



**Digital Commons@**  
Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

Journal of Catholic Education

---

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 8

---

12-1-1998

## A Case Study of Immigrants and Education: The Scalabrinian Experience With Italian Americans

Mary Elizabeth Brown  
*Center for Migration Studies*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

---

### Recommended Citation

Brown, M. E. (1998). A Case Study of Immigrants and Education: The Scalabrinian Experience With Italian Americans. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 2 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0202082013>

This Focus Section Article is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu). To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email [CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu](mailto:CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu).

---

## A CASE STUDY OF IMMIGRANTS AND EDUCATION: THE SCALABRINIAN EXPERIENCE WITH ITALIAN AMERICANS

MARY ELIZABETH BROWN  
*Center for Migration Studies*

*This article describes the experience of the Society of Saint Charles, commonly known as the Scalabrinians, regarding the Catholic education of Italian immigrants between 1887 and 1933. It relates this historical situation to the following issues facing contemporary Catholic immigrant education: 1) financing local parochial educational programs with nonlocal funds; 2) developing theories regarding transcultural education; and 3) considering education inclusively to incorporate programs beyond parochial schooling.*

Those who observed the Italian mass migration of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and those who base their scholarship on those observations have consistently remarked that Italians did not take advantage of educational opportunities to the same degree that other immigrant groups did. Observers and scholars concerned with religion considered the Italians a “problem,” including a problem for Catholic education. However, recent research into both the Italians and those who observed them have identified the value systems that shaped the Italian immigrants and have also explored the Italians’ own world view.

This article pays particular attention to research done on the Society of Saint Charles, also known as the Scalabrinians, an order of male religious founded in 1887 to minister to immigrants in their new homes. The efforts of the Scalabrinians significantly contributed to the history of Catholic education in the following ways: 1) Scalabrinian records provided the baseline for a framework to survey the scholarly literature on Italians and Catholic edu-

cation; 2) they staffed numerous Italian parishes in the U.S. Northeast and Midwest; and 3) because of the unique history of the Scalabrinians, the work of sociologists and educators who research the field of Catholic education is enhanced.

## **DESCRIPTIONS OF "THE ITALIAN PROBLEM" IN CATHOLICISM AND IN EDUCATION**

Browne (1946) published the classic definition of "the Italian problem": They neglected to attend Mass and to receive the sacraments, did not support their parishes or send their children to parochial school, did not respect the priesthood, and did not realize they should have been doing better in all these categories. Browne also drew up a list of reasons for the Italian problem, placing the major emphasis on the ignorance of Italian Catholics.

Vecoli (1969) reevaluated Browne's use of the problem label for Italians. Vecoli pointed out that the Italians had reasons for their long history of anti-clericalism. Four-fifths of Italian immigrants to the United States came from Southern Italy or the island of Sicily. Historically, these two areas had agricultural economies in which a small group of families owned most of the land, reducing those who did the work to various forms of peasantry or tenancy. The Catholic Church, allied with the elite and a major landowner itself, contributed to the exploitation of the people for whom it should have provided pastoral care. In the 19th century, after the unification of the northern and southern kingdoms and the industrialization of Northern Italy, Southern Italy was reduced to an internal colony. However, when intellectuals and political activists denounced the Italian masses' increasing oppression, Catholic leaders condemned both the critics and the modern trends they criticized, without addressing those grievances. Vecoli thus provided an explanation for what Browne observed, but did not deny Browne's charge.

Tomasi (1975) presented new evidence and new conclusions regarding the Italian problem, pointing out that despite the problem characterization, the Italians were integrated into New York Catholicism, with parishes much like those of their non-Italian co-religionists. He then reordered Browne's list of causes of the Italian problem, replacing Browne's emphasis on the ignorance of the Italian people with an emphasis on the anti-Italian prejudice of the U.S. Catholics with whom the Italians came into contact. Once ensconced in their own parishes, under the care of priests who understood their language and customs, the Italians were no longer a problem.

