SERVITES AND THE ITALIANS OF CHICAGO

[printed Oct. 4, 2013]

The Servites (or Order of Servants of Mary, to use our official name) are known for their work with the Italians in Chicago at Assumption Parish in River North, the first Italian parish in Chicago, and then at St. Philip Benizi Church just north of Assumption which served chiefly immigrants from southern Italy and Sicily. Here the name of Fr. Luigi (or Louis) Giambastiani is very familiar. And then later the Servites also served the Italian community in Blue Island at St. Donatus.

But today I will like to present three lesser known, but I think quite important aspects of the relationship of Servites with the Italian immigrants in Chicago. First, the story of the first contact of Servites with the Italians of Chicago; 2) the background of Fr. Agostino (or Austin to use his Anglicized name) Morini, to lead to the main section 3) the report of Fr. Morini in 1887 to the Cardinal Prefect of the S. C. of Propaganda Fide on the condition of the Italian immigrants in America.

1. THE INITIAL CONTACT

Most stories about the Italian immigrants in Chicago and the Church begin with the simple story of the mission which Fr. Austin Morini gave to the Italians in the basement of St. Patrick’s Church, beginning on Passion Sunday, March 22, 1874. Most accounts, however, are either incomplete or even inaccurate. I would like to set the record straight, based on Fr. Morini’s own memoirs, written some thirty years after the event and also corroborated in part by contemporary correspondence. This is the full story, as told by Fr. Morini himself.¹

Fr. Morini, with two other Servite priests and a lay brother, came to St. Charles parish in Menasha, Wisconsin, in 1870 at the invitation of Bishop Joseph Melcher. They were sent to America, certainly to assist the bishop in his new diocese, but mainly to establish the Servite

---

Order in the New World, not to any specific ethnic group. In fact, the Menasha parish was composed mainly of Irish and French-Canadian settlers.

To supplement their income in this parish, Fr. Morini would preach missions and retreats in the area. In late December of 1873 Fr. Morini preached a retreat to the Sisters of Mercy at Janesville, Wisconsin. In Morini’s word:

Fr. Doyle, the pastor, with whom I stayed, insisted that it was impossible for us to establish ourselves at Doty Island [i.e. Menasha]. He asked me if I knew Chicago, to which I replied that I had seen it only while passing through and I had left a calling card in the small house where the bishop lived. He proposed that I go there with him the following morning, which was a Monday. When we arrived there, he took me to make the acquaintance of several Italians who owned restaurants and liquor stores, and to all he said that I wanted to give them a mission. He said this on his own, because it seems to me that I had not mentioned anything about this to him. The reception was so-so.

The same evening we went to see the bishop, a fine and jovial person. Fr. Doyle told him, too, that I wanted to give a mission to the Italians, and I thought it best to agree. The bishop said to me, “Come here tomorrow morning and we’ll talk about it.”

The only thing that Fr. Morini records about the night spent in the home of Fr. Doyle’s relatives was a army of bedbugs which kept him awake most of the night. He called this his “First taste of Chicago.”

The following morning Bishop Foley told him about an unsuccessful mission which the Passionist Fr. Gaudentius Rossi gave to the Italians two years earlier. Morini then comments: “I understood that the bishop’s faith in the Italians was zero.” At the bishop’s suggestion he made arrangements with Fr. Conway, pastor of St. Patrick’s Church, to use the church basement for the mission. With permission obtained, Fr. Morini returned to Menasha and wrote officially to both the prior general and the bishop for permission and faculties for the mission. The prior general sent permission in a letter of January 28, 1874, and Bishop Foley, in a letter of February 3, 1874,

2 Ibid., pp. 74-75.
not only gave permission for the mission but also authorized Morini to write to the various pastors to make an announcement to the Italians in their parishes that the mission would begin on Passion Sunday and end on Palm Sunday.  

Fr. Morini and another Servite from Menasha, Fr. Bonfilius Baldi, came down to Chicago for the Mission from March 22 to March 28, 1874. Morini was expecting only a dozen or so men, but a hundred showed up. The congregation was always large and the confessions numerous. And Morini concluded “It was a real and unexpected success.” And the bishop was pleased with that report.

