of Madonna and Child. The visual instance of a deferential Mary actually on her knees at the feet of her husband and son (e.g., p. 67) is particularly striking for its inversion. At its most benevolent, the image of Joseph as a “mothering father” (cradling, embracing, and teaching his son a trade) fostered new discourses around masculinity in Hispanic society, thereby encouraging new models of: 1) engaged fatherhood and 2) useful manual labor — neither of which prevailed at the time. Alongside Joseph’s image as the nurturing<sup>15</sup> “foster father” of Jesus,

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Li santi pi vui l’amuri  
L’affettu e lu piaciri  
Unn’aiu chi vi riri  
Aiu vita e morti (2 times)

Morti vurria la sorte  
D’avirivi l’assistenti  
Gesù Maria e Giuseppi  
Eternamenti (2 times)

Cantari vurria sempre  
Maria di l’auri santi  
St’armuzza mia si impigna  
E si ni va cuntenti (2 times)

<sup>15</sup> How does the Sicilian St. Joseph tradition play with gender roles? Turner/Seriff give a feminist reading of the private tables observed in Texas, exploring how the “ideology of reproduction” at its center sacralizes “woman’s work” of nurturing and caring — always the focus of the tables themselves. Women cook the foods, bake the breads, literally feed the saints. Therefore, although St. Joseph is indeed the namesake of this feast, it celebrates *women’s* work, for the altar is actually a “*woman’s altar*.” So too is an altar normally a response to a *woman’s* vow; and it is the *women* who sing novenas to the saint. Men instead roughly function as helpmates and do the heavy lifting. In other words, according to the authors, the public event outwardly focuses on the male saint as a *paterfamilias*, while the private event (the actual preparation of the altar) focuses on woman’s work. The tables observed in Los Angeles cannot be said to *strictly* adhere to this division of labor, for men cooked the pasta, stirred the sauce and baked the

were equally compelling images of the worker saint (Joseph the Carpenter)<sup>16</sup> and the Holy Family's *Flight into Egypt* (Joseph as migrant) — all images amply repeated throughout the Catholic world, Old and New.<sup>17</sup>

Does this Hispanic cult have much to do with tradition in Southern Italy? It is well to remember the centuries-long presence of the Spanish hierarchy (largely through Aragonese Viceroyalty from 1409-1516; as direct rulers from 1516-1713; through Neapolitans until 1816), and its affiliated religious institutions in Sicily (and the Italian South).<sup>18</sup> Thanks in part to Spanish hegemony, Joseph became deeply rooted in Sicilian soil. Although the official cult may have been created to counter that of Mary, it was likely re-appropriated and made popular among Sicilians.<sup>19</sup> Mary, however, resurfaces in the pageant that accompanies the Sicilian tables, reaffirming the Earthly Trinity. She is also hailed, along with Joseph and son, in the ritual calls of the devoted. We will return to this issue below. Here follows a brief summary of the cult's rise and evolution.

During the first centuries of Christianity, the private cult of Joseph appears to have arisen in the Eastern Church (e.g., among Egyptian Copts), while the public and liturgical cult was not codified till much later during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. St. Bonaventure (1212-1274) and St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) were counted among Joseph's most ardent promoters. Indeed, until the early Middle Ages, Saint Joseph is rarely depicted, and where he does appear, he is included in groupings with Patriarchs and ancestors of Christ. One of the earliest depictions of the saint in his own right, holding the flowering branch, is in a fresco at Santa Croce, Florence by Taddeo Gaddi (1332-1338).

Although the Gospels speak little about Joseph, the Evangelists' relative silence was embellished by theologians who created a rich narrative tapestry upon which iconography rested and with which it interplayed. We learn of a series of premonitory dreams in which Joseph was: a) reassured of pregnant Mary's purity and his decision to marry and protect her (and the future Messiah, of course); b) warned of Herod's murderous intent on the innocents of Bethlehem in order to prevent the reign of the Magi-announced Messiah, and c) warned that the family should flee into Egypt, coupled with the subsequent admonition to return to Nazareth from Egypt after Herod's death. We know that Joseph is of the royal lineage of David (cf. Luke's lengthy

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bread (as professional bakers) alongside the women. And men were as much "givers" of tables (e.g., També, Perricone) as were women (e.g., Buscemi Carlson, Vaccaro). The *majority* of the cooking and baking, the singing of novenas, and especially the intimate knowledge of culinary traditions, were clearly in the woman's domain, however. On Texan traditions, see also: *Texas Tavola*, 2007. Circe Sturm, gave a recent report on these elaborate Texas tables at the 2008 annual meeting of the American Italian Historical Association, in New Haven.

<sup>16</sup> But more accurately the "builder" < Greek *tèkton*, which the *Vulgate* translated as FABER.

<sup>17</sup> Despite concerted efforts to promote such gendered imagery in New Spain, colonials reverted to a more indigenous veneration of the Mexican Madonna, i.e., la Virgen de Guadalupe (Villaseñor Black 2006: 157 f.).

<sup>18</sup> See: "List of Viceroyalty of Sicily:" [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Spanish\\_Viceroyalty\\_of\\_Sicily](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Spanish_Viceroyalty_of_Sicily). "Dynastically, the rulers of Aragon and then all Spain occasionally controlled not only Sicily but much of southern Italy (the Kingdom of Naples). Several, including the remarkable Charles V, were Hapsburgs who ruled not only Spain and her possessions but also Austria and various lands of central Europe. This period lasted for over two hundred years, until the War of the Spanish Succession and the brief reign (1713-1720) of Vittorio Amadeo of Savoy" (from: Salerno 2005).

<sup>19</sup> The Josephine cult indeed is considered to be largely the product of Spain: "Il tipo devozionale di Giuseppe, sempre più diffuso a partire dal secolo XVI ha origine in Spagna. Il culto di San Giuseppe ha un suo vertice nella cappella di San José in Toledo, dove si trovava inizialmente anche il quadro di *San Giuseppe* dipinto da El Greco (see: "*Giuseppe: padre putativo di Gesù*"). For a detailed consideration of this cult, see especially: Villaseñor Black 2006. See also Stramare 1993 for the contemporary cult.

genealogy, Ch. 3), although he exercised the humble profession of builder (carpenter), and that he died of natural causes with his son and wife by his side. St. Joseph is known simply as “a just man.” Later he is persistently referred to as Jesus’ “foster father” (“*il padre putativo*” in Italian; paraphrasing Luke, Ch. 3.23). Many additional narratives however (e.g., the story of St. Joseph the Carpenter, widely diffused in the fourth century) largely derive from Eastern Apocrypha. From this Eastern cultural and religious milieu derives the image of Joseph as an old man (sometimes a widower; hence the predominance of early depictions of the saint with a long white beard, infra “*la varba* [<barba] *di S. Giuseppe*”). But in essence, Joseph was a silent saint. Indeed, the story of Joseph within the Church seems to be one of increasing presence and focus. Joseph comes in from the wings to center stage. To literalize this metaphor, we recall: “E’ noto come la genesi del teatro religioso cristiano sia da cercare in ambienti appartenenti alla Chiesa orientale, prima attraverso la drammatizzazione della Passione, in seguito anche degli episodi legati alla Natività” (Giallombardo 1990 [1981]: 9). According to this scholar the *Flight into Egypt* pageantry present in Sicilian St. Joseph traditions directly relates to Eastern Byzantine tradition. It might do well to remember, however, that liturgical drama existed in all parts of the Catholic world. Nonetheless, among his iconographic attributes, Joseph is depicted with a flowering branch, a walking staff, carpenter’s tools, and a lily (symbol of purity). By 1538, a St. Joseph’s Carpenters’ Guild was founded in Rome (S. Giuseppe dei Falegnami), dedicating its St. Joseph church in 1596.

In the West, the tradition develops from the eighth century forward, while the date of his feast fluctuates, for several centuries, between July 20 and March 20. Joseph is closely associated with Benedictine monastic settings, but by the end of the fourteenth century, most all the major orders, starting with the Franciscans (1399), adopt this patron feast day (although with alternating dates all over Europe). In 1479, the feast of March 19 enters the rite but was celebrated only in Rome, thereby contributing to an increasingly public and liturgical cult. In 1621, Gregory XV instituted March 19 as an obligatory feast day for the entire Church. A few decades later, thanks to the Carmelites in Italy and Spain, the new celebration (“Patrocinio di San Giuseppe”) was officially adopted by the Church. Many confraternities (especially carpenters) elected him as their patron saint. In 1714, Clement XI accorded to Joseph his own mass and special offices. In 1870, Pope Pius IX extended the patronage of St. Joseph to the Universal (i.e., worldwide Catholic) Church, celebrated on the third week after Easter. In 1955, this feast was abolished and was substituted by Pius XII with a celebration of Saint Joseph the Worker on May 1 (co-opting the Communist International Worker’s Day). The celebration of Joseph’s marriage to Mary was abolished in 1961 (Giallombardo 1990 [1981]; “Giuseppe [padre putativo di Gesù]”)

Giallombardo points to the heavy Byzantine influence on the Sicilian church, hence accounting, in part, both for the early presence of the *dramma sacro* in Sicily (thence on the genre’s influence on forms of Sicilian traditional cultural forms, e.g., the St. Joseph’s pageant), and on the figure of Joseph himself as an older man (infra. *la varva di San Giuseppe*). Indeed, many of the prayers, songs, and novenas in honor of St. Joseph,<sup>20</sup> insist on his old age. Of course,

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<sup>20</sup> The IOHI Collections include several recordings of such chants (e.g., “San Giuseppuzzu,” frequently sung as a novena on successive nights leading up to March 19) by Sicilian women in the Los Angeles area. Vita Gracchiolo, a font of Sicilian religious oral traditions (e.g., songs, orations, sung rosaries, ritual calls), and other women, were recorded by me in San Pedro after the blessing of the private table given at the home of Maria and Agostino Vaccaro, on March 17, 1995. Chants sung in Upland, California, at the private table given by the “Arbresche” (=

Joseph's great age became hotly contested and the Western Catholic Church came to strongly oppose it, since the advanced age (and implied impotence) of the holy husband appeared to devalue the virginity of Mary. The Western Josephine iconography came to insist instead on the saint's *younger* age and vitality, before reevaluations of Joseph returned him to his older age in the fifteenth century.

