Priest, Parish, and People

Saving the Faith in Philadelphia’s “Little Italy”

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Introduction

To know the history of Italians in America, we must study their religious life. For Italian immigrants, once beyond the family, seeking the meaning of new experiences, securing a place in a new society, and finding solace when faced by new tribulations often meant turning to persons and institutions that told them what to think and how to live. For many of them, religion not only offered solutions to these problems but also provided a device through which the larger society was refracted and by which their own community was built.¹

Sociologists and anthropologists have identified the basic elements of communal life—producing the material things by which we survive, reproducing the next generation, transmitting the old culture to young people, protecting ourselves from external threats and establishing order within our group, defining ultimate beliefs and objectives, and finding time for leisure through which we restore our energies. They have also identified basic institutions—the economy, family, education, politics, religion, and recreation—that carry out these tasks in modern societies. Recognizing the importance of “institutional completeness,” that is, a complete array of these arrangements to satisfy the needs of individuals as well as to sustain group survival, religion takes on an indispensable function for any type of human community, but it serves an especially important role for immigrant communities.²

Previous studies on immigration in general and on ethnic communities in particular have examined how religion affected adjustment to America. They have described its role in the struggle of immigrants to preserve their ethnic identity and culture, the part of the church in the assimilation of the foreign
born, and the tensions between the piety of immigrants and the efforts of ecclesiastical leaders who seek to control them. But the place of religion remains a problem for anyone who attempts to understand immigrant life in America. And while studies of religion also recognize the importance of “institutional completeness,” they have failed, with some notable exceptions, to adequately describe its role in the building of an immigrant colony and in the ethnic community that succeeds it.

Although attention has been paid to ethnic diversity in American religious history, it has often been selective, and the experience of some groups, such as the Italians, despite being a large part of the population, remains to be adequately examined. Even an exemplary study of conflict within American Catholicism, defining the great issue of the late nineteenth century as the need to reconcile the whole with its parts, focused only on the Irish and Germans. And a more recent effort, praised for giving “due notice to ethnic diversity” and being sensitive to the calls for justice expressed by various groups, almost entirely omits Italians. As one critic succinctly observed, this neglect represents “a flagrant case of ecclesiastical colonialism that has distorted the interpretation of American Catholicism.” Despite work by recent scholars, the Italian chapter in American Catholic history remains far from fully explored.

In view of the magnitude of immigration from Italy as well as its presence as a component of the Catholic population, Italians remain a neglected aspect of American religious history. Conversely, the religious experience of Italians represents a dimension of their adjustment to America that deserves more attention than it has previously been accorded as an issue of immigration history. For despite the political conflict of nationalists with the Holy See in their homeland, together with the rejection of religion by nonbelievers among them, immigrant Italians, largely at least nominally Catholic, found the Catholic Church a highly visible aspect of the social landscape of urban America. Italian Catholics in America, however, encountered their traditional faith in a setting that was different not only geographically but also socially and politically. Unlike in much of Europe, it was a minority religion, beset by Protestants and proselytizers in a pluralistic society. For Catholicism, the neighborhood parish eventually became a fortress that defended the fidelity of its members by services, sermons, and popular piety. From older roots, it developed newer functions that made it a center for spiritual life, education, social services, and recreation. By doing so, the parish became a source of group cohesion, personal identity, and adjustment to urban life. But with the transformation of religious institutions in America, the parish also mediated assimilation as its members became Americans, and thus it reflected a much larger reality of immigrant life. Thus, to know the history of Catholicism or immigrant life in America, we must understand the role of the parish.

The experience of Philadelphia’s Italians allows us to see the parish in the context of religious and immigrant history. In November 1852, Bishop John Neumann
founded the Italian Mission of St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi, the first church specifically for Italians in America. It was located on Marriott (now Montrose) Street, between Seventh and Eighth Streets, in the district of Moyamensing but later was incorporated by redrawn boundaries into the southeast quadrant of the city. Although a small cluster of immigrants from Italy had already settled in that area, as their number subsequently increased, Philadelphia eventually had one of the largest Italian populations in the nation. While it spawned other immigrant communities in the city as well as in outlying areas, South Philadelphia long remained the hub of Italian settlement. And if South Philadelphia arguably remained synonymous with “Little Italy,” then St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi was its principal institution in the late nineteenth century.8