At the end of the mission Fr. Morini announced, after having consulted the pastor, that they would return to St. Patrick’s the following Sunday, Easter, so that they could make their Easter communion. At the invitation of Fr. John McMullen, pastor of the cathedral parish and vicar general, Fr. Morini moved from St. Patrick’s to Holy Name. As he was leaving, Fr. Conway abruptly told Fr. Morini

I want you to know that I have had enough of your filthy (lerci) Italians and I cannot let them return to my church nn Sunday

To no avail, Fr. Morini protested that Fr. Conway had already given permission, and that it would be difficult to contact all the people about a change. A solution was found in the generosity of Fr. Jacques Coté, pastor of the French church of Notre Dame. He welcomed the Italian congregation not only for Easter but for every Sunday until a better place could be found. Fr. Morini concludes: “For a considerable period each Sunday we heard confessions there and said Mass, and preached.”

In the meantime, Italians were searching for an old Protestant Church to buy or land to purchase for a church for the Italians. They were unsuccessful. After Easter Fr. Morini returned to Menasha and sent another Servite Fr. Andrew Venturi to Chicago to take a census of the Italians and ask them to subscribe to the project of forming an Italian congregation. On April 28 Fr. Venturi wrote that he had reported to the bishop that he had visited 200 families and 176 of them had made pledges for a total of $8,826, but, according to the bishop, this was not sufficient to support a priest. Morini returned to Chicago on May 4th and informed the bishop of the lack

---

3 These letters are cited in ibid, note 128 on pages 74-75.
of success in forming an Italian congregation at that time. It was at this time that Bishop Foley told Morini “I would like to have you in Chicago.” The result of subsequent meetings was the bishop offered the Servites an Irish parish on the western limits of the city, the present Basilica of Our Lady of Sorrows.

It is unclear to me at present how long the Italian congregation remained at the French church. The story picks up again several years later when in November of 1880 land was purchased for the Church of the Assumption, the first Italian church in Chicago.\(^4\)

In November of 1874, Fr. Morini summed up for his Florentine literary friend, Alessandro Carraresi, his views of the Italians in Chicago:

> Regarding your desire for information about the Italians in Chicago, know that there is neither an Italian printer nor Italian printing house in Chicago, and the Italians of Chicago, here as elsewhere, are people who do not read anything. Those who are better off take care of their restaurants and the other sell fruit from carts, shine shoes, paint houses, or sharpen knives. The good people go with great haste to the first Mass on Sundays in the nearest church and then to their restaurants. There are some who have some money but no one, absolutely no one, could be said to belong to the middle class. The only thing that they read is the Protestant newspaper. The children all speak English and do not want any other language. In short, that is the state of the Italians here.\(^5\)

2. **FR. AUSTIN MORINI, O.S.M.**

Since the main section of this presentation is the examination of Fr. Morini’s views on the Italian immigrant situation, here we will look at only those aspects of his life which help to understand the influences behind his views.

When Morini preached the retreat to the Italians of Chicago in 1874, he was 47 years of age.

\(^4\) Ibid., pp. 135-138.

\(^5\) Letter of Morini to Alessandro Carraresi, Menasha, November 13, 1874. Edited by Filippo Berlasso as letter 580, p. 1109, in *Carteggio di Agostino Mroini, O.S.m. (1853-1874)*, Monumenta OSM, n.s. vol.1, tome 2. (Rome, Edizioni Marianum, 2001.)
age. He was born in Florence and ordained there in 1850 at the age of 24. From 1850 to 1864 he was occupied with formation of students within the Servite Order and also with literary pursuits. He reedited the renaissance translation of the letters of St. Jerome, and in doing so he had contacts with many of the literary figures of Italy of the time. He also carried on a lively correspondence with the Bollandist Victor De Buck in Brussels, not only on items of historical interest but also on the politics of the day. He was instrumental in having his friend Alessandro Carraresi translate Montalembert’s opus on the Monks of the West from French to Italian, and he also aided in the translation. In brief: he had a wide view of culture and politics of the day and a broad range of interests.

In 1864 to 1870 he was one of the first two Servite friars in London, where he anglicized his name of Agostino to Austin and learned English. He foresaw the suppression of religious orders in Italy and therefore the need to establish foundations in countries where the Order could survive and grow. In 1870 he was named superior of the first group of four Servites to go to the United States to Menasha, Wisconsin. Therefore from 1864 to his mission in Chicago 1874 he had virtually no contact with Italian immigrants. In fact he said clearly that the future of the Servite Order in the United States lay with the Irish not with the Italians.

After his move to Chicago in 1874 he was in contact with the Italian community of the city and helped organize, with Fr. Sostene Moretti, the parish of the Assumption in 1880-1881. But he continued his literary contacts in Chicago. Several months after his arrival in Chicago, he was contacted by William Onahan, one of the leading lay Catholics of the city, and president of the Catholic Literary Union Association. Onahan arranged that Morini give a lecture to the Union Literary Society. Morini chose the subject of Savonarola.