In its Sicilian traditional adaptations, according to Giallombardo, the cult of St. Joseph seems to represent a confluence of earlier Eastern and later Western Church influence. The fact that Sicily for a long time came within the orbit of the Eastern Church also meant that it tended to accept non-Catholic versions of Church teachings. If we look at the entire panoply of Sicilian festivities, we indeed find the stratification of the two traditions: in Sicily, in fact, Josephine devotions go from January to September, with many and varied elements finding expression therein: from "pre-Christian" fertility rites (food abundance, bonfires and ritual breads) to strictly Christian ritual dramatizations, iconography, and narrative.

The variant forms taken by Josephine celebrations may well result from syntheses of historically-layered, anthropological and ethnographic convergences. This semantic accumulation is present, if latent, in the various forms of his feast day in the communities that celebrate him. Joseph has been invoked by multiple categories of supplicants, a fact which points to his *de facto* versatility and the range of meanings his narrative embodies. His diverse attributes (e.g., Joseph the Worker, Joseph the Carpenter, A Just Man, Joseph the Patriarch, Joseph and the Good Death) have earned him a great number of confraternities, professions, social groups, and even nations that have adopted him as their patron saint. He is the patron saint of workers, carpenters, economists, solicitors, fathers (= Italian "Father's Day"), the dying, the poor, and marginalized, of lost causes.<sup>21</sup> The list continues:

Innumerevoli sono le categorie che lo considerano loro speciale patrono: viene invocato per l'infanzia, gli orfani, i vergini, la gioventù, le vocazioni sacerdotali, le famiglie cristiane, i profughi, gli esiliati. E' speciale patrono degli operai in genere e segnatamente dei falegnami e degli artigiani. Si ricorre a lui inoltre per le malattie agli occhi, per gli ammalati gravi ed in particolare per i moribondi.

As an old and slightly comical figure, he was even considered the patron saint of drunks, and so too the patron of cuckolds (especially in medieval times). As a saint always accompanied by his (flowering) walking staff, and as the journeying saint, I would posit that he might make an ideal patron saint of migrants (cf. *infra*). St. Joseph indeed seems to do overtime as an all-purpose worker-saint. Attesting to the popularity of the saint in Italy is the ubiquity of the name *Giuseppe* throughout the Italian peninsula from Trento to Palermo. *Giuseppe* is the most popular name given males (paired with *Maria* for women), judging by 1982 telephone directories studied by De Felice (1,718,000 such). In Palermo, for example, *Giuseppe* numbered 14,303, *Salvatore* 9,408, and *Pietro* only 3,570 (De Felice 1982: 91, 332f).

Sermons, both historic (cf. Villaseñor Black 2006) and contemporary (e.g., in conjunction with St. Joseph Tables in Los Angeles, cf. IOHI Collections), give us a good indication of how

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ethnic Albanian, from Piana degli Albanesi) Mistretta family in March 1998, were recorded by Kenneth Scambray. There are several St. Joseph songs in Sicilian that are still sung, e.g., the novena.

<sup>21</sup> A popular legend has Joseph arguing with God over freeing a thief (sometimes Mastrilli, a brigand of Terracina) from hell, threatening to leave Paradise and taking his wife, her dowry of saints and angels with him—suggesting perhaps, Joseph's sense of equity and his defense of social outcasts.

Joseph is to be “officially” interpreted even today. These tend to focus on Joseph’s special and intimate relationship with his son, since he raised, guided, provided for, and taught the future savior of humanity, making Joseph critical to the Salvation and Redemption narrative. Joseph is always a faithful and obedient servant of God, accepting his role as good husband to Mary and as father to Jesus — an ideal family man, in other words. As a “virgin” father, he provides the ideal complement to the “virgin” mother Mary. In Sicily, in fact, the costumed threesome of the St. Joseph day pageant, are alternatively referred to as *i santi* or as *i virgineddi* (even when they were *not* played by children). Further, in early iconography, this Earthly Trinity (i.e., the Holy Family) was considered to be something of a mirror image of the Heavenly Trinity and as such frequently depicted as the human incarnation of the divine family constellation (cf. Villaseñor Black 2006). In Italy, indeed, “s’impone la tipologia della Sacra Famiglia che nel Barocco è vista anche come Trinità Terrestre.” With these historic accounts as background, it is time to tackle the cartographies of St. Joseph’s Tables and, more importantly, the actual substance (pardon the pun) of Sicilian devotional food practices — the focus of this essay.

#### 4. Geographic distribution of St. Joseph food altars in Southern Italy

In mapping the Italian community of Los Angeles, it became apparent that many aspects of Italian folklife seemed to be especially well preserved among Sicilians. Primary among their traditions is the St. Joseph’s Table. In tracing the provenance of the Los Angeles-based table tradition, I soon discovered that the altar/table tradition was widely diffused throughout Sicily. In the account of the preeminent nineteenth-century Sicilian folklorist, Giuseppe Pitrè, tables were ubiquitous. For example, in S. Croce Camerina (Prov. of Ragusa), at the turn of the last century, “Non vi è quasi famiglia [ . . . ] che per devozione non imbandisca una mensa per ricevere, in onore di S. Giuseppe, della Madonna e di Gesù, tre poveri, che sceglie tra le persone più bisognose del paese” (*Feste patronali in Sicilia*, 1900; as cited in Uccello 1976: 75). Although the tradition is widespread in Sicily, it appears to be strongest in the West, especially in the provinces of Palermo, Trapani, Salemi, Enna, Agrigento. But it is also found in Ragusa, Catania, Siracusa, and the Egadi Islands. Sicilian sites with strong St. Joseph traditions — not all focusing exclusively on tables, but some on *i vampi* (bonfires; cf. *Vocabolario siciliano*, Vol. 5) or other associated aspects of the richly stratified festa — include: Alimena - Caccamo - Ganci - Monreale - Roccapalumba (Palermo); Campobello di Mazara - Gibellina - Vita (Trapani); Pietraperzia - Scicli – Valguarnera (Enna); Favara - Ribera (Agrigento); Rosolini (Siracusa); Marettimo (Isole Egadi); Acate - Santa Croce Camarina (Ragusa); Mazzarrone – Mirabella Imbaccari - Palazzo Adriano (Catania). ([http://www.sicilyland.it/festa\\_san\\_giuseppe\\_sicilia.htm](http://www.sicilyland.it/festa_san_giuseppe_sicilia.htm)). The tables reported in the Los Angeles area for this study are represented by immigrants from: Trappeto, Terrasini, Piana degli Albanesi (Palermo), Favignana (Trapani), Villafranca Sicula (Agrigento), Valguarnera Caropepe (Enna).

Nonetheless, regional variants on the table tradition can be found throughout the Italian South, although, for the most part, not as elaborately articulated (e.g., Abruzzo/Molise,<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Although, Giuseppe Colitti notes that, during a recent visit to the Museo da Migração in Sao Paulo, Brazil on June 21, 1998, he transcribed the elaborate list of dishes for the St. Joseph’s table to be thirteen (sometimes nineteen) in the tradition of the Molise region, and that besides the Holy Family and angel, twelve guests were normally invited to play the role the Apostles—all taking precisely assigned places at the table, and that after the recitation of prayers, the woman of the house served them in stocking feet, beginning with St. Joseph (personal communication). See [www.giuseppicolitti.it](http://www.giuseppicolitti.it) and the Web site of the Research Center he directs: [www.centrostudivalloidiario.it](http://www.centrostudivalloidiario.it).

Lucania, and notably in the Salento, the southernmost tip of Puglia). In the area of Taranto, for instance, it is known as *la mattarèdda* (<*mattrə* <Gr. *maktira*, wooden bread trough). In other Salentine provinces of Puglia, the towns closely associated with the tables are Giurdignano, Poggiardo, Uggiano la Chiesa, Cocumola, Minervino di Lecce, Casamassella, Otranto, Lizzano, San Marzano di San Giuseppe, San Donaci.<sup>23</sup>

Although emigrants from all these regions may be found in the United States and are well represented in Los Angeles, St. Joseph Tables have been almost exclusively associated with Sicilian Americans. And when unable to prepare them in their New World environments, some families (e.g., the Delia and Riesi families, Sicilians of Patterson, as reported by Uccello 1976: 75) instead sent contributions back to Sicily in order to “*fare la cena al Patriarca*.” Sicilians, I found in my Los Angeles-based research, seemed especially committed to preserving their cultural heritage. Could this be due to the increased dose of prejudice (contributing to increased insularity) felt by the earliest immigrants? Or to a presumed cultural conservatism even pre-emigration? It is unclear. As Sicilian-American Virginia Buscemi Carlson† (d. 2007),<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The Salentine tables, judging from available images, seem to be distinctive in the even, replicability of the plates laid out. They are all the same (although in odd numbers and ready to be served to the saints). In Uggiano, at least, the tables do not appear to be rich and varied cornucopias of plenty but rather give the impression of a cafeteria line. Here, it is the head of the household, as St. Joseph, with his *bastone*, who signals the beginning of the meal, and strikes the ground with his staff at the successive eating rounds until the ritual meal, shared with his other saint/guests, is over. As with Sicilian tables, here too the tables can be viewed by pilgrims on the eve of March 19 and throughout the next day. Frequently, a small table is set at the entrance of the home where the “*pacino*” (small bread), *lambascioni* (wild onion), and fried dough sweets can be taken away by visiting pilgrims. On March 19 instead, St. Joseph and the other saints (a minimum of three and a maximum of thirteen — again always an odd number), eat precisely the same things.

