



Pastor's Pen

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- Fr. Tom Wilson, Pastor

IN AWE OF THE BAMBINO

In the area where I grew up, there was a large company that employed a lot of people. The company had a custom of gifting a modest number of shares of its stock to any babies born of its employees on New Year's Day. I happened to know one of the recipients, who told me that the accumulation was helpful when he went to college, but not exactly a windfall. I always wondered why the company did that and what the fascination with New Year's Day babies was. Whether we're Human Resource compensation experts or doting grandparents, parents, aunts or uncles, the birth of babies is still an awe-inspiring event and one to reverence.

Years ago, I was in Rome and met up with some married friends, who were living there while pursuing graduate degrees. They adopted a baby a few months before they relocated. In God's Providence, we were in Rome at the same time as the canonization of St. Gianna Molla, (among a few others,) and we were able to get tickets to the canonization ceremony. We looked forward to the serendipitous gift of being present at any canonization, and especially Gianna's.

Any gathering at St. Peter's is a spectacle, and with the pope present, as well as people devoted to several saints in the making, that day had its own special flair. The Mass started in late morning, and they planned to let people in the gate about 9:00. We arrived at 7:00, and we were among the first ones in what could loosely be called a line. As the faithful accumulated, it seemed more like a blob of people than a line. The straight-line queue is not in the DNA of the Italians. My friends, after living in the city for several months, were quite comfortable with the unstructured method of waiting in the crowd and cared for their little one during the wait. After waiting a couple of hours, the guards opened the gate to allow people to get in to their assigned sections in the piazza.

As we stood up and started moving forward in a form of human mash, it was getting a little uncomfortable, but my friends moved with ease. An easy assumption is that there might be some clergy privilege, but no such luck was in store for me. But as soon as my friend stood up and got the baby arranged to move him, an elderly Italian woman, probably a local Roman, screamed at the top of her lungs, "Bambino! Bambino! Bambino!" As the rest of the crowd heard her call, they began to part like the Red Sea at Moses' command. Mom, dad and baby were informally escorted to the front, while the priest navigated the mass of humanity and met up with the privileged later on.

My friends said what happened that day was not at all unusual. They love babies in Rome. They just don't have them. In fact, there are so few infants and children in Rome that actually seeing one creates a stir in a crowd, a park, or on public transportation. They are so rare that it creates a stir when one is seen. There are so few Italian babies now that within two generations, almost no native Italians will have a living experience of a cousin.

It is at once a great joy to see the reverence for young life and incredibly sad to see so little of it. Reasons abound. The most common I heard was that people are afraid they cannot afford a family. It certainly is not disdain of children. Italians are known for showing their emotional affect, and the response to the bambino shows their love for children. They are human and react in awe of a baby, like we all do in our own way. Whether it is the big brother or sister, mom or dad, aunts and uncles, or worshippers in line at the grocery store, the baby draws attention. There really is something to be in awe of in all babies. It is something we need to recapture in more than commercials.

As we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, not just any event or baby to be in awe of, but *the* baby to revere, it's a great time to renew our awe in the gift of life God bestows and the gift of new life restored by Jesus. The baby is not just cute. He is a gift and the prime gift to humanity. Baby gifts wear out, stocks are eventually sold, but the life remains. As we rejoice in the gift of Jesus' birth and prepare for a new calendar year, it is time to recover the awe owed to *the* Bambino.