In 1880 he also visited the Italian parish in St. Louis which had great debts and was faltering. To the disappointment of some of his confreres he did not accept the parish.

But, in my opinion, the greatest influence on this letter of 1887 was his presence, as a superior of a religious order, at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884. The Council took up the question of Italian immigrants. In Baltimore Fr. Morini spoke with Fr. Andreis, pastor of the Italian parish of St. Leo. In 1886 he visited California, stayed with Archbishop Riordon of San Franciscan whom Morini knew as a parish priest in Chicago and also others whom he
befriended at the Council.

Therefore by the time he was requested by Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, Prefect of the S. C. de Propaganda Fide, Fr. Morini had a wide experience both of other ethnic groups and cultures in general as well as person contact with Italian communities in several difference cities. It was drawing on this experience that he formulated his response to Cardinal Simeoni.

3) FR. MORINI’S LETTER ON THE ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS

a) The Context

In a letter of January 19, 1887, to Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, Prefect of the S. C. de Propaganda Fide, Fr. Morini wrote his reflections on the means of providing for the spiritual welfare of the Italians in North America. The letter was actually addressed to the Servite Prior General Pier Francesco Testa who had relayed the Cardinal’s request to Morini. Remember that Simeoni was also the cardinal protector of the Servite Order from 1877 to 1892, so it is not surprising that he would work through the prior general. For this reason the original of the letter is in the Servite General Archives in Rome, while only a copy of it is the Propaganda archives.

To understand better the importance of this letter it is useful to back up a bit to follow the progression of the interest of the Propaganda with regard to the spiritual welfare of Italian immigrants in the United States. In 1883 after the American bishops proposed holding a third plenary council, the Propaganda invited the American archbishops to come to Rome to discuss a working document prepared by the Propaganda. This meeting took place from November 13 to December 10, 1883. The session on December 1st took up the question of religious aid for the Italian immigrants. Archbishop Gibbons of Baltimore approved the established of committees for Italian immigrants in the United States and suggested that similar committees be established in Italy. He also approved the plan of placing Italian priests in charge of their co-nationals living in the United States. Archbishop Corrigan of New York “observed that is was difficult to provide special churches for the Italians because: 1) The Italian immigrants did not ordinarily

---

frequent the church; 2) they had their dwellings dispersed throughout the various parts of the cities; and 3) they made no offerings to the priests either for the latter’s support or for the maintenance of the church.. For this reason the Most Reverent Coadjutor Archbishop of St. Louis (Patrick J. Ryan) said that it was more expedient that at the principal churches of large cities there should be provided priests to whom the care of the Italians should be committed, with the duty of seeking them out, inviting them to attend church, and giving them religious instruction.” The cardinals of the Propaganda also commended the Society of St. Raphael in Germany.7

Ellis describes how this proposal on immigrants was received in the council: “Actually, the chapter on Italian immigrants raised so many differences of opinion in the council that it was finally dropped entirely, and Gibbons, in his role as apostolic delegate appointed a committee which rewrote the chapter with no special reference to the Italians. The new version contained words of praise for the German and Irish immigrant societies, as also an emphasis on the need for priests in the seaboard cities to care for the newcomers, the necessity of special protection for women immigrants, and the desirability of directing the foreign-born from the cities to the rural areas.”8

The Council decided that the apostolic delegate should write to Rome concerning the conditions of the Italian immigrants. Gibbons asked Bishop Thomas Becker of Wilmington to write the letter in his name. Ellis describes this letter as follows: “The letter, which was addressed to Cardinal Simeoni, spoke frankly of the Italians’ neglect of Mass, the sacraments, and the support of their parish priests once they arrived in the United States.” The letter also urged the Italian bishops to provide for the religious instruction of the immigrants before they left Italy. The patrone system was described and also the work of several apostate priests in New

7 “Minutes of Roman Meeting Preparatory to the III Pleanary Council of Baltimore. Chapter XII The Care of Immigrants.” An English translation is found in The Jurist 11 (1951): 538-539. It is also summarized in Ellis, op. cit., 215-216,

8 Ellis, op. cit., pp. 340-341, For the decree on immigrants see Acta et Decreta concilii Plenarii Baltimorensis Tertii anno MDCCCKXXXIV, Titulus VIII. De Zelo Animarum, Caput I. De Colonis et Advenis (Baltimore, 1886), pp. 130-132.
York. With this information and other correspondence on the subject, the S. C. de Propaganda Fide was ready to take action in early 1887. It was in this context that Cardinal Simeoni solicited the views of Fr. Morini. The Congregation prepared its report on Italian immigration and presented it to Pope Leo XIII in an audience on June 26, 1887. Annexed to this report were twelve documents cited in the report. Fr. Morini’s letter is cited as document number 7. and is described in the report as “the authoritative and confidential information received in this regard.” In addition to these sources of information the report uses extensively also the pamphlet on immigration by Bishop Scalabrini of Piacenza and also a memorandum on Bishop Scalabrini’s pamphlet requested by the Congregation from Bishop John Ireland of St. Paul.