Scholars have too often offered erroneous comments or paid meager attention to St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi. For example, after mentioning Bishop Neumann’s founding of an Italian church in Philadelphia, a nineteenth-century historian found little else of importance about it.9 Although once stationed at nearby Our Lady of Good Counsel, an Augustinian observer inexcusably, perhaps deliberately, identified St. Anthony’s in New York City as the first Italian church in America.10 A later writer thoroughly confused St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi with a church in Hoboken, New Jersey, thus filling its history with misinformation.11 Although recognizing the primacy of St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi, a sociologist turned exclusively to parish life in New York City.12 But local historians have also neglected it. A priest who wrote an early history of Philadelphia Catholicism identified St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi in his index as the city’s first Italian church but ignored both its local and national implications in his text.13 And even a recent history of the archdiocese failed to find the life and extraordinarily long tenure of its most celebrated pastor to be worth noting.14 If we are to correct these deficiencies, we need to become better acquainted with the history of this parish along with the experience of Italians as Catholics in Philadelphia.

St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi, however, was not a disembodied institution but one of human drama and performers. Its history reflects the aspirations of immigrants who held a secular faith in the city of Philadelphia and who believed that its opportunities, along with their own hard work, could provide the material rewards that had been denied them in their places of origin. But these Italians also carried a more traditional faith, whose renewal gave them spiritual comfort during life’s disappointments, trials, and tragedies. The priests who led this church and congregation were its principal players, while its parishioners made up the supporting cast. The story of St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi is ultimately about immigrants and their priests who together sought, believed in, and built on both kinds of faith in Philadelphia.

Although several priests nurtured the growth of parish life at St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi—and this work is about all of them—one stands above all others as the city’s Little Italy evolved into a large, visible, and stable ethnic community.
Antonio Isoleri was not quite twenty-five years old and had been ordained only ten months when he arrived in Philadelphia on January 5, 1870. Before his death sixty-two years later in 1932, he served fifty-six years as pastor of St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi. During that time he became prominent in the Italian colony as well as respected throughout Philadelphia. By his personal character and accomplishments, Isoleri made a unique mark on local history and in the larger experience of Italians in America. But he is remembered today only by a handful of older residents as a powerful and dynamic figure who left an indelible imprint on them and their community.

Great statesmen are more likely than the foot soldiers who serve under them to leave extensive collections of personal documents and memoirs. We know more about the lives of prime ministers and kings than we do about the common people. And within the world of religious institutions, we know more about princes of the Church than about lesser members of the clergy. Yet the priest who ministered in the front lines of spiritual experience often held a position of strategic significance for the parish church and the secular community. Antonio Isoleri was such a figure. His life, although unusual in many ways, contained much of the ordinary. For him, a religious vocation was not simply a matter of personal piety in pursuit of salvation but was also a matter of confronting the mundane and material struggles found in a temporal world. At the same time, his story discloses that no person takes the journey through his days alone. Every biography is also a history. By his efforts at creative writing, his struggle to interpret the painful politics of his land of origin, his devotion to religious faith, his service as pastor to his flock, and his vigorous leadership of the Italian colony, Isoleri’s life reflects his personal odyssey as an immigrant as well as the history of his community.

The reader who seeks only to know the life of the priest who is the main figure of these pages may become confused as the subject shifts to what may appear to be a different book. But behind this narrative and analysis, the “sociological imagination” that links history and biography, while reducing the dichotomy between “the public and the private,” provides its guiding premise. And whatever it is called, it places human interaction within a context that occasionally requires us to momentarily set aside the priest’s tale before returning to it with a better understanding.

The life of Isoleri, therefore, should neither be presented, nor can it be properly understood, apart from the broader situation in which it unfolded. The period from his arrival in America in 1869 until his death in 1932 was a significant chapter in immigrant, religious, and political history. And it embraced an enormously important stage, or more accurately several stages, of the Italian experience in America. When Isoleri disembarked in New York City in late 1869, he was one of only 2,891 Italians recorded as entering the United States in that year. The entire population of the nation in 1870 included only 17,157 persons.
born in Italy. The Federal Census for that year reported only 516 Italians for the city of Philadelphia, with 301 of them living in South Philadelphia. Among a Catholic population in the Diocese of Philadelphia of about 220,000, the only church for Italians had a congregation of about 400 members. And the next September following Isoleri’s departure from the land of his birth, Italian troops entered the Porta Pia, captured Rome, and unified Italy. The loss of Rome ended the temporal power of the Catholic Church and brought the papacy to the lowest point of its modern history.