DiGiovanni (1994) offered an alternative to Tomasi's thesis, crediting neither the Italian immigrants nor the priests who cared for them but Michael Augustine Corrigan with developing a successful strategy of Italian-American pastoral care. In 1880, when Italian immigration to New York became noticeable, Corrigan was coadjutor to Cardinal John

McCluskey, Archbishop of New York, in which capacity he attended the Third Plenary Council of 1884 and influenced its actions on Italian pastoral care. In 1885, McCluskey died and Corrigan used the archepiscopal office to erect national parishes, to invite religious orders to staff those parishes, and to invite orders of women religious to staff parochial schools for Italians.

Parallel to this religious problem ran what might be called an Italian "educational problem." Kessner (1977) cited statistics for the late 19th century that placed the percentage of illiterate Italians over the age of 14 at 47%. Italian-American-born or -raised children did better in terms of literacy, but lagged behind other immigrants' offspring in terms of receiving high school diplomas or length of time spent in school.

Observers usually cited a combination of economic and cultural factors inhibiting Italian educational advancement. Covello (1967) focused mainly on the problems of educating Italian-American boys. After interviewing the parents of his students, many of whom hailed from Southern Italy, he concluded that Southern Italian culture warned against permitting offspring to improve themselves and advocated training children to follow in their parents' footsteps. In the case of working class Italian parents, those footsteps led out of the classroom and into the factory. Even parents with aspirations for their youngsters mistakenly assumed one needed enormous erudition, enough to become a physician or lawyer, for education to be of benefit. Because they could not expect their sons to attend a university, they eschewed even the high school level and settled for elementary education and a quick entry into the labor force.

Cohen (1992) found a similar combination of economic and cultural factors limiting female education. Italian immigrant families expected girls to marry and did not see how education would help to achieve that goal. Parents did not expect to benefit from their daughters' education, so they ended that education as soon as possible so that they might at least profit from a few years of their daughters' work before marriage ended their working careers or redirected their resources to their husbands.

To what extent Italian-American educational achievements have occurred remains controversial. Changes in technology and in the location of industries reduced job opportunities for children about the same time that police stepped up enforcement of truancy laws. Also at that time parents realized that high school education led to secretarial jobs which in turn introduced women to prospective husbands with brighter futures. One can cite examples of Italian achievement in intellectual pursuits including the late president of Yale University, Bart Giamatti. One can also cite Kessner's (1977) statistics, which showed a slow increase in the length of time second-generation Italian Americans remained in school and a much slower ascent through the ranks from blue to white collar occupations. Cohen's (1992) study of women showed a faster rise up a shorter slope.

## FACTORS INHIBITING CREATION OF ITALIAN PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS

Combining perceived Italian alienation from education and Catholicism might lead to the conclusion that the Italians were especially alienated from Catholic education. Archival records indicate that Italian clergy working in Italian-American parishes offered parochial education and that Italian parents sent their offspring, but several factors inhibited development of parish schools during the earliest period of Italian mass immigration, i.e., the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The two examples cited below come from the experience of the Society of Saint Charles, the Scalabrinians. The first three Scalabrinian missionaries to the United States arrived in New York on July 22, 1888. They rented space at a former Presbyterian church on Roosevelt Street on the Lower East Side, but their big year came in 1889. They moved to a building at 122 Roosevelt Street, and through renovation of the top floor for Catholic worship, Saint Joachim's parish was established. On March 31, 1889, Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini arrived with her first band of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, who began to teach at Saint Joachim's school. (It is not clear in which order these events took place.) On June 6, 1892, the superior of schools for the archdiocese inspected Saint Joachim's and pronounced it "defective in every respect." The school was located in a building in which the basement was rented by a junkshop. The classrooms were small and poorly ventilated. The classes consisted of a kindergarten of 34 children, a first grade of 44, and a second grade of 34, and were taught by the sister superior, two other sisters, and two lay women. Only the sister superior spoke English. She complained to the inspector of the living quarters and the lack of support, claiming the parish allocated the community of seven sisters only \$10 per month, and expected the sisters to raise most of that by charging the schoolchildren \$.50 per month. The clergy were to make up the difference, but at that point owed the sisters \$500. This report is the last documentation regarding Saint Joachim's School. The parish continued without a school until its suppression in 1958.