The importance of this letter of Fr. Morini has been noted by DiGiovanni in his *Archbishop Corrigan and the Italian Immigrants*, and by Peter D’Agostino, in this doctoral dissertation for the University of Chicago. But they do not present it in detail.

[as an aside: I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Peter, for the great work he did for the Servites in his doctoral dissertation and also also several articles which he published. In truth, this presentation should by right be made by Peter and not by me.]

b) The Content

Time does not permit a complete analysis and comment on the letter, but we will try to

---

9 Ellis, op. cit., p 341.

10 An English translation of this report is found in Silvano Tomasi, *For the Love of Immigrants: Migration Writings and Letters of Bishop John Baptist Scalabrini (1839-1895)*, pp. 139-159, with the twelve annexed documents on pp. 160-177. Fr. Morini’s letter is on pp. 166-170, as Document No. 7. The quotation identifying Fr. Morini’s letter as authoritative and confidential information, is found on p. 145. The document no. 7 is cited seven times in the course of the report,


12 Get full information on the Peter’s dissertation.
present a summary of the letter, with some comments, and suggestions as to the sources he is
drawing from. He first states that it is not easy to find the means to provide for the spiritual
welfare of the Italians in North America.

i) The general situation of the Italians in the United States in the view of Fr. Morini

According to Morini’s report, those immigrants who remained in the city were scattered
throughout the area. They sold fruit from carts, or had restaurants or liquor stores; others went
through alleys collecting rags, paper, and cigar butts. Still others roamed around the city and
countryside playing music and begging. Even those who did go to church, contributed very little
to the collection for they didn’t seem to realize that they had to support the priest and the church.

Those outside of cities lived in small groups, mixed with other nationalities, in such
occupations as building railroads and canals, mining coal and other minerals, and in winter they
worked for logging companies.

In general they were dirty and ignorant of the faith; some were Garibaldians who spoke
obscenities against the priests and the pope.

All of this was based on his personal experience, for he cites the experiences noted
above. He visited the Italian church in St. Louis which had to be sold. He states that he spoke
with Fr. Andreis, the pastor of the Italian parish in Baltimore who told him that without the help
of the Irish the parish was in danger of being sold, because the Italians did not contribute enough
for the support of the priest and maintenance of the church. In California, which he visited in
1886, there were many Italians who were wealthy and hundreds of families living near the church,
but attendance at Mass on Sunday was about 200 and the church was not yet painted. He
preached in Burlington, Iowa, where there were a few dozen Italian families; but only one person
came to confession. The same was the experience of Fr. Tonissi in the predominately Irish
parish in Spring Valley, Illinois. Fr. Tonissi visited all sixty Italians there, but again only one
came to confession.

Here it is interesting that Fr. Morini does not cite the example of Assumption parish in
Chicago, which seems to go contrary to the above examples. There were, by the 1880s, a
sufficiently dedicated Italian group to sponsor and assume responsibility for the “Italian church.”
It should also be noted that according to the baptismal register of Assumption church in the first
five years of the parish, 1881 to 1885, there were 804 baptisms, 15 per cent of which had non-
Italian names, mainly Irish. It would be interesting to learn how these non-Italian parishioners fit
into the “Italian” parish, and if this percentage continued beyond this first five year period.

ii) Reasons for this situation

Fr. Morini then lists two reasons which, in his opinion, were responsible for this sad
condition. First, because in the past in Italy, at least in some parts, education had been
overlooked. This observation is interesting, because reading the reports written in Italu,
especially the pamphlet by Bishop Scalabrini, one has the impression that most of the Italians
emigrating were certainly poor, but were practicing Catholics. The lack of adequate religious
formation did not seem to be a problem.

A second reason given by Fr. Morini was the indolent nature of Italians and the lack of
desire to give themselves to agriculture work or a trade. Because of this the Italians were the
only ethic group which did not have “colonies.” More about this latter. Note also that Morini’s
experience in California did not seem to fit into this picture, where Italians were in trades and
professions, and even agriculture. One might also cite the “success” of the founding of the Italian
parish of the Assumption in Chicago.