On other forms of traditional Salentine culture, notably music (including the music of the Griko minority of the Grecia Salentina), see *Alan Lomax in Salento*; Del Giudice and Van Deusen 2005; sound recordings: *Italian Treasury: Puglia; Canto d'amore: canti, suoni, voci della Grecia salentina*; and *Bonasera a quista casa*.

<sup>24</sup> Let me give a sense of the psychological dynamics at play in the Virginia and Sam partnership by exploring the worldview and personality of Virginia Buscemi Carlson, who recently passed away. She loved all traditions, especially Sicilian and Greek, engaged in folkdances of all sorts; enjoyed Rock & Roll, Country and Western, as well as Italian and specifically Sicilian music, and ate all types of ethnic food. She assiduously watched National Geographic documentaries in her enthusiasm for learning about other cultures. Most importantly, within the context of this study, she constantly saw links across cultures (e.g., within foodways: semolina for Norwegians and Sicilians, the method of killing chickens for kosher Jews and Sicilians). She stated: “I have learned by mingling with other races that things, in the end, are very much alike.” Virginia’s life was living proof of the concept expressed by Juan Gutierrez (National Roundtable on Folk Arts in the Classroom) decades ago: “When you have a passion for your own traditions, you are sensitive to the traditions of others.”

Virginia was proudly and even fiercely Sicilian. She served a term as president of Arba Sicula and was a local authority on all things Sicilian (which is one of the reasons Sam Perricone engaged her to make a St. Joseph Table at St. Joseph Church). Born in Villafranca Sicula (Prov. of Agrigento), she came to New York (where her mother was born before returning to Sicily) when she was 11 years old and moved to California only as an adult, after divorcing her first (Italian) husband. She returned to Italy in 1971 for the first time and maintained an active link with Sicilian friends and relatives. Her house was a monument to *Sicilianità* and Ken, her Swedish-Norwegian husband, cheerfully supported her ethnicity. Yet Virginia was no die-hard “in-grouper,” threatened and defensive. She believed that it was important to be “modern” while still valuing one’s own traditions and dialect, and dismissed out of hand the snobbery of modern-day Sicilians (and Italians) who felt it was a step up the social ladder to have shed traditions and all traces of Sicilian dialect. She held up her own father (91 in 1989) as her cultural hero. He was educated, learned his Italian grammar beautifully, read novels to pass the time and enrich his command of the national language, but also freely spoke Sicilian. Indeed, it seemed to her that he was far ahead of others for knowing not one but two languages. (She regretted not having taught her children to speak Italian but attributed this reluctance to the complication of having to translate for her husband — although Ken insists he would have simply learned it.) Virginia believed Sicilians to be more strongly attached to their island’s traditions than other Italians to

passionately affirmed: “Without our traditions, there would be nothing left: we would be just like everyone else.” [Figure 34] In 1998, it was with Virginia and the Sicilian community in Los Angeles that I had the privilege of co-curating a St. Joseph’s Table [Figures 35 – 38] at UCLA’s Armand Hammer Museum, right next to the visiting exhibition: “The Invisible Made Visible: Angels from the Vatican.” The juxtaposition of an abundant food altar of local folk tradition next to the imposing paintings and sculptures from Rome was curiously moving. In more ways than one, the local community (and not just the Vatican angels) was being made *visible*.

##### 5. Sicilian St. Joseph Tables in the diaspora (e.g., New Orleans, Los Angeles)

Anecdotal evidence suggests that tables are to be found all over North America, as well as in other places to which Sicilians emigrated.<sup>25</sup> For example, a Campanian colleague, Giuseppe Colitti, reports (via e-mail communication) that in the late 1990’s he had found a long list of the “*pietanze rituali*” prepared for the feast of St. Joseph (although it was not clear by which group of Italians the table had been prepared) at the Museo dell’Emigrante in São Paulo, Brazil. In Los Angeles, as I have noted, the custom of preparing St. Joseph’s Tables is widespread and may be considered one of the major folk celebrations of the Italian community today — thanks, in part, to the efforts of the Italian Catholic Federation.<sup>26</sup> Not long ago, someone estimated that as many as 100 (between private/public tables) were given each year.

Further, besides crossing Italian regional lines, the custom has even crossed ethnic boundaries. In New Orleans, for example, many African-American Spiritualist churches where Voodoo (<Haitian *Vodou*) is practiced, have long been preparing St. Joseph’s Tables. The

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theirs. Indeed, I too came to discover that Sicilians still danced their tarantella, knew and sang dialect songs informally, practiced their religious rituals, and widely maintained their culinary traditions.

<sup>25</sup> And they are likely present elsewhere, despite the lack of formal documentation. Chupa, Anna Maria, n.d., in her “St. Joseph’s Day Altars” (“Louisiana Project: Land, Environment, Culture,” Houston Institute for Culture: <http://www.houstonculture.org/laproject/stjo.html>), also reports researching the tables in Gretna, Louisiana, and Starkville, Mississippi. Tables have been reported in Texas as well (see Turner and Seriff) and continue to be researched by Circe Sturm, who reported on these tables at the 2008 American Italian Historical Association meeting in New Haven, Conn. See the film *Texas Tavola: A Taste of Sicily in the Lone Star State*, 2007, 34 min., directed by Circe Sturm and Randolph Lewis.

<sup>26</sup> The primary sites for viewing St. Joseph’s Tables in Los Angeles are: Casa Italiana, the social hall adjacent to St. Peter’s Italian Church (the only national parish in the Southland); Mary Star of the Sea Church (the home parish of the original fishing communities, Sicilian and Ischian, in San Pedro, Los Angeles’ port city); and some years at Villa Scalabrini (the Scalabrinian retirement home in Sun Valley). Today, they are largely affiliated with churches within the Italian Catholic Federation (ICF). It was Father Pisano (of Pugliese provenance), himself a devotee of St. Joseph, who was instrumental in diffusing the *public* table tradition via the ICF throughout Southern California. According to Pisano, the first table given publicly in a church was at Mary Star of the Sea Church in San Pedro in 1958. Previously, tables had been prepared exclusively in private homes (cf. Speroni 1940, for early tables in southern California). On Ischians in San Pedro, including its fishing traditions (i.e., Blessing of the Fleet), cf. Del Giudice 2007. Pisano’s personal view of folk tradition is rather enlightened, given the sometimes hostile attitude of clergy toward such folk cultural expressions. He stated that he feels strongly about these traditions, that they are in fact good for the faith, and that while the Bible is primary, traditions form an important corollary, as a “source of truth.” Traditions are, in his view, a living *proof* of faith, and in fact, in those for whom faith is weak, folklore seems to reinforce religious observance through devotional practice. Pisano considers the tables a beautiful tradition that should be diffused throughout Los Angeles parishes. He concedes however, that no group prepares the tables with more devotion or splendor than the Sicilians. He too recognizes the danger in the loss of traditional culture and notes that the next generation does not feel these traditions as strongly and they ought to be encouraged to preserve and transmit them. At Mary Star of the Sea Church, in San Pedro, one can safely say that the tradition is deeply rooted and will not easily pass away.

syncretistic nature of Vodou allows for a stratification of deities where indigenous and Christian saints share identities (cf. Cosentino 1995). I here recall the sage words of Ralph Rinzler, co-founder of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival: “There are two ways to preserve folk culture. You can pickle it and put in on the shelf or you can share the seed.” Sicilians in the diaspora have been sharing this tradition for decades.

A brief word about the St. Joseph Table in New Orleans, where it is not an insignificant custom, given the city’s high percentage of Italians from the mid-nineteenth century onward, a high percentage of whom were Sicilians. It is not surprising then that the St. Joseph tradition in New Orleans has continued to be strong.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, there would have been ample opportunities for all ethnic groups to experience them. African Americans not only have given St. Joseph Tables of their own, but have assimilated St. Joseph into their own pantheon of deities. Chupa reports that in her New Orleans research on Damballah, this African spirit came to be associated with St. Patrick and with Moses, and she also saw frequent references to St. Joseph. Spiritualist churches that honored Black Hawk as a patron spirit of social justice simultaneously honored St. Joseph and Moses in prominent positions on their altars (<http://www.houstonculture.org/laproject/stjo.html>).

It is clear that the St. Joseph’s Table seed itself had fallen on fertile ground among Louisiana African Americans who themselves largely grew up in a Catholic tradition of altars, sculpted figures, and saintly iconographies. Saxon notes that the attraction among Louisiana African Americans is toward the figure of St. Joseph the Worker and is invoked especially for his assistance in finding work or shelter. We may speculate that the tradition may also have appealed for a variety of other reasons: the spectacular food displays, the pageantry of costumed dramatizations, the focus on the poor and marginalized, and obviously the “symbolic value” of St. Joseph himself and his defense of the humble, the hard working, and the defenseless.

