

# San Gennaro Festa Scene On Mott St.

Dorothy Day

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*Summary: Writes of a time of fasts and feasts—Orthodox Jews observing the Day of Atonement while their Italian neighbors continued to celebrate the Feast of San Gennaro. Tragedy marred the celebration—a drunken fight resulted in the fatal stabbing of a participant. While visiting with her neighbors during the festa, she reflects upon the hardships in her neighbors' lives, the acceptance with which they endured their poverty, and the enthusiasm with which they embraced the simple pleasures which came their way. (DDLW #348).*

Tonight the feast of the Atonement begins, when the orthodox Jews afflict their souls and fast from food and drink for twenty-four hours. While they began their services at sundown, the feast of San Gennaro in our neighborhood was in full swing. It had been going on since Tuesday night and will continue until Sunday night. Every day bands parade through the streets, and the statue of the Saint is set up in a shrine on the street. This is the one feast of the summer which is sponsored by the Church. The statue is taken from the Church of the Precious Blood on his feast day and is kept out for the rest of the week.

The third night of the festa was marked by a murder. At two-thirty in the morning when the street was still full of celebrants, a street fight started. A dozen men started brawling, seizing empty pop bottles, breaking off the bottoms and slashing each other with them. Knives and guns were drawn and before the fray ended, two men were lying in the middle of the deserted street. One of them was taken to the hospital and the other lay there in the gutter until almost eight when Joe and Gerry were going to Mass. Fortunately Teresa and I had gone to Transfiguration Church down Mott Street, instead of the Church of the Precious Blood and so we missed the gory spectacle. Why they had to leave the body lying in the street—why the coroner could not get around sooner, it is hard to see. Of course no one in the block knew anything. One man admitted to hearing shots, that was all. When they identified the dead man and the one who had been brought to the hospital, they found that both had records for manslaughter and drug traffic. The police headquarters is only two block away, but evidently there were no police on hand to stop the fight which ended with murder. From a pagan standpoint, one might argue that two criminals or more were trying to eliminate each other and so the price of prosecuting them would be lessened for the state. On the other hand, such battles exemplify a state of anarchy. And a murder was committed.

## Dancing

The fourth night of the festa there was a dance across the street in the playground. Japanese lanterns were hung in profusion and at eight a phonograph with a loud speaker blared forth swing music. Before a half hour had passed, not only the playground was crowded but couples were dancing up and down the street. In front of every door, little girls danced the Lindy and those that had no partners danced alone, their dresses flying as they whirled about. Mothers sat on benches and boxes along the street and babies toddled up and down, narrowly escaping collision with passersby. That was last night, and we sat out there with them, enjoying these last days of summer weather. There was a bit of chill in the air which made dancing enjoyable, and the air was clear so that the stars shone brightly. For a long while the half moon, brilliant even against the garish street lights, hung above the middle of the street down towards Canal Street. When I looked up later, I was surprised to see that it was passing behind the tall tenements, but the stars still shone with sparkling brilliance.

Celia came by as I sat, with her school books under her arm. She has been with us four years now, and every evening she is off either to the library or to classes at some night school. We call her a perennial student and expect she will be going to school at the age of eighty. On the other side of me sat an Italian mother,—she will have another baby soon, and her little daughter danced, unable to keep still at the music across the street. The young mother next to me lost a little girl last winter. She was only six and she reached up to the stove and tipped a pot of soup over herself. She died a few days after, in the hospital, not from the burns but from pneumonia. Just before Christmas last year she was laid out in the front room of the apartment in the front house and we all went in and visited the family during the two days of vigil before the funeral. Now there will be another baby this Christmas and every night the mother sits in front of the house, big and tranquil, smiling at the little girl who dances in front of her and at the baby who stirs under her heart.

## Synagogue Scene

Chinese passed by slowly, listening to the music, the children jiggling a bit too, while they clutched their mothers' hands on either side. Old peddlers, stooped and gnarled, shuffled along—Chinese and Italian—their faces impassive and still. Young couples sauntered, cars moved slowly through the traffic of human beings.