During Isoleri’s years in Philadelphia, Italian immigration to America underwent a vast transformation. Increasing to nearly 56,000 in the first decade after his arrival, immigration from Italy grew steadily until it reached its peak just before World War I. From 1871 to 1930, Italy sent 4,625,677 immigrants to America. Although they often returned to their homeland, many others settled permanently. From an army of young male laborers when mass immigration began, women and children increasingly joined them by the early twentieth century. From the northern regions of previous years, their origins shifted overwhelmingly to villages and towns of the Mezzogiorno and Sicily. The passage of the National Origins Quota Acts all but ended immigration from Italy in the 1920s.

By 1930 the U.S. population included 1,790,429 persons born in Italy, the highest figure ever reached, and 2,756,453 others who were American born but fully or partly of Italian parentage, for a total of 4,546,882 Italian Americans. In Philadelphia some 68,156 residents were natives of Italy, with 43,383 of them, or about 50 percent of all foreign-born whites, living in South Philadelphia. By that year the Catholic population in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia reached about 812,550 members. The archdiocese eventually established twenty-three nationality parishes for Italians in the city and its surrounding area, with about 89,000 members in their congregations. But other churches became de facto Italian parishes as newcomers crowded into neighborhoods, thus making them a part of the Catholic population who could not be easily counted. In February 1929 the Lateran Treaty and the Concordat resolved the “Roman question,” thus ending nearly sixty years of tension between Italy and the Vatican. Through these agreements with Fascist Italy, the Church reached a promising moment that was widely celebrated in Italian churches in Philadelphia.

Within this framework, the story of St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi, along with its pastors and people, could be seen as a self-contained, uneventful tale of a single parish and as only a minor episode of local history. But this remarkable era spans from well before the start of mass immigration from Italy through the initial development of immigrant ghettos in American cities to a time when Italians had become so well assimilated in the United States as to be no longer regarded as a serious problem. The recounting of this saga transcends mere parish history or Isoleri’s part as pastor and constitutes an important chapter in the rediscovery of the Italian American past.
While some scholars have favorably portrayed the nationality parish as a decisive, but often overlooked, institution in the adjustment of Italian Catholics in America, other writers have viewed it as a deterrent to assimilation. Its role was actually much more complicated. Isoleri sought to make his parish a device that enabled its members to retain their *italianità* while at the same time permitting them to become Americans. He sought to help them to remain what they had previously been while he facilitated what they inevitably were becoming. And this story engages some central issues of religious and immigrant history in general—it recognizes the role of the priest in immigrant life, the tensions of popular piety with ecclesiastical bureaucracy, and the influence of religious experience on assimilation. And unlike an earlier perspective depicting immigrants as being uprooted, isolated, and alienated, it allows us to see their parish life as a bridge between old and new cultures that eased adjustment and encouraged assimilation while also building their own community.

It is important to distinguish what the present study is about from what some readers may want it to be about. It is a study in the historical sociology of an immigrant community and its institutions. While it enters into religious history, there are many questions that it raises but does not answer. Without comparing the religious life of Italians in Philadelphia with that found in other cities, or their religious experience with more recent immigrant groups, or the complex relationships of pastors and sisters who served in parishes, it provides material for subsequent scholars who wish to pursue these topics. The story of Isoleri, his parish, and its relationship to the community deserves to be told first and by itself. Yet that particular focus has implications beyond itself.

The nationality parish, set aside for the exclusive use of a single immigrant group, did not begin with the Italians, nor did it end with them. But from its earliest days, it has often been part of a troubled legacy of Catholicism in America. German Catholics in Philadelphia, in seeking to separate themselves from the congregation of St. Mary’s, initiated plans for their own church in 1787. When they opened Holy Trinity two years later, against the wishes of the Reverend John Carroll, superior of the Catholic mission in America, a highly contentious era of Church history began. More than two centuries later, Catholicism in America seeks to accommodate newcomers from Africa and Asia by a policy of enculturation that provides continuity, particularly in liturgical forms, with their traditional cultural heritage. Between the historical boundaries of earlier Germans and the current migration, the encounter of Italian immigrants with American Catholicism offers a benchmark by which to evaluate its efforts to deal with cultural diversity. The recent decisions by Church authorities in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, and elsewhere to close nationality parishes that once housed immigrant congregations, as well as the current need to serve new immigrants, make the case of St. Mary Magdalen dePazzi both timely and timeless. This situation of Italian Catholics in Philadelphia was not and is not
an entirely unique case. In many respects, it could be also found wherever Italians formed immigrant colonies and faced the difficult task of adjusting both in a secular and in a religious sense to life in America. While differing in details, their more general dimensions were quite similar. Consequently, the Philadelphia case resonates with familiarity throughout the history of urban America. It is an encounter that Church leaders today would be well advised to reexamine as they face the immigrant groups of more recent years, if they wish to avoid the mistakes of the past.