The Mardi Gras spirit of Louisiana Creoles seems also to have had a profound effect on the tradition. In New Orleans, St. Joseph was married to the grand ball tradition and frequently the saint’s day ended with dancing in many quarters of the city. In the past, such parties, not confined to Italians, nor even to Catholics, were ubiquitous. Apparently, African Americans frequently donned their Mardi Gras costumes on St. Joseph’s night. The mid-Lenten reprieve represented by the St. Joseph calendrical occurrence might have warranted this quality of joyous festivity (cf. Cuccagna), although in its Sicilian origins, never had such abandon been observed. St. Joseph, despite the occasional merrymaking around bonfires, was more Lenten and less Carnavalesque in spirit.

#### 6. *Interpreting the tradition: table, altar, banquet* (See: Rituals of abundance. *Infra*.)

Within the St. Joseph’s Table tradition several convergences and morphologic syncretisms appear to have occurred over time. Such layering may also be discerned in the variation in nomenclature: is it a table (*tavolata*, *tavola*) or an altar? That is, although the terms “altar” and

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<sup>27</sup> The “Virtual St. Joseph’s Altar” provides much useful information regarding altars in Louisiana (<http://www.thankevann.com/stjoseph/>). It reports that the 2008 altar (its tenth) had 4,000 visitors and over 224 offerings. Members of The Greater New Orleans Italian Cultural Society (GNOICS) built their first *public* altar in 1967 “on the front steps of the St. Joseph church on Tulane Avenue.” In 1978, the altar location was moved to the Piazza D’Italia, due to inclement weather in previous years (Chupa: 98). Private tables however, had likely been given among Sicilians from their first years in Louisiana.

“table” seem to be used almost interchangeably, they more likely represent a blurring of two historically superimposed worldviews, Antique/Classical and Christian, roughly corresponding to Table and Altar. Tables indeed range from the pared to the extravagant. The sacramental breads on the altar, of course, forming the minimal “table” are still the norm in private settings, where the food may instead be spread out in an altogether separate room (also likely due to constraints of physical space). Public tables seem to revel in visual gastronomic excess.

But what is the elemental relationship of the profane and sacred as it focuses on the “food altar” in honor of St. Joseph? Where precisely does the abundant, elaborate table end and the altar begin? Where is the ancient rite of Spring to be discerned (if it is) as distinct, from the more sober and parsimonious Christian votive items? The divide may be illusory and may point to a duality of thinking around issues of sacred/profane. Giallombardo (1990 [1981]: 12) reminds us that it is well known that many religious matrices recognize the domestic hearth (with its *lares*) to be the elemental altar. The altar and *mensa* tend to converge as one and the same (cf. MENSA ‘table, board’ > dial. It. *mèsa* ‘*madia*’ = ‘bread trough, kneading board’ DEI 2433; MISSA > It. *mèssa*). Although here with a significant difference between the human and the divine: in the St. Joseph tradition, one does not *consume* the divine (as in the Christian Eucharist), but rather it is those portrayed as doing the consuming (“*i santi*”) who *are* divine (p. 14).

While the focus of the St. Joseph tradition is on the saint himself and associated ritual breads, i.e., on Christian *agape* in the form of a communal meal, clearly the table lends itself to displays of gastronomic abundance and excess (even though the table too and all the foods associated with the festivity are blessed by the priest before anyone partakes). But, in fact, the collective meal provided to the poor is a basic, simple meal; the foods taken away by visitors are minimal (bread roll, orange, fava bean); while the foods found on the table and served to the saints are varied, rich, special status foods. The latter are frequently destined for some special group: honored guests of friends and family, the priests of the congregation, the Holy Family itself — and no longer the poor. The non-perishable foods collected for the occasion (dry pasta, oil, packaged foods) are sometimes given to retirement homes and orphanages or distributed to the visiting needy.

In the Sicilian tradition and its diaspora reenactments, all forms ranging from minimal to maximal altars and tables are present. In Trapani, the most elementary form of altar is present — upon which are received offerings of food and drink, to be consumed by the saints. The altar presents a three-tiered step ladder to the divine, in an apparently archaic form found throughout the Eastern Mediterranean: “La sua diffusione è attestabile in tutta l’area del Mediterraneo orientale, fin dalle epoche più antiche e nella forma a ripiani che appare dominante in Sicilia (Giallombardo 1990 [1981]: 15). The altar is often made to look like a shrine and then again may be an extension of it, or it may be set up in a separate space altogether. It is not clear if those partaking perceive a subtle division between table and sacred altar. Giallombardo speculates that an influence of the Church may account for the disposition of objects: that is, it may not be a coincidence that on the steps of the altar are those items most readily associable with Christianity: bread, wine, oranges (“I cibi dell’antica *agape* Cristiana”), whereas “profane” foods are more distant from it.

## 7. Bread in Italian culture

As I have written elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> the primal role of bread in Italian culture (and in the Christian rite, of course) cannot be overstated and serves as an important point of reference for understanding not only the sacrament of the Eucharist, but the central place of bread on the Sicilian (and Pugliese) St. Joseph's Tables. Bread forms one of *the* sacramental foci of Christianity, along with wine — both southern Mediterranean legacies.<sup>29</sup> And Southern Italy's is a quintessentially Mediterranean food culture. Bread is the staff of life and for centuries was the stuff which barely kept the masses this side of starvation in the South (while *polenta* or cornmeal filled this function in the Italian North). Direst poverty was known as "*miseria di pane*" "bread poverty" — that is, when even the minimal meal was not possible. The most elemental form of charity, in fact, was giving bread to the poor.<sup>30</sup> It is *the* basic food and hence is sacred (like corn to the Hopi, rice to the Japanese). It is never wasted nor disrespected since it is conceived to be or represent a divinity *embodied*, e.g., the body of Christ. Consequently, there are many creative uses of old bread in *la cucina rustica* (or peasant cooking): it is recycled in soups and stews, grated as breadcrumbs, made into *bruschetta*, toasted, soaked, sautéed, etc. The primal activity of baking bread is also the symbol of hearth and home. It is a moral touchstone. How many dialects sum up the honest and generous as *buono come il pane*? Close friends broke bread together as *compagni* < COMPANIONE < CUM + PANEM (cf. *companatico* which suggests that bread is the mainstay for which other foods — cheese, olives, vegetables — formed only a collateral accompaniment). The preparation and consumption of bread is always an act of devotion,<sup>31</sup> a daily ritual, and in Sicily, the variety of ritual breads is truly vast. Charitable bread distribution in Sicilian tradition was not exclusive to the feast day of St. Joseph, but was also practiced on the feast of Saint Anthony (June 13), when breads were brought to church, blessed, and then distributed to the poor.<sup>32</sup> Buscemi Carlson recounted organizing such a distribution at her own parish of St. Raymond's in Downey (Interview, October 21, 1995).

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<sup>28</sup> E.g., Del Giudice 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Especially after the arrival of Islam on the Mediterranean scene (post-seventh-century invasions), the Mediterranean itself became a dividing line in terms of foods: whereas wine and even bread had been sacred foods in Islam and Christianity, and were generally common to Mediterranean cultures, the Christian shift northward meant that wine and bread (along with pork, the foods of the New Europe) became predominant markers of Christianity, thereafter separating Medieval Christian Europe from the Islamic world (Montanari 2000: 191).

<sup>30</sup> A traditional Italian anti-clerical perspective may see in the official Church hierarchy's (i.e., ICF) involvement in the tables, a money-making venture typical of the proverbial money-seeking Catholic priest. On a less cynical note, it may be remembered that this feast reinforces key concepts of Christian *caritas* and hospitality, that is, of feeding the poor, caring for orphans, and other weak and defenseless members of society (cf. traditionally, articulated as caring for widows, orphans, prisoners, and providing dowries for poor girls). The distribution of daily bread was a time-honored and visible form of charity for many churches throughout Italy.

<sup>31</sup> Note the variety of sacred symbols which frequently were imprinted on bread or the many rituals of devotion which accompanied its preparation and consumption (kissing the loaf of bread, making the sign of the cross over it, the taboo against turning it upside down or dropping it on the floor, etc.). In part, this reverence also reflected the understanding that it *physically* represented the body of Christ and therefore should be handled with care and awe.

<sup>32</sup> In Puglia, another way to fulfill one's vow to the saint is simply to prepare St. Joseph breads (or a special pasta dish, *vermiceddhri*) and to distribute these to the faithful as they exit church, or else to deliver them house to house. The recipient repays the favor by dedicating a prayer to the devotee.

