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The Trials and Triumphs of New York's Italian Catholic

Immigrant Community in the Struggle for Equality

It is a common myth among Americans that the many and varied numbers of immigrants who have come to our shores have been welcomed with enthusiasm. Italian immigration to the United States commenced in large numbers in the 1880s, but the same cycle of hostility, suspicion, and violence would mark the early Italian experience in America in more intensive ways than their immigrant predecessors from Germany and Ireland. This was no less true of the New York Catholic Church.

Approximately 80 percent of the new arrivals from Italy were from the desperately impoverished southern part of the country or from Sicily. As opposed to previous waves of immigrants, many of the Italians came for the purpose of working only, and fully expected to return home after earning enough money to purchase their own farms. The new immigrants were different in appearance from their earlier, Northern European counterparts. Their complexion was sallow, and their eyes were dark brown, as opposed to the blue-eyed, fair complexion of the average

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German or Irishman. The media of the day portrayed Italians as lazy, superstitious, prone to crime, ignorant of the high-minded principles of democracy, and prone to righting personal wrongs outside the bounds of traditional American jurisprudence through personal vendettas and violence.¹ The Italian form of Catholicism was also viewed as “different,” and would negatively impact their initial Church experience, even in the diversified New York Catholic Church of the era. Every type of immigrant Catholicism was different, but Mediterranean style Catholicism incorporated a blend of pre-Christian beliefs, such as the evil-eye, *malocchio*, and Festas—annual public celebrations and parades of the saints—all glaring novelties at the time.² Additionally, the new Italian immigrants were viewed as negligent in Mass attendance and receipt of the sacraments, non-supporters of the parish or of Catholic schools, and not respectful of the Catholic priesthood. In striking contrast to the older and more established German and Irish immigrants, Italians presented new and challenging issues for assimilation.

¹ Chris Wolf, “A brief history of America’s hostility to a previous generation of Mediterranean migrants—Italians” November 26th, 2025.

² Ibid.

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A more in depth look at the challenges faced by Italian immigrants quickly sheds light and more accurately helps in understanding the reason for these perceived differences in religious practice. The parts of Italy where the preponderance of immigrants came from in the period between 1880 and 1920 were agricultural areas in which a small number of families owned and operated most of the farmland, reducing those who did the work to peasantry or tenancy. The Catholic Church, allied with the landowners and elite, and itself a major landowner, contributed to the exploitation of the very people for whom it should have provided pastoral care. This reality contributed to anti-clericalism, greatly intensified after Italian reunification and the emergence of a more highly industrialized Northern Italy.³ With respect to education, the children of the new immigrants were expected to forgo serious educational aspirations in the mistaken belief that only if one became a lawyer or a doctor was education of any real benefit. The more practical pursuit of improving oneself involved getting only enough education to go from agricultural work to working in a factory. For girls, the emphasis was to get a little education as fast as possible to benefit the family

³ Mary Elizabeth Brown, "A Case Study of Immigrants and Education: The Scalabrinian Experience With Italian Americans." *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, Vol. 2., No., 2, December 1998, 188.

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before having to direct the resources to their husbands.⁴

The early Italian immigrants differed little from their Northern European forebearers with respect to the support of Catholic education in that money was a difficult and scarce commodity for those struggling to gain a foothold on the socio-economic ladder. Also, language and transience were far more significant factors in the lagging effort to anchor the immigrants to parishes and parochial schools. Assimilation proceeded slowly, as English-speaking parishes relegated the newcomers to the basement of churches for services. With many immigrants of a mindset to return to Italy once a measure of financial independence was achieved, the urgency to learn English was not very strong, as Italian parents wanted their children prepared for the likelihood of returning home. Another impediment worth considering is the ineffectiveness of early orders of Italian religious, principally nuns, in the maintenance of schools and quality of instruction provided. Zealous sisters were confronted with the problems arising from teaching in overcrowded, inadequate and oftentimes unhealthy facilities, as well as providing instruction to second generation immigrant children without

⁴ Ibid., 189.

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themselves being adequately trained in the English language. To overcome these impediments, the Society of St. Charles, known as the Scalabrinians, named in honor of its founder, Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, sent out three missions to the United States beginning in 1888 for the purpose helping Italians to preserve their culture and Catholicism in its entirety through the Italian language. To augment this effort, Mother Frances Cabrini arrived in 1889 with the first mission group of the sisters of the Sacred Heart.⁵ These efforts at improving Italian immigrant pastoral care had become largely possible through the intervention of New York Archbishop Michael Augustine Corrigan. When Corrigan assumed the leadership of the Archdiocese in 1885, he quickly set about establishing Italian national parishes, where the liturgy could be celebrated in Italian, and where religious orders were invited to come and staff parochial schools for Italian children.⁶ Prejudice and discrimination against Italians died a slow death. Obviously, Italians did assimilate, and its hard to imagine America today without organizations

⁵Ibid., 190.

⁶ S.M. DiGiovanni, *Archbishop Corrigan and the Italian Immigrants* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Books, 1994), 30-39.

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like the Knight of Columbus or the Sons of Italy. Italian Americans have been amongst the nation's most productive and loyal citizens. Italians for example made up an estimated 12 percent of the men who joined the U.S. military during World War I, despite being a much smaller percentage of the population.⁷ One need only stand in the interior of our own Shrine of the Most Precious Blood Church at 113 Baxter Street, an Italian National Parish, to appreciate the deeply and spiritually artistic heritage of the earliest Italian immigrants to Nolita. The focal point of the Italian Festa of San Gennaro, the Shrine is living testament to the triumph of a reviled and marginalized immigrant group's ascent to its rightful place at the table of the American dream. The once feared expressions of Mediterranean style Catholicism are proudly on display in the nave of Most Precious Blood. The numerous, statues, icons, and priceless works of art are living testament to the cultural enrichment and vitality that generations of Italian immigrants bequeathed to New York Catholicism. Since its recent merger with the Basilica of Old Saint Patrick's Cathedral on Mott Street, The Shrine of the Most Precious Blood has experienced a rebirth of spirit, traditions, and activities.

⁷ Christopher Wolf.

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Along with older, groups, Most Precious Blood is now called home by the Saint Rocco Society of Potenza, as well as the Craco Society⁸

The future begins with a vision and a hope. For Italians immigrants, the vision and hope of a better, more secure future for themselves and their families began on the narrow, cart-laden, and frenetic streets of a strange and unknown land. Just as the fortunes of their Church weathered centuries of oppression, uncertainty, rejection, and revilement, so too did her Italian immigrant children forge a courageous path into a better future not only for themselves, but for all Americans.

⁸ The Daytonian in Manhattan, "The 1904 Church of the Most Precious Blood, "April 11th, 2011, www.daytonianmanhattan.blogspot.com/2011/04/1904.