Then Kichi Harada, Japanese, came along, another one of our family, and sat down beside Stanley and me. (Stanley is Lithuanian.)

“I went for a walk,” she said, “first down through the festa, and then over to the East Side.” Mott Street runs down the center of Manhattan and is neither West nor East. “The stores are closed—but when I passed the synagogues, there were lights in all of them and the doors stood wide open. There was music, queer music, so I went upstairs and asked if strangers could come in. The man at the door told me I could go upstairs to the gallery and I went there and sat with all the women. They all looked at me. Downstairs the men wore long white shawls with black borders and they sang, but upstairs the women sat and wept, the

tears running down their faces. They were so devoted, I never saw people so devoted. What it is—what day is it for them?”

We explained to Miss Harada that it was the day of the Atonement, a day of fasting and penance.

“But what are they crying for, why was it all so sad,” she wanted to know, her flat round face puzzled.

“They are repenting of their sins, the sins of the world. All night and the next day, they neither eat nor drink.”

But it was hard for her to understand what it was about. She is Japanese and a Buddhist. She knows about Christianity from what she reads in *The Catholic Worker*, but she knows nothing of the Hebrew Religion.

## Staff

“The music,” she said, “reminded me of the workmen at home, in Japan, who used to sing like that as they worked on the terraces. They sang such sad songs, and they sounded like that tonight.”

Julia and Rita, who stay on the same floor with Miss Harada came by, on their way out to visit the festa. They lamented that it was a fast day so that they could not eat any of the little sausages browned over charcoal, with garnishing of onion and red pepper. They have been busy redecorating the dining room, and when they are through with that, they are going to start on the coffee shop. Rita has sold enough papers to buy the paint. Antoinette, our Italian neighbor and some of her friends are helping us in the circulation office.

Mostly the women sat out in front. Joe sat in the store working late, Bill was cutting a stencil in the back office, upstairs there was a meeting of the agrarian committee of the Catholic Union of Unemployed. Victor, one of the advisors of the C.U.U., was in bed with a cold so they had the meeting up in his room. Peter Carey didn't have to go to work until midnight, so as co-advisor he joined the meeting. There were a half dozen there, figuring on ways of using the ten acres one of our readers promised us down in Maryland. They'd like to get out there next February and start a communal farm.

While they talked visitors kept dropping in. Roddy McPherson, former cook on the Easton Catholic Worker Farm, is working now as a general handy-man on cottages down in Rockaway. He's aiming to save his money over the winter to build in the spring on the farm. He talked to them about chickens; someone else talked of weaving blankets.

Pretty soon Tom Lonergan, who helps on the breadline and takes charge of the clothes, went to the coffee room to make a pot of refreshment for the meeting and came out in front to see if he could serve the women, too. (Tom went on retreat last week with the editors of the Commonweal, who always share their yearly retreat with a few of the Catholic Workers.)

It was good to sit outside and listen to the music and drink hot coffee. Underfoot the street was littered with papers and trash. We are crowded hereabouts as in nowhere else in the

world. The streets are like dark canyons and even now there are cold drafts down these dark alleys. Elsewhere throughout the city people live in rabbit warrens too; there is the scream of children, of trucks, a constant babble of sound. Even the music was harsh and blaring, slightly sour, and from around the corner came the operatic airs played by the brass band on Mulberry Street.

As one of our Canadian readers pointed out to us today, half the American continent is at war. So is Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan, Russia, Poland, Germany, France and England. Throughout the world, people are torn emotionally or just dulled by the horror of war.

But here on Mott Street daily life is so hard, there is murder and sudden death, there is imprisonment and illness, hunger and pain always. That is life for these poor. And when there is a festa and dancing and music and the joy of children and family life, then they will take that too, and be happy while the moon shines down over all.