## 8. Dramatization of migrant journeys: into Egypt and out of Sicily

The dramatization of the Holy Family's migrant journey is alternatively known as "*Fuga in Egitto*," "*Parti di san Giuseppe*," or "*Funzioni*," (Giallombardo 1990 [1981]: 9).<sup>33</sup> Indeed, one of Joseph's key attributes is the wayfarer's staff. Joseph himself is a seeker, a migrant, in search of food and shelter for his family. In the pageant, the saints or "*virginetti*" ritually knock on three doors (known as the "*tupa tupa*"- or "knock, knock") and ask to be let in; they are twice turned away and then given hospitality [Figure 39 - 41]. It was the three of the poorest of the village, including orphans, who were traditionally dressed as Mary (a young girl), Joseph (an old man), Jesus (a small child). They were then seated directly at the table and served a substantial meal (a taste of every item of blessed food or sometimes a ritual three).<sup>34</sup>

It is not exactly clear when or how the table tradition began in Sicily, but one might posit that it had a direct link to the promotion of Joseph by the Spanish establishment and roughly coincides with the Spanish presence in the South (even though the table tradition is strictly a Southern *Italian* folk custom without counterpart in Spain or its former colonies). It is the dramatization of the Holy Family's hospitality-seeking, which may be one the *trait d'union* between the Sicilian *Flight into Egypt* pageant and the Mexican Nativity tradition of *Las Posadas*, which seem to so closely coincide with it.<sup>35</sup>

The saints in present-day public celebrations are normally comprised of a young couple and a young boy, who normally walks the procession hand-in-hand with his "parents." (At least in one occasion, they *are* his parents, although this is not the norm (e.g., Figure 41). Playing one of the saints seems to have become something of an honorary role since it no longer tends to be enacted by the poor — and therefore has no stigma attached to it. They walk in procession and behind them follow the guilds and the general public. After the saints have eaten (and not before), all are invited to the communal banquet where typically a "poor man's meal" — either a bean soup (*pasta e ceci*) or a "*Milanisa*" (pasta with fresh sardines, fennel, pine nuts, and raisins, topped with sweetened and toasted breadcrumbs, to replicate sawdust from a carpenter's workshop), or even Trapanese couscous, all depending on Sicilian provenance, together with bread and fruit — is served. No one is turned away. In Sicily, often an olive branch or palm frond over the door signaled that a family had opened its doors to the community [Figure 42]. After supper, guests are given blessed foods, a bread roll [Figure 43], perhaps an orange or lemon (recall that Sicily is Italy's citrus grower), and a fava bean to take home. The special foods from the table are given as gifts or sometimes auctioned off. Bits of the blessed bread have historically been used as talismans, to keep away storms or hunger. In the African community of New Orleans, fava beans (also known as "lucky beans") were also used as good luck charms.

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<sup>33</sup> I thank Steve Siporin for calling my attention to the appropriateness of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible as a synonym for food (especially bread), which brought the earlier Joseph and his brother to that land. Evidently, it became a recurrent pattern of the hungry in times of famine, albeit Sicilians were likely unaware of this notion.

<sup>34</sup> In Otranto (and other areas of Puglia), the "saints" vary from a minimum of three (Mary, Jesus, Joseph), to five (with the addition of St. Ann and St. Joachim); to seven (with St. Elizabeth and St. John), nine (St. Zachariah and St. Mary Magdelene), eleven (St. Catherine and St. Thomas) and finally thirteen (St. Peter and St. Agnes) — in increments of male/female paired saints ([http://www.otrantopoint.com/tavole\\_san\\_giuseppe.html](http://www.otrantopoint.com/tavole_san_giuseppe.html)).

<sup>35</sup> Sicilian tradition is rich in various genres of folk theatre (e.g., *L'Opera dei Pupi* or marionette theatre based on the *gesta* of Charlemagne and the Paladins) and extends to religious pageants (*sacre rappresentazioni*).

The statue of St. Joseph itself is supposed to assist sellers in selling (if buried upside down in the yard) or buyers in finding a home.<sup>36</sup>

It appears to me that St. Joseph has been particularly attractive to Italian Americans, in part, because of his close association with the paradigm of Joseph as *Migrant* or Wanderer (beyond Joseph the Worker and Joseph the Patriarch).<sup>37</sup> It does not take a long stretch of the imagination to see a strong identification of immigrants with Joseph — himself “emigrant” — fleeing into Egypt, a stranger in a strange land, at the mercy of a foreign and historically hostile people who had enslaved the Jews. Some parts of the analogy closely align, while others less so. Many Italian immigrants were forced to flee their village homes as economic refugees and were equally at the mercy of their foreign (and frequently hostile) hosts. The welcome was not always warm, as Sicilians in particular were subjected to some of the harshest forms of prejudice and hatred by their host nationals *and* by other regional Italians — at times, just as foreign.

For wayfaring peoples with a long history of migrations behind them, Mediterranean peoples understood the ideal (and absolute necessity) of practicing hospitality. Lodging the traveler and feeding the stranger were key cultural values throughout the Mediterranean world, from ancient times to modern. In the Christian era, indeed, numerous hagiographic tales illustrate how in assisting the stranger one may actually be welcoming into one’s midst the divine presence disguised in human form (e.g., St. Christopher, St. Martin). And in pre-Christian times too, the motif of “entertaining angels unawares” was known (e.g., the story of Abraham just before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; many Elijah the Prophet tales). Hospitality is a sacred duty.

Emigration from Italy, for the most part, was not a matter of choice but of necessity. Poverty, under-development and natural catastrophes, caused millions to flee during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in a mass migration that had had no equal. One of the most commonly shared “foundation” legends as the basis of the St. Joseph’s Table tradition is found almost exclusively in diaspora written and oral sources. It involves variations of the following:

The tradition of building the altar to St. Joseph began as far back as the Middle Ages [sic] in gratitude to St. Joseph for answering prayers for deliverance from famine. The families of farmers and fisherman built altars in their homes to share their good fortune with others in need.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> A recent *Los Angeles Times* article (“3 BR, 2 BA, plastic saint buried in yard,” April 19, 2009) reports on the marked increase in the practice of burying the statue upside down to sell property (and removing it when the sale is made) during the current recession as homeowners are desperate to make sales in a sagging market. Philip Cates, a Modesto, CA-based mortgage banker and owner of [www.StJosephStatue.com](http://www.StJosephStatue.com) has sold more than a quarter million do-it-yourself kits since he launched the mail-order company in 1990. And it is not only Italian Catholics who are buying them. (On the Virtual St. Joseph Web site, this practice is attributed to St. Teresa of Avila who was apparently assisted in the opening of Carmelite Convents throughout Europe by her traveling statue of St. Joseph!) You can even buy a kit to help you accomplish this task. See: “Devotion to St. Joseph to Sell your house” (<http://www.thankevann.com/stjoseph/sellhome.html>). You can also go on a St. Joseph shopping spree and buy, among other artifacts, T-shirts, prayer-cards, and tote-bags, at: <http://www.cafepress.com/thankevann>.

<sup>37</sup> Indeed this was the narrative followed by Fr. Pisano (cf. n. 25) in his sermon at the Mistretta altar in 1998 and by Fr. Provenzano at Mary Star of the Sea Church, in San Pedro, in 2009.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., The Virtual St. Joseph Altar, <http://www.thankevann.com/stjoseph/>. These are especially evident in local publications, many of them apparently relying on an oral tradition. They provide a good indication of the narrative as it widely circulates. There are a plethora of such “how to” guides for creating St. Joseph’s Tables. I cite merely one example: *Viva San Giuseppe: A guide for Saint Joseph Altars*. Sisters of St. Joseph, St. Joseph Guild, New Orleans, Louisiana. n.d.

This narrative follows a fairly standard sequence of communal crisis (famine, plagues, etc.) – prayer – divine intercession.<sup>39</sup> As far as I can tell, there is little trace of this narrative in homeland Italian literature. Still, it bears a resemblance to other tales in the Italian oral tradition that also appear to be linked to migration. As I have written elsewhere:

Numerous Italian tales begin with the scattering of large families due to famine, as children (often brothers) are sent into the world to seek their fortune. For Italians, a people with a long history of emigration, these tale types take on curiously ethnographic undertones, and may indeed be considered emblematic tales of [im]migration. Not surprisingly, they have endured among immigrants themselves both as tales [. . .] and as oral histories — corroborating Calvino’s maxim that *le fiabe sono vere* (folktales are true). Not only were these tales “true,” but so were the fantastical fictions of *Cuccagna* and *Upside Worlds* (partly) materialized through the immigrant experience. (Del Giudice 2001a: 48)

In other words, the options open to the starving peasant, fisherman, or shepherd, it seems was either to pray to saints for a miracle (cf. foundation legend), to emigrate, or to resort to crime (cf. “*O migranti, o briganti*”). Millions departed in search of *basic* material sustenance. And many found it in abundance. The custom of the St. Joseph Table seems to focus on these pivotal themes of famine, migration, and found abundance.

If this “happy ending” seems somewhat implicit in the St. Joseph Table tradition, here is a way it *might* be “read.” While the tables do in fact symbolically focus on the poor, this *fiesta* also discretely: a) dramatizes the story of immigrant success, b) celebrates the work ethic, and c) affirms the patriarchal family — pillars of the Italian immigrant ethos. In fact, opulent tables are possible *as a result of* material success and depend on many generous donors. Tables, therefore, may also be a form of tribute to family businesses (often food-related), which heavily sponsor them. As such, the tables can inadvertently become monuments to immigrant triumph. Food — its production and distribution — has indeed sustained numerous Italian immigrants in America. Therefore, what better way to enshrine the source of many an immigrant fortune than in food for the table?<sup>40</sup> Hundreds of kilos of cheese and pasta, gallons of oil and cases of wine are donated to the tables each year, to be consumed, sold or distributed. Both wealth and its redistribution therefore, are often twin items on the St. Joseph’s Tables.

### 9. *Private vs. public tables*

This oblique narrative may be especially operative in public displays. But what motivates private tables? Where ought we draw a separation between the private and the public spheres of the celebration? In traditional Italian village settings, we are told, such a separation was not as

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<sup>39</sup> For the wide range of crises — personal, communal, national — upon which St. Joseph’s intercession has said to have had positive effect, see especially Villaseñor Black, who lists them in detail, as they occurred in Spanish and Mexican settings.

