

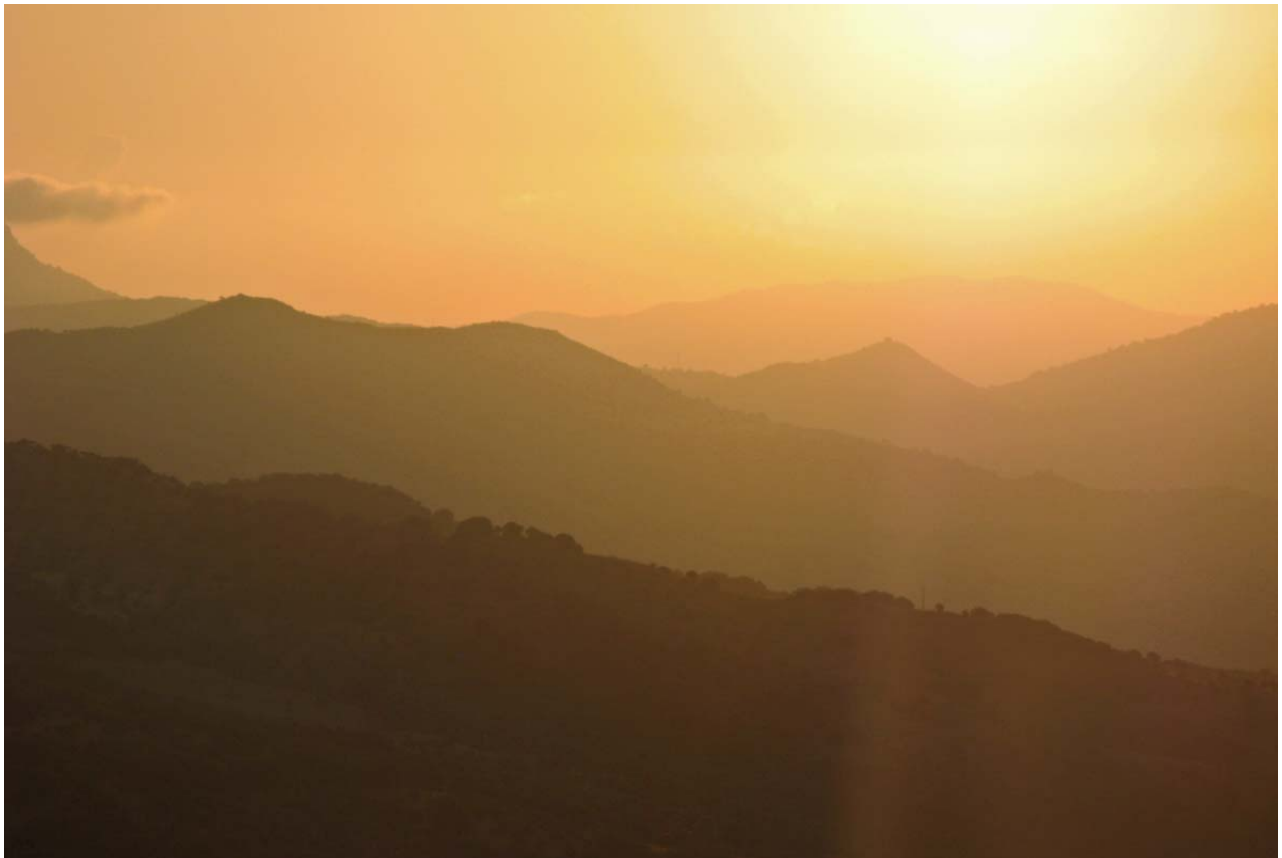
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# Letters From *Italy*

- to family and friends -

August 12, 2009

*Isnello*



Sunrise over the mountains

*Isnello Sicily*



Il villaggio di Isnello

Sicilia, Italia

Poste d'Italia – mercoledì 12 agosto 2009

*Isnello* is situated about 2000 feet above sea level tucked under a ridge which peaks at 4500 feet. We drove up here yesterday from Cefalù using the car we had rented at the airport – more on that saga in another letter. It is an automatic. I remembered all that shifting getting up here a couple of years ago, and thought the driving would be made a little easier by not having to shift – plus negotiate the hairpin turns at the same time. Mistake. It is a *European* automatic! I must have pushed the gear shift lever the wrong way or pressed a button under the shift lever inadvertently because we could only go 10 mph at a very noisy 4000 rpm, or not go at all. The entire ride up was like playing pinball with a death wish. So for twenty very long minutes we were the bane of the Italian drivers behind us – but come to think of it, I may have secretly enjoyed putting them off. I only found the right combination of lever and button pushes somewhere near the top of the climb.