The Scalabrinian mission in Boston also had a short-lived, but better documented, experience with parochial education. In Boston's North End, the Scalabrinians complemented the work of a group of laymen organized as the San Marco Society for the purpose of securing a parish for their community (DeMarco, 1980). The parish, under the name of Sacred Heart, became a reality in 1888, and Archbishop John J. Williams entrusted its staffing to the Scalabrinians.

In 1901, Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, the founder of the missionary community, made a pastoral visit to his priests and their parishes in the United States. During his stay at Sacred Heart he announced that the

parish would be the site of his newest experiment in Italian-American pastoral care. Scalabrini had assisted in stabilizing a new institute of women religious, the Apostles of the Sacred Heart. He wanted to send a group of these sisters to Sacred Heart to start an Italian-language parochial school. Such a school would help the Italian immigrants to maintain their culture in its entirety—language as well as faith—in their alien environment. The pastor who was to preside over this experiment was caught by surprise. Although he wrote this account of the announcement 27 years after the event, it still conveys his desire to please Scalabrini, whom he admired, and his desire to tell his superior the truth: “And when I was asked my opinion I declared openly that the proposed schools were excellent, but were neither needed nor possible at that time...and therefore I suggested that the project be postponed to a better time” (Gambera, 1994, p. 131). He resigned rather than either thwart Scalabrini’s wishes or preside over what he feared would be a disaster. A successor undertook Scalabrini’s plan and welcomed the Apostles of the Sacred Heart. However, he could not afford to maintain the project, the sisters had to leave the parish, and the program was abandoned.

DiGiovanni (1994), Brown (1995), and Orsi (1985) have demonstrated that Italian immigrants at other parishes, in other locations, staffed by other religious orders or by secular clergy, had similar problems maintaining parochial schools. There are common threads in the various case studies. First, it would seem that any Italian education or religious problem stemmed at least partly from financial hardships common to all immigrants. The Italians had difficulty finding money in their own communities to support school buildings, teachers, textbooks, and educational equipment.

Second, it would seem that the Italians were perplexed not so much by a language barrier but by having to decide what to do about that language barrier. The Irish Catholics who preceded them to New York and Boston had no trouble deciding what language to use in their parochial schools, because Gaelic had been thoroughly suppressed. Italians, though, had experience in both learning and teaching their own language in schools. Caroli (1973) has shown that Italian immigrants were highly transient, with much return emigration; it made sense to teach children Italian in preparation for the possibility that they might live in their native homeland. Barry (1953) has shown how deeply 19th-century Catholics believed that “language saves faith,” another reason to try to preserve language. However, a few short years in the United States taught the first Scalabrinian missionaries the importance of English as a tool in the proper pastoral care of the rising generation. Having to forge a new path between Italian and English was bound to slow down the development of Italian parochial education programs.

Third, it might be fruitful to pursue further research in the archives of women religious, who seem to have been asked to build bricks without straw. Ambitious parishes asked sisters to conduct parochial schools with insuffi-

cient funds for either the school or the sisters. Zealous and obedient sisters came to teach children without having had adequate training in English or the opportunity to think about the particular challenges of teaching second-generation ethnic Americans. Confirmation of the importance of studying women religious comes in the next section, which discusses how well the sisters succeeded in fields other than parochial education.

## A ROUNDABOUT METHOD OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Scalabrinians, then, had to find alternatives to parochial schools that would educate youth. To survey how they did so, it is helpful to focus on one Scalabrinian, the Reverend Antonio Demo, pastor of Our Lady of Pompeii in Greenwich Village from 1899 to 1933. Our Lady of Pompeii had no false starts with parochial schools; instead it cut a circular path, doing everything else and then taking on the challenge of a parochial school.

This circular path started in 1908, when Our Lady of Pompeii began raising funds for an *asilo infantile*, or day care center. By 1913, the parish had enough money to buy a tenement at 8 Downing Street, around the corner from the church, which was at 210 Bleecker Street. The lower floors were renovated for the day care center and plans were made to raise extra revenue by renting out the top two floors. The facility named Asilo Scalabrini opened on October 25, 1915, and was such a success that Our Lady of Pompeii ran the risk of violating health department codes by squeezing as many as 90 children into a space meant for 79. Asilo Scalabrini was open from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on workdays. The Sisters of Charity Pallottine staffed the center. It offered play space in the indoor playrooms (although it is not known what games the children played), meals, and a physician's attention for children with illnesses or injuries.