<sup>40</sup> Writing in the early 1980’s, Giallombardo noted the tendency toward conspicuous consumption, even in an ostensibly charitable tradition such as the St. Joseph table: “Oggi [. . .] si può leggere il senso di una fruizione legata a istanze fortemente avvertite di esibizione individualistica del proprio benessere socioeconomico. [. . .] costosi antipasti, dolci più elaborati ordinati al pasticciere, frutta pregiata [. . .]” (Giallombardo 1990 [1981]: 28).

clearly demarcated: in Sicily, any “private” table was to be open to anyone who chose to participate. In earlier Los Angeles neighborhoods too, more ethnically homogeneous and compact, this lack of strict demarcation appeared to obtain (Speroni 1940). For example, in these smaller immigrant neighborhoods, streets continued to function as extensions of “private” space.<sup>41</sup> It is attested that in Sicily, in fact, the more archaic tradition was to place the altar/table *outside* the home (e.g., in the courtyard or outside one’s front door), while today instead it is prepared in larger *inside* locations (e.g., a grocer’s warehouse). Indeed: “In tutta l’area del Mediterraneo antico e classico, comprese le culture italiche, è documentato infatti il passaggio dei culti alle divinità dall’esterno all’interno” (Giallombardo: 16; cf. n. 16). But ancient practices aside, this shift may more likely here be attributable to modern and urban uses of private/public space.

When I began to document tables in Los Angeles in the early 1990s, a full range of celebrations along the private/public axis existed. At the private end of the spectrum were more modest tables meant primarily for the enjoyment of family and friends (e.g., Vaccaro, Buscemi, També, Grammatico, Russo, Mistretta tables). Tables were sometimes presented in semi-public spaces such as restaurants (e.g., the early tables of Perricone, or in a social club); yet increasingly they have become public charitable events, sponsored by corporate groups (the ICF, a saint’s society or church guild) and are connected to specific parishes or cultural centers (e.g., Casa Italiana, Mary Star of the Sea, or even the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, given by the Patrons of Italian Culture in the mid-2000s). Father Pisano seems to have played a key role in this shift of focus toward public table (n. 24).

Many though continue to be *private* devotional tables prepared as an *ex voto*, to the saint to secure his favor or in response to a petition which has been granted (*per grazia ricevuta*), to celebrate one’s name sake [Figure 44], as a devotion to one’s favorite saint, or as a general “Sicilian Thanksgiving.” In the literature and in oral narration, one finds a variety of stories of sick children cured, sons returning from war unharmed, husbands saved from a serious accident, and so forth.<sup>42</sup> But tables are not always given as an act of devotion and prayer; they may also be given for the simple pleasure of inviting guests to a celebration (or as an act of heritage preservation). In any case, although a table may represent the outcome of a personal vow (normally expressed by a woman), the execution and production of the actual altar includes a devotee’s spouse, family, *comari/compari*, and *paesani* for no *one* person could possibly accomplish such a culinary *tour de force*. St. Joseph’s Tables therefore are always something of a cooperative, communal event.

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Sciorra’s research on yard shrines [1993] and *presepi* [2001] in New York.

<sup>42</sup> E.g., the Vaccaro’s have given a table for over 25 years, beginning a few years after the birth of their daughter, who was born with congenital health problems. Maria Vaccaro tells of how she had actually forgotten her promise to the saint but was reminded of this vow one year by fava beans growing in her garden, which jogged her memory and prompted her to begin preparing her yearly tables. Virginia Buscemi gave a table for her brother who was scheduled to have heart surgery in 1987. Although it had been scheduled twice before, each time the doctor had been called out of town. The 3rd scheduling fell on the morning of March 19 (St. Joseph’s Day), and so it seemed to Virginia to be a propitious coincidence. Joseph També’s family in NY gave tables in the 1940’s so that the saint might protect his two older brothers who had gone to war (one returned, the other did not). Other private tables have been given by Josephine Grammatico Frka, by Virginia and Jack Russo, of San Pedro — apparently inheriting this family practice from mothers who had passed away. Private tables, of course, tend toward the keeping of a vow, whereas the public tables are geared toward public charities — in part to feed the poor, and also to support charitable organizations and parishes themselves.

## 10. Rituals of abundance: pre-Christian and new world revisitations

The tendency to see pre-Christian fertility rites in diverse ritual behavior has been a long-standing one among scholars of traditional cultures in the Mediterranean. It is especially evident among Italianists as well as in the general literature on Italian traditional culture — where antiquity seems generally to confer cultural status. And it may be especially strong in the case of Sicily where the ancient world is everywhere evident on the landscape itself and induces one to make such links. *Proving* such continuity in actual cultural practices, however, is more challenging. Are St. Joseph's Tables indeed an expression of pre-Christian spring fertility rites? As my colleague Dorothy Noyes, warns: "After all, the seasons, scarcity, anxiety about harvest [...] don't go away with Christianity, and modern Sicilians on their desertified land probably faced much harsher anxieties about scarcity than antique Sicilians living in the breadbasket of the Empire (personal communication)." She suggests that "non-Christian," rather than "pre-Christian," might be a more accurate term.

Nonetheless, food altars such as this *do* seem to replicate rituals of abundance at the heart of key calendrical occurrences in agrarian societies — anticipating the harvest in spring, celebrating the harvest in spring and fall. Sicily remains a predominantly agrarian economy. Several specific features in the contemporary St. Joseph tradition may comfort the desire to identify aspects of such rites in the "tables of plenty." For example, the tables feature the season's first fruits, including ripe shafts of wheat (or pasta), as well as freshly germinated wheat buds (the so-called "*giardini di Adone*" [Figure 45 and 46], cf. "Gardens of Adonis" for the feast of Aphrodite and Adonis in ancient Greek culture). It may be relevant to recall that in pre-Christian times the cult of Demeter, the goddess of grain, was particularly strong in the Sicilian interior and that a major ritual celebration in her honor occurred mid-March (cf. St. Joseph day, March 19). The pagan cult of Ceres (>cereal or grain) centered on Enna where in Roman times a sanctuary to the goddess became the focus of agrarian fertility rites. Even today, the overall effect of a beautiful table is to represent the Earth's bounty in an endless variety of dishes — an "*orgia elementare*" as Giallombardo puts it — and to collectively celebrate and share that abundance in the form of a communal banquet. This scholar, too, identifies beneath the veneer of Christian culture the birth-death-rebirth cycle "un consistente sostrato di origine precristiana: per quanto il culto ufficiale lo abbia via via espunto, tale nucleo originario continua ancora oggi a costituire il senso profondo della diffusissima venerazione popolare."<sup>43</sup>

The naturalistic shape of the breads (birds, flowers, animals, fruits), the presence of fava beans, the building of bonfires, are also identified as recalling practices linked to the world of the Ancients. Although bonfires are normally associated with the Summer Solstice (mid-June, St. John the Baptist feast day, June 24), they are here also present at the Spring Equinox (mid-March or St. Joseph, March 19). Further, in all of Italy, the sweets most closely associated with Joseph are not bread, but fritters of all sorts, the empty and filled variants. "*San Giuseppe frittellaro*" is responsible for *frittelle* in Latium, for Neapolitan *zeppole*, or Sicilian *sfinci* (filled cream puffs) — apparently both of Arabic derivation: *zalabiyah* and *sfang*, both designating forms of fried pastry. In ancient Roman times, such sweets were prepared for *Liberalia*, a festival held on March 17 in honor of Bacchus and Silenus in proximity of their temples (Field 1997: 399)

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<sup>43</sup> She goes on to affirm: "La valenza vitalistica legata al cibo si rivela in modo conclamato nella dimensione orgiastica delle tavole in cui si ostentano l'abbondanza e la varietà ricchissima delle pietanze preparate in onore di san Giuseppe." (Giallombardo 1990 [1981]: 10).

But elsewhere in the Christian ritual calendar (e.g., Easter, Christmas), the non-Christian and Christian ideologies live as a fairly balanced *connubium*. And so it would appear also for St. Joseph's Tables. In any case, there seems to be little awareness of any ideological conflict, and likely there is no conflict in the minds of participants (cf. Noyes' comment above). At times, altars and tables cohabit, and at others, they are spatially discrete. The profusion of dishes that dominates public spectacle produces a visual cornucopia that overwhelms and delights. It appears that the Cuccagna festive paradigm is a constant (if sometimes latent) one, even here in the context of the most solemn Christian occasions of fasting and self-denial (cf. Del Giudice 2001a), for it appears here during Lent itself<sup>44</sup> as a mid-Lenten reprieve from such deprivations.

### 11. Social justice, "Sabbath economics" and feeding the poor in Los Angeles

But the Christian narrative, particularly in diaspora contexts, seems to be equally strong in this ritual of abundance and *hospitality*. In the St. Joseph tradition, one welcomes the Holy Family and thereafter *all pilgrims* into one's home, sheltering and feeding them. It is important to remember that the *questua*, or begging ritual, is a key component of giving a table (and of course is reenacted within the pageant by the Saints themselves). This ritual begging of food, the humbling of oneself before friends, family, business associates, and even strangers, is in fact a necessary aspect of giving a table and cannot be delegated. (It was originally performed barefoot, *scalzi*, or at least in stocking feet, as a symbolic act of humility.) For anyone giving a table, it would appear, this created an *embodied* experience of poverty and fostered empathy for the actual poor.<sup>45</sup> In other words, until one has begged for food or lived on the streets, one cannot fully understand or care for those who must do this day after day. Indeed, it has become the daily reality of a growing number of people in Los Angeles today — for the unemployed poor, the homeless, and the migrant (often one and the same).