Although Morini doesn’t call it a third “reason,” one might include under this heading his
discussion of language, but we will treat it separately because of the importance Morini
attributed to it.

iii) Possible remedies

Here Fr. Morini lists two possible remedies for this very serious condition of the Italians
in America. First, committees could be formed in the port cities both in Italy and in the United
States, and he describes the composition and functions of these in some detail. Second, the
majority could be persuaded to go to rural areas and form agricultural colonies.

At this point Morini is calling not so much on his personal experience as on his experience at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore where these possibilities were discussed.
The question of the committees had been proposed first by the cardinals of Propaganda Fide and
was discussed and accepted by the American archbishops in their meeting in Rome. But after the
discussion in the council itself, the final version of the decree speaks of them in vague, generic
One of the most active of the bishops at the Baltimore council was John Ireland of St. Paul. He was one of the supporters, together with Bishop John Lancaster Spaulding of Peoria, of the Irish Catholic Colonization Association of the United States. The organizational meeting for the Association was held in Chicago 1879, under the direction of William Onahan, the prominent lay Catholic leader who had been in contact with Morini soon after Morini had come to Chicago. Thus Morini had several opportunities to learn about this Irish experimentation. No doubt it was because of his council experience that he urged Cardinal Simeoni to consult with Bishop Ireland for more details about this question, since Ireland was in Rome at that time. If Bishop Ireland were not available he suggested the name of Dennis O'Connell, the rector of the North American College in Rome. But Morini expressed also his doubts that a colonization program would be successful. In his memorandum, quoted in the report of Propaganda Fide, Bishop Ireland also seemed dubious as to the possibility of forming Italian agricultural colonies. He wrote “that the idea of forming Italian colonies, like those of the Irish, deserves serious consideration. Since the project is difficult, we should not worry to much about it in the beginning.”

iv) Language

At the end of his letter Fr. Morini mentions a “serious obstacle” to the spiritual and temporal good of Italian emigration. It is the question of language. Morini develops this theme in greater length in a postscript to his letter. Most of the immigrants, he writes, are from Genoa or Naples and speak their own dialects rather than Italian. and do not understand pure Italian well. Language is therefore not a unifying element among the Italians. He cites the example of the Irish for whom English is their native language and the Germans who learn English but have sufficient numbers so as to maintain also their own language and schools.

He presents two possibilities: first, if the immigration continues in rather large numbers, and if priests who speak the various dialects are provided, and especially if it is possible to form colonies, the Italian churches will survive. But if immigration decreases or ceases entirely, or if it is not possible to form colonies, Italian churches will become English. The young people and children born here mix with other nationalities and speak only English. He gives the example of

---

13 Tomasi, *For the Love of Immigrants*, p. 156.
Assumption Church: “Catechism is taught in Italian but very oft'n it is necessary to shift to English, since the children understand English and not Italain.” Furthermore, he adds, the parents want the children to learn English not Italian, because English is the language which they need to earn a living. He ends by saying that it is necessary for priests and religious coming to America to know English.

**Concluding remarks:**

In conclusion I would like to add two personal impressions of the “Italian problem” as seen from Italy (Bishop Scalabrini and others) and from America (Fr. Morini and the Baltimore Plenary Council).

1) First, the impression one gets from reading Scalabrini is that the Italian emigrants are certainly poor and many without formal education, but by and large they are good moral people and regular church goers. Morini, on the other hand, admitting that there are some good Italian immigrants, paints a rather different picture. They show little interest in the church, and even if they do attend Mass, they contribute little to the support of the priest and church. He also cites the “Garibaldians” who would be the anti-clerical group, not mentioned by Scalabrini. Morini seems to be saying that the real problem lies, at least in large part, in Italy not in America.

2) A second impression is that the relationship between language, patria, and religion is more pronounced in Scalabrini. So much so that it almost seems that he proposes Italian “colonies” with economic and social ties to the “Patria.” since Italy cannot have political colonies like the British and French. In one place Morini speaks of “the language, the great element of nationality which is connected so strictly with the Faith.” But he also writes that “[f]ortunately, I will say, social and commercial circumstances by their nature lead to assimilation, so that the diverse nationalities are gradually absorbed and the great American nation is formed.” In this Morini seems closer to the Americanizer position of Bishop Ireland than the more self-contained Italian colonies, which support religion, language, and patria, of Scalabrini.

Conrad M. Borntrager, OSM
Servite Historian and Archivist


582 letters and the letture on Savonarola


____ “Profilo di fra Agopstino Morini con particolare riferimento al suo carteggio (1853-1874).” *Studi Storici O.S>M.* 51 (2001): 117-185