Asilo Scalabrini escaped at least one problem. Since the children were not getting a systematic education, there was no question regarding what languages to use or why. Thus, Asilo Scalabrini could use the talents of sisters who originally came to the United States to teach parochial schools.

While Our Lady of Pompeii had no school, it had other programs for school-age children. Most importantly, it had catechism classes. The catechism classes had begun before Demo came to the parish. His predecessor as pastor had secured the patronage of Miss Annie Leary, an Irish-American heiress who was concerned with Italian immigrants. Sullivan (1992) describes how in 1898-1899 the pastor developed a system whereby the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart staffed a *Scuola di Lavoro*, or sewing school, for Italian girls under Leary's patronage, and also taught catechism. The school was reorganized in 1905. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart withdrew and the Christian Brothers took charge. They in turn trained parish

women to assist with the teaching. A 1911 photograph shows at least 27 female teachers. At 9:30 a.m., children and teachers attended Sunday Mass with an English-language sermon. At 2:00 p.m., they reassembled for catechism. The teachers held their classes in the parish, seating their pupils in different sections of the pews. Class lasted an hour, after which there was an hour of movies, as a sort of reward. Catechism students also took part in special events. For example, on December 23, 1923, the Italian-language newspaper *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* noted that a group of 30 elementary school girls sang Vespers and another group of 25 recited poetry in English, Italian, and Latin. Boys had an extra opportunity to participate in parish life through service as acolytes. A 1911 souvenir journal showed 16 altar boys, ranging from small lads to tall young men. Correspondence found in Our Lady of Pompeii's records indicates that the priests treated the group of altar boys as an organization or club by holding regular meetings and going on outings.

Our Lady of Pompeii met some of the educational needs of adolescents and young adults through its drama program. The earliest recorded plays took place February 12-13, 1906, when the *Circolo di Madonna di Pompeii* put on a four-act drama. On June 4-5, 1906, the Daughters of Mary presented a play about Saint Bernadette of Lourdes, and also presented a farce. The plays became more regular after December 10, 1912, when the *Circolo Gioventu Femminile*, or Young Ladies' Circle, held its first meeting. This group was formed in order to raise money for the parish, and its chosen method of doing so was sponsoring Italian and English plays. The headline event was usually in Italian. Judging from titles such as *L'Orfana Vindicata* [The Orphan Girl Vindicated] or *L'Eroismo di una Figlia di Maria* [The Heroism of a Daughter of Mary], the plays centered on moral issues. Other plays given, though, were among the best in Europe. The group's premier production, *La Notte Del Sabato*, based on Goethe's *Faust*, was performed June 30-July 1, 1913. The players also acted in an Italian version of Shakespeare's *Othello* and in Emil Zola's *Teresa Raquin* (Brown, 1992). Until 1922, the group tended to produce two plays a year, each running for a couple of nights.

In 1923, the players began an ambitious new project, an annual Passion Play. The play was actually more like a series of tableaux of the Stations of the Cross, but they were very elaborate. Veteran performers took the roles of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Judas Iscariot, and Saint John. Other parishioners played crowd roles: apostles, Pharisees, scribes, soldiers, and the women followers of Jesus. The Passion Play served multiple purposes. It raised money for the parish, kept the young people entertained under Catholic auspices, and provided a devotional event for the spectators and a learning experience for the participants.

Pompeii's first step toward a parochial school came in 1922 when Demo requested from the Diocesan Council permission to purchase property



between Bleecker and Hancock Streets and erect a parochial school. However, Demo learned that city authorities were planning to extend Sixth Avenue south of Bleecker Street right through Our Lady of Pompeii. The parish purchased a tract of land one block away from its condemned church and hired an architect who had already built a combination church and school for another Scalabrinian parish in New York, Saint Joseph's.