The focus of the tradition, of course, is always on the table and on feeding the community — whether that is a restricted circle of family and friends, a neighborhood, or a village; whether there are the truly needy among them or not. The pageant seems to have become secondary or sometimes eliminated altogether. (As repeated in the literature and as corroborated in my own field research, it is harder to find the "poor" who are willing to impersonate the saints, and therefore it is often relegated to children. The role may have more recently become honorary: as was noted in March 2009 in San Pedro, the actual family of *santi* had been on a waiting list for five years.) Variations occur in the logistics of the pageant (houses in the neighborhood? around one's own house or banquet hall?)<sup>46</sup> and in how the funds are gathered: food may be sold or

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<sup>44</sup> The battle between meat and fish — Carnival and Lent — of course, has a long and codified tradition in Italian folk culture (and throughout Christian Europe), and many a formal *contrasto* or battle between a gluttonous Carnevale (depicted as a jolly and rotund man) and a haggard, stingy old woman, Quaresima can be found in the broadside and chapbook press from the Middle Ages forward. The sausage, in particular, as a symbol of Carnival, was a featured item of Cuccagna too (cf. Del Giudice 2001a).

<sup>45</sup> In Marettimo (Isole Egadi), bonfires (*vampi di San Giuseppe*) are lit for the saint ("fare la Duminaria"), lighting fires one next to the other in honor of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary. "Ciò accade alla vigilia del 19 marzo, secondo una tradizione popolare per il quale il santo rappresenta tutti i poveri che soffrono il freddo e la fame." A clearly post-hoc Christianoid explanation of the bonfires (a standard rite of Spring. . .). Again, a communal dinner is shared and those who cannot participate are served in their homes. In Ribera (Agrigento) *la stragula*, carted by two oxen, represented abundance and "la gloria del santo patriarca mediante alcuni elementi carichi di valore simbolico, quali il pane e i rami di alloro."

<sup>46</sup> Where the parish is predominantly non-Sicilian, the celebrations are on a smaller-scale. The Irish parish of St. Raymond's in Downey (Virginia's parish), for instance, held a small procession around the parking lot, not around

auctioned, a donation may be requested for the meal or for viewing the table. Candles, figurines, prayer cards, and other artifacts may also be sold, or paper money pinned directly to the saint's sashes [Figure 47 – 49; cf. Figure 1]. Formerly in Sicily, significant funds could be raised by auctioning off St. Joseph's beard and funds might be given directly to Jesus, Mary, Joseph (that is, the poorest members of the village).<sup>47</sup> In Sicily, the table tradition historically represented a *direct* form of wealth redistribution at a time of year when food stores were low (i.e., by actually feeding the poor). Today, tables generally help raise funds for charities of various sorts (cf. n. 29).

Through the tables, the community, in fact, feeds *itself* in the form of a communal meal for rich and poor, thereby leveling somewhat the division between charity givers and receivers, and mitigating the stigma attached to hunger. Those involved in charitable food programs frequently attest to how important it is to partake of a communal meal side by side *with* the poor (as a respectful and even transformative gesture for the poor themselves and for those who are not poor.) The shared banquet enshrines the value of hospitality as a social and religious rite. It also seems to remind the collectivity that at any given moment the one may become the “other” — as the wheel of fortune is constantly in motion. This is a profound lesson upon which we might all reflect. The recent recession in fact is raising the topsy-turvy world to our consciousness once again, making abundantly evident that those who had never previously been subjected to the indignities of bread lines or soup kitchens are now being forced into these unfamiliar venues.

A begging ritual allows us to experience, to some extent, the psychology and physicality of poverty itself. For immigrants, it may even commemorate family history and ritualize the immigrant experience *per se*. It cannot be denied that the wandering and “knocking on doors,” the search for food, lodging, work<sup>48</sup> may be a powerful reminder of early immigration as so many experienced it (cf. Del Giudice 2009b). Hospitality and the injunction to open one's doors

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the block. A private celebration may have a pageant only around one's own house, or if neighbors are congenial and interested, involve other homes as well.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Uccello 1976: 74; Figure 51 “Varba di San Giuseppe,” Valguarnera.

<sup>48</sup> The regional histories of hospitality in the Mediterranean provide numerous examples of sites of hospitality on rural, maritime and urban landscapes, which included monasteries, hostileries, pandocheions, “accepting all comers.” This “open door policy” led to pandocheions being associated with the low-life of prostitution and thievery, seedy and insecure places by late Roman times. These, apparently, emerged in the Islamic world as Arabic *funduqs* (emerging in the eighth and ninth centuries) for pilgrims but came to fill an increasingly commercial role for world traders — so that they came to provide new charitable and mercantile roles in the Muslim world. In Italy, the *fondaco* emerged after merchants discovered the *funduq* in Egypt and N. Africa, but here evolved into warehouses for goods rather than people, and became highly profitable to governments as they more closely monitored people and goods, and increased their taxation. Commonalities in the intercultural Mediterranean world between the second and sixth centuries apparently originated in a common Greek cultural ancestor, for in order for there to be travel throughout the region, there had to be places to rest along the route. This reality produced closely related forms of hospitality in a “family of institutions” which disappear in the early modern period. The longevity of such institutions up until the sixteenth century, suggested that “housing the stranger” be he wanderer, merchant, pilgrim, or student, created a point of shared — if varied — experience of hospitality throughout the Mediterranean. The worldly pandocheions, in Christian narrative, alternatively came to represent both a locus of temptation and a locus of charity. That is, early commentators, including Origen and Augustine, interpreted the inn in the story of the Good Samaritan, as a symbol for the Church itself. In one of his sermons, Chrysostom exhorted his listeners to open their doors to the stranger and to let their houses serve as “pandocheions for Christ” — linking this institution to Christian charity. And yet, in another sermon: “Do you not know that the present life is a journey? [. . .] You are a traveler . . . a traveler and a wayfarer. These present things are a road.” For this most illuminating history on the regional variations of “lodging of travelers” in Christian, Jewish and Muslim contexts, from the first to the sixth centuries, see Constable 2003: introduction, from which this note derives.

to the stranger, is a long-rooted ideal in Mediterranean culture, and in Italian culture is particularly engrained (cf. Herman Clapp 2009).

The fact is that the poor are no longer Sicilians (once so abundant), nor even Italians, and it is now *we* who must welcome the stranger, the migrant, the “other,” and feed the poor in our midst. That “community” we serve may now be inter-ethnic and interfaith. How does one reconcile cultural preservation of specific customs in a multiethnic society? What is lost and what is gained? Certainly some intra-group dichotomies and inter-group misunderstanding may necessarily result. One Sicilian, in tears over the beauty of the St. Joseph’s custom, maintained that no one could truly understand what St. Joseph meant to a Sicilian. And even the most generous givers of tables (those truly heeding the call to “feed the poor”) nonetheless experience some loss of meaning when the tradition is shared with an out-group that does not necessarily understand it (cf. Estes), nor appreciate its special foods. How do groups develop strategies to deal with these questions of cultural alienation in a multicultural society? There are creative and generous ways to do this. One might cope with these opposite pulls by, for example, participating (or producing) two events in tandem, the one intimate and more “authentic” among family and friends, while the other an altruistic event serving a broader group of the needy, thereby answering the call to practice charity in the world.

Facing the dilemma over ethnicity versus the mandate to actually feed the poor in a communal meal, [Figures 50 – 52] Sam Perricone [Figure 53] resolved the debate in favor of the latter. In fact, to my mind, no one seems to have taken the “feeding of the poor” more literally,<sup>49</sup> or accomplished it with more grace, than Sam. In 1989 and 1990, when St. Joseph’s Tables first caught my attention, Sam and his friend Virginia Buscemi Carlson were giving a table at St. Joseph’s Church (a poor, largely Latino parish, in East Los Angeles, at 12th and Los Angeles St.). It was a symbiotic relationship. Virginia (repository of many Sicilian traditions), along with many members of Arba Sicula (“Sicilian Dawn,” a cultural association) decided to “reclaim” the feast to ensure its “authenticity” and organized a table (largely using the resources of Sam).<sup>50</sup> During the two-day period, over 1,500 people were fed a lavish (*not* a poor man’s) meal of: pasta, grilled swordfish, fennel salad, fruit, traditional sweets, bread, and even wine (“let them enjoy themselves,” he generously insisted). Sam provided only his finest and refused to cut corners (e.g., costly swordfish, extra virgin olive oil), despite Virginia’s protestations. Although not all may have appreciated the swordfish or the fennel (for they may be acquired tastes), Sam nourished the community in the best way he could and did so in a spirit of joy rather than duty. In an event of this scale, it is well to note that the stigma of begging is avoided since the meal is shared by many — richer and poorer alike. Nonetheless, evidence of discarded swordfish was

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<sup>49</sup> Father Giovanni Bizzotto (a Scalabrinian), formerly at St. Peter’s Italian Church on N. Broadway in Chinatown, is another example of this fervor for feeding the poor, as the Church under his direction became a focal point in the neighborhood for the feeding of the homeless and migrants from the Casa Italiana kitchen.

<sup>50</sup> She was introduced to Arba Sicula in 1970 in New York. Her friends, the Lobellos, went to Italy in the 1970’s, talked about starting a branch in Los Angeles, and joined with Madeline Vinci to begin a chapter. They announced the first meeting at Casa Italiana in *L’Italo-Americano* alone and had 400-500 people turn up. Many had to be turned away. The majority of Sicilians, she stated (as well as the Italians found in Sons of Italy, Unico, the Garibaldina Society) were 85-90 percent American-born. Although such clubs may include a few members from Italy, the latter do not seem to have a lasting interest in these clubs, since they perhaps tend not to feel their own ethnicity threatened. Virginia noted that it seemed ironic that it was the Italian *Americans* who seemed to know their traditions better than recently-arrived Italians. Indeed, upon returning to Italy later in life, she was greatly disappointed to discover that she seemed to know more about Italian traditions than Italians did. Arba Sicula, she said, was trying to return Sicilians to their traditions.

offensive to some Sicilians. Why and how did Sam and his family (including his 90-year old mother) do this? Sam is in the produce business and so food has been the focus of his professional life (Sam Perricone Citrus, Inc.). Many business associates (a large number of them Jewish, in fact) have contributed over the years to his patron saint's celebration. Further (according to Virginia), although a second-generation Sicilian, he has never forgotten his roots nor his early poverty and especially remembers when he was a young married man holding down two jobs, working day and night. When he became prosperous and returned to Sicily during a St. Joseph celebration one year, he was inspired to make a table of his own — first in his restaurant, “Salvatore” (at Olympic and Soto) for many years (sending the proceeds to St. Joseph's Church), then at the church itself.

