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## Naples & New Towns

by *Leon J. Podles*

Since we have made Naples, Florida, our winter residence, I have often pondered the question: Why is there a Naples? God could have provided many places for those fleeing the twin curses of cold and taxes, but in his infinite wisdom he provided them with Naples. Having devoted many hours in the pool to this question, I came up with the answer: Naples is God's way of teaching humility to the rich. It does this in two ways: First, if you live in Naples, no matter how rich you are, there is always someone richer. Second, Naples demonstrates that money does not buy good taste.

As I have no chance of being on the Fortune 500 list, I am untroubled by the first rebuke that God gives to the Naples rich. The ups and downs of the stock market mean that someone who was worth \$1.2 billion two years ago is now worth only \$600 million, and the mere \$750 millionaire who socked his money away in government bonds now outranks him. *Sic transit* and all that. How fleeting is the glory of wealth, especially when the stock market is doing a prolonged nosedive.

As for the second rebuke, Naples has a taste for "Mediterranean" architecture. This style is based upon impressions of Caesar's Palace—the one in Las Vegas, that is. The Romans went in for vulgarity, God bless them, but even they would be puzzled by the variations on classical architecture that are dreamed up by Midwesterners after two or three margaritas.

My house? Well, by luck we chose one so nondescript that it is easily hidden by palms, benjamini, giant birds of paradise, and so forth. You can't go wrong with tropical plants, which like the climate and the water and also enjoy doing their impression of Jonah's gourd. We share the house with a number of lizards. The males use our porch as a health club and spend their days doing push-ups and flaring their necks to attract the attention of lady lizards. These then lay eggs in the electrical sockets, which short out. My wife wanted to plant lemon trees until she learned about roof rats. These live in trees and eat fruit, and find tile roofs bijou winter accommodations. No lemon trees for us.

The lemon tree fruits and flowers at the same time, and is therefore a symbol of Mary, Virgin and Mother. I am not sure what the grapefruit is a symbol of—perhaps the American tendency to obesity. Poinsettias, named after the notorious Freemason US ambassador to Mexico, grow like weeds. The majestic Royal Palm was named after Civil War veteran and highway builder Roy Stone of Plattsburg, New York.

Collier County, in which Naples grows like fungus on a damp wall, was named for the Collier family, which still owns big chunks of it. They have done a land deal with Tom Monaghan of Domino's Pizza fame to develop several thousand acres of the finest swamp as a new town and university, both named Ave Maria. Collier County is also half Catholic, in part because of migrant Midwesterners, in part because of migrant Haitians and Mexicans.

The Haitians go for the splashiest Sunday best: No shorts or stretch pantsuits for them—they prefer big hats and fancy white dresses. The Haitian men are the hardest workers in the county. They have a corner on the roofing market because they are the only ones who can stand to work on the roofs in a tropical sun during the summer, when all the new construction is done. My wife walked past a group of them on our block taking a lunch break, and wished them *Bonjour*. This provoked a hearty chorus of *Boozhoo, Mum*.

Ave Maria is near Immokalee, home of Haitian and Mexican farm workers. Father Fessio, the new chancellor of Ave Maria University, claimed that Monaghan decided to put the college on land near Immokalee because the psalm response for the day the decision had to be made was, "The Lord hears the cry of the poor." The Collier land deal also had something to do with it, but the new university will provide stable employment for a lot of poor Catholics. Ave Maria hopes to raise scholarship money from the well-to-do Catholics of Naples to help the Mexicans and Haitians who will be the first of their families to go to college, or maybe even to finish high school.

Alas, the children of the European Catholics who have retired to Naples are not reproducing themselves. The Catholic Church in the United States will soon become brown- and black-skinned, much livelier, and much better dressed at Sunday Mass. With some help from Tom Monaghan, it will also become better off economically and will be instructed in the truths of the Catholic faith—something that does not happen at many Catholic colleges any more. So maybe Divine Providence had a third reason up its sleeve in establishing Naples: to provide a conduit so that the wealth accrued by First-World Catholics (who are disappearing) can benefit Third-World Catholics (who are flourishing). Perhaps they will be grateful and pray for the souls of their benefactors, who will have no descendants to pray for them.

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