On October 7, 1928, Our Lady of Pompeii dedicated its new church. It eventually opened a new day care center and a parochial school. The teachers were from the Apostles of the Sacred Heart (then called Missionary Zelatrices of the Sacred Heart). After establishing themselves in Connecticut and in the Scalabrinian parish of Saint Joseph's and spending their summers taking classes at Fordham to better teach their Italian-American students, the sisters were ready to teach in English.

## CONCLUSIONS

In explaining the Italian-American historical contribution to American Catholicism, three points merit reflection: the socioeconomic status of the immigrants, the challenges of a multilingual world, and the venues in which education was provided. The socioeconomic circumstances of 19th and 20th century Italian immigrants appear similar. Both groups start life in the United States on the lower socioeconomic levels, stabilize family life, receive pastoral care and the benefit of a Catholic education, consolidate economic strength, and advance up the socioeconomic ladder.

The extent to which the Italian immigrants understood and spoke English contributed significantly to their successful integration into American life. Many 19th-century Italians could neither read nor write their native language. Consequently their children had great difficulty assimilating into and succeeding in a multilingual America. The Scalabrinians addressed this problem by providing formal Catholic education in various forms to the Italian immigrants. But Bishop Scalabrini was concerned that as a consequence of this education, they might forsake their native language as well as their faith. Thus his missionaries came prepared to preserve the Italian faith in its original cultural and linguistic form. However, the missionaries themselves soon realized the importance of using English. To do so would demonstrate to the second-generation immigrants that Catholicism was as compatible with American culture as it was with Italian culture.

Italian parishes provided Catholic education in various forms, such as nurseries for preschool children, youth programs, acolyte corps, choirs, and drama programs. They also sponsored sodalities. In these days of restricted funds, the Scalabrinian experience remains a heartening reminder that it is possible to provide Christian education in many settings.

## REFERENCES

- Barry, C. J. (1953). *The Catholic church and German Americans*. Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Company.
- Brown, M. E. (1992). *From Italian villages to Greenwich Village: Our Lady of Pompeii, 1982-1992*. New York: Center for Migration Studies.
- Brown, M. E. (1995). *Churches, communities, and children: Italian immigrants in the Archdiocese of New York, 1880-1945*. New York: Center for Migration Studies.
- Browne, H. J. (1946). The Italian problem in the Catholic church of the United States, 1880-1990. *Records and Studies*, 35, 46-72.
- Caroli, B. B. (1973). *Italian repatriation from the United States, 1900-1914*. New York: Center for Migration Studies.
- Cohen, M. (1992). *Workshop to office: Two generations of Italian women in New York City, 1900-1950*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Covello, L. (1967). *The social background of the Italo-American school child: A study of the southern Italian family mores and their effect on the school situation in Italy and America*. Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill.
- DeMarco, W. M. (1980). Ethnics and enclaves: The Italian settlement in the north end of Boston. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 41(06), 1A. (University Microfilms No. AAT80-26750).
- DiGiovanni, S. M. (1994). *Archbishop Corrigan and the Italian immigrants*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Books.
- Gambera, G. (1994). *A migrant missionary story: The autobiography of Giacomo Gambera*. New York: Center for Migration Studies.
- Kessner, T. (1977). *The golden door: Italian and Jewish immigrant mobility in New York City, 1880-1915*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Orsi, R. A. (1985). *The madonna of 115th Street: Faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sullivan, M. L. (1992). *Mother Cabrini: Italian immigrant of the century*. New York: Center for Migration Studies.
- Tomasi, S. M. (1975). *Piety and power: The role of the Italian parishes in the New York metropolitan area, 1880-1930*. New York: Center for Migration Studies.
- Vecoli, R. J. (1969). Prelates and peasants: Italian immigrants and the Catholic church. *Journal of Social History*, 2, 217-267.

*Mary Elizabeth Brown, Ph.D., teaches at Marymount Manhattan College and works at the Center for Migration Studies. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mary E. Brown, Ph.D., Center for Migration Studies, 209 Flagg Place, Staten Island, NY 10304-1199.*

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.