Opportunities for public education are always available and can partly smooth the way for intercultural understanding. One apologist (Sicilian actor, Lou Cutrell) warmly insisted while addressing the largely Latino congregation of St. Joseph Church in 1990, that “you don't need to be Sicilian to have a table” (cf. “you needn't be Jewish to have a Mitzvah”).<sup>51</sup> Both the St. Joseph Mass and the explanation of the legend and food altar custom preceding the communal banquet were translated into Spanish. At the banquet itself, gratitude came in many languages and forms. One Native American *danced* his “thank you” for those giving the table. Virginia's desire was that in planting this seed in the parish it might germinate and later thrive on its own. She was disappointed when, after she became ill and was no longer able to organize it herself, the table was discontinued. Without her direct involvement — and one would posit, without the personal and cultural resonances inherent in the custom for Sicilians themselves — the tradition did not take hold. It seemed clear that, in this instance, Sicilians remained at the core of the tradition, while others (primarily Italians) took on a satellite function. Absent such direct support, the custom sometimes wanes.<sup>52</sup>

The impulse to share traditions across ethnic and socio-economic boundaries, as well as the call to engage in social action in a contemporary world, is not unique to this project. Folklorists (community and public sector) have variously devised ways of commenting on and impacting the communities in which they live. Within the Italian context, we may point to various examples: the attempt to bring real Turks to the Giglio celebration in Nola early in the new millennium, the placing of a baby from a foundered immigrant ship in the manger of a *presepio* on the Puglian coast. Closer to home, we may point to the activist *presepi* of Joseph Sciorra (“Gramsci's presepio,” <http://www.i-italy.org/bloggers/981/gramsci-s-presepio>). All these instances provide examples of “living folklore” offering political commentary and encouraging compassionate action as they address real-life and current issues of migration and racism, war, and global economic crisis, for example.

My own current thinking on “ethnography as spiritual practice” has redirected many of my ethnological efforts as well, many of them strongly influenced by notions of social equity: for instance, here in the case of St. Joseph's Tables with issues of food justice and poverty; in the

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<sup>51</sup> In fact, in Los Angeles, in the late 1990s/early 2000s a Hollywood synagogue had initiated a city-wide “Mitzvah Day” during which a wide range of charitable activities were organized, so that anyone who might want to participate could help the needy, accompany the aged on field trips, paint club houses, plant a school garden, and so forth. Much to the chagrin of some Jews, resistance to this name (and the religious provenance of this tradition) apparently caused it to be renamed “Big Sunday.” The philanthropic community service day was adopted by Mayor Villaraigosa of Los Angeles and promoted as a citywide effort in the mid-2000s.

<sup>52</sup> In 2004, I was invited to speak to the Women's Council of All Saints Pasadena (a prominent, socially-activist Episcopal church), because they wanted to assemble a table for the homeless and for foster families. They did this in conjunction with Trader Joe's and Whole Foods. I suspect that the event was not repeated in subsequent years.

Watts Towers Common Ground Initiative with issues of art, migration, and development (forthcoming). If we were to return to a Christian ideological matrix (not at odds with leftist economic-based thinking, in this instance) — and here a language actually appropriate to the Christian Italian folk tradition of St. Joseph’s Tables — such rituals of charity and redistribution may be considered a practice in “Sabbath Economics” (Myers 2002), which I am beginning to explore. Indeed, Sabbath Economics, in part, pertains to the periodic redistribution of wealth in society, the pardoning of debts, and the dismantling of patterns of hierarchy, wealth and power. Another current movement that seeks to enact some of these concepts is the “Simple Living” or Simplicity Movement, which teaches sufficiency (what is enough?) as well as global sustainability (“live simply so others may simply live”).

The economic downturn has increased the numbers of the poor and homeless in Los Angeles (as it has all across the country and the globe), as the many new soup-kitchens, food programs, and refugee missions, attest. Thus, this ethnically-specific food altar custom has gained renewed relevancy. As a ritual of food redistribution, St. Joseph’s Tables are indeed a “feast for our times.” This tradition with remote cultural roots addresses issues which are both contemporary and urgent, demonstrating once again how traditional cultures may enrich modern urban life and help tackle some of its most persistent problems.

But the impulse to engage in cultural preservation of such traditions (cf. “heritage” discourses) comforts not only “tribal” interests but global wellbeing as well (cf. Del Giudice 2009a). And I am becoming evermore interested in how the two sides of my own activities (as they address ethnology and spiritual practice) may be put to best use. I have written elsewhere of how ethnologists may have a specific ability to recognize and address some of the imperatives of the United Nations’ “Earth Charter;” e.g., “Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human wellbeing” (II.8.b); “Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations”(II.9.c); “Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance” (III.12.d); “Recognize the importance of moral and spiritual education for sustainable living” (IV.13.f). In some modest way, I see my own research on this food altar tradition, and the social activism it seeks to promote, as contributing to the ideals of this charter.

How do we, in practice, both affirm our own cultural practices and ethnicities while helping to solve critical global concerns — both globally *and* locally? How do we begin “sweeping at our own feet?”<sup>53</sup> And how can ethnographers specifically “listen globally” and “act locally?” What ethical obligations might motivate our work? And how can we academics overcome our seemingly constitutional aversion to utopian discourse and action (although we may be adept at analyzing them from a safe distance)? We can all, I believe, creatively imagine ways to harness our own best traditions and identify indigenous practices that work — the better to preserve and

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<sup>53</sup> As I have recalled elsewhere, during the U.N. Status on the Commission of Women meeting in New York in 2008, I became acquainted with the Beijing Platform for Action, the Beijing Circles process, and the concept of “sweeping at your own feet.” When a Western woman asked her African sisters what she could do to help alleviate suffering on that continent, the Tanzanian woman responded with a story: When she was a little girl and overwhelmed by the task her mother had set before her of cleaning the family’s entire hut, the girl asked: “Where shall I begin?” Her mother answered: “Begin by sweeping at your feet.” I take this to mean not only that we must begin working on behalf of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (target date 2015), in *our own* backyards, but that we must begin in small, community-based ways. Together with the Rev’d Joanne Leslie, in 2008, we have started the first Beijing Circle in Los Angeles, at St. Alban’s Episcopal Church, to address just these goals. It is now in its second year.

*share* them.<sup>54</sup> At times, the inherent humanity and beauty of a cultural tradition will make it infinitely adaptable and acceptable to others. Harnessing energies, goods, and historic practices within the community can have many positive benefits *within* the group, as well as *without*. In our case, given their food genius and the cult of abundance, their heightened aesthetic sense in food practices, and the generous spirit with which hospitality is practiced, Italians stand to accomplish what mere food kitchen programs do not and cannot do.

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<sup>54</sup> By way of example (for there are many similarly minded organizations today), the innovative nonprofit Bread for the Journey seeks out community leaders who are already known and effective in their *own* communities and supports their work with micro-grants. There is no sense re-inventing the wheel, nor *not* relying on indigenous knowledge and expertise. It is a “best practice” to engage in partnerships of this sort.

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### **Field Recordings**

(IOHI – Italian Oral History Institute Collections, UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive)

### **Audio Tapes**

Interview with Virginia Buscemi Carlson, by Luisa Del Giudice, Downey, May 30, 1990.

Interview with Virginia Buscemi Carlson, by Luisa Del Giudice, Downey, October 2, 1995.

Chants for St. Joseph, recorded in Upland, March 1998, recorded by Kenneth Scambray.

Interview with Virginia Buscemi Carlson (recorded by Jennifer Pendergrass, June 14, 1999; see Pendergrass 1999.)

Interview with Luisa Del Giudice, "St. Joseph's Day Tables," by Evan Kleiman, KCRW Public Radio Program "Good Food," April 8, 2000; 1 -120-min. audio cassette.

Interview with Father Pisano, Vita Gracchiolo, Maria and Agostino Vaccaro, by Luisa Del Giudice, San Pedro, March 17, 1995

Erika Turley, "Religious Experience Among Sicilian Women" in San Pedro's, student paper, including audio tapes, photographs, saints' cards, and 2- 90-min. audio cassettes with Rosalia Orlando, La Fata, Manzella, June 8, 1999

### **Videotapes**

St. Joseph's Day Table, Buscemi Carlson home, Downey, California, March 18, 1987.

Private St. Joseph's Table, mass & blessing with Father Pisano, Joseph També, women singing novena, San Pedro.

Mistretta Family St. Joseph's Day Chants, Upland, 1998.

*St. Joseph's Day Table*, 1 VHS home video, St. Joseph's Church, Los Angeles, March 18, 1990 [videographer: Ken Carlson (Virginia Buscemi Carlson's husband)]

*St. Joseph's Day Table*, 1 VHS home video (videographer: Ken Carlson [Virginia Buscemi Carlson's husband])

*St. Joseph's Day Table*, Casa Italiana, March 18, 1995, VHS video (videographer Steve Weimeyer)

St. Joseph's Day Table, Vaccaro house, San Pedro, March 17, 1995

*Celebrazione di San Giuseppe*, Dinner dance, Casa Italiana, n.d.