Ann and I are staying at a *pensione* operated by the very friendly and efficient “Congregation of the college of Sisters of the sacred family.” In the recent past the *pensione* was a private boarding school for elementary students. As a result of its original

function, the buildings occupy an entire city block and include a church, living quarters for the Sisters, rooms which housed the students, at least two large dining rooms, a spacious kitchen, and sitting rooms for work and study.

The building interior is superbly appointed in wood and marble with many works of religious art adorning the walls. Inside it is wondrously cool even on these hot summer days – insulated as it is by several stories and the buildings’ two-foot thick walls. From the rooftop, you can see the entire town – and the mountains for miles beyond.

On the other side of the valley that bisects the town, I could see the church of *Santa Maria* aglow in the morning light. Just above the church are the ruins of “the castle” that Ann’s mother played in and around when she was a child. We were told that the church would be open for public mass this evening so we made a resolution to see the church from the inside.



The Church of *Santa Maria* overlooking Isnello

Late that afternoon we hiked down to the central piazza – *Piazza Mazzini* – and then up the hill on the other side of the valley to the church. We entered via a side door and found ourselves in a mini Sistine Chapel at the beginning of mass. We stayed for almost the entire service, much of the time spent staring at the detailed paintings on the walls and ceiling while the sun outside the door slowly faded behind the mountains above us.



*Isnello as seen from Santa Maria*

The view of *Isnello* from the church of *Santa Maria* is even more spectacular than the view from the top of the pensione. The whole town is visible in one fell swoop and appears much larger than when viewed from the other side of the valley. From that view it appears dwarfed by the peaks behind it.

On the way down from *Santa Maria* we met two women, one of whom we had spoken to briefly on the way up. Apparently whatever Ann had told her had triggered a connection because she greeted us like family – in fact we were! She looked directly at Ann and said (in Italian, of course), “You are my cousin.”

The woman’s name is *Giovanna*. Her grandfather and Ann’s grandmother were brother and sister. Ann was able to carry her own in the conversation because she knows all the Italian words for relatives of varying degrees. I don’t even know what they are called in English.

After a brief but intense conversation, *Giovanna* offered to take us to dinner – literally – in about an hour. We thanked her, hurried back to the pensione to change, and then waited at the *Piazza Mazzini* for her. Not long after we got to the piazza a gentleman walked up to us and said “Come...come,” in English! Ok, nothing surprises us in Italy anymore, so we simply followed. Around the corner we found two cars waiting, one of which was being driven by *Giovanna*. She motioned for us to get in, we did, joining her and her daughter.

She drove us up (and up) the narrow winding roads, past the parking lot where we had left our car, and continued on up the hill at breakneck speed chattering away the whole time. She was taking us to dinner at one of her favorite *trattoria* – perhaps the *only* trattoria in town – “La Brace,” located on the *Via Castelbuono*.

The car suddenly screeched to halt, *Giovanna* jumped out and ran inside the restaurant. We carried on as if these were ordinary events and made pleasant conversation with *Giovanna*’s daughter. *Giovanna* suddenly appeared and motioned us to exit the car. As we walked toward the door of the restaurant, she told us that we were to have a great meal and that we were to be sure to arrange to visit her before we left town. We had her cellphone number. Typically Italians exchange cellphone numbers before surnames – they are much more useful. *Giovanna*’s parting words informed us that she had told the proprietors – two brothers whom she apparently knew quite well – that we were family from America and that they should treat us well!

It was as if we had been preceded by a personal letter of recommendation from *il papa* (the pope) himself. About two hours later we managed to extricate ourselves from the restaurant in a kind of culinary shock. Never before had we been to a food fete of such magnitude and such delight!

This kind of restaurant experience takes getting used to. I’d read of many similar experiences in Michael Tucker’s book *Living in a Foreign Language*. On the cover of the book, his white shirt is not tucked in for good reason. I highly recommend his book to those of you at home craving a virtual gustatory experience. And if you are ever in *Isnello*, well....

It is late in the evening; the air is wonderfully warm and pleasant; people are strolling about as if it were the noon hour, and it is a good thing that the walk back to the pensione is all downhill.

Garrett (dad) with Anna Marie (mom)