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Community and Church: the Italian “problem” in Australia during the inter-war years

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ABSTRACT

The mass migration of Italians to Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the USA and Australia, caused a great amount of discontent in religious circles, so much so that Italian migrants have been considered a religious “problem”. One of the greatest contributors to the Italian “problem” was the folk religion of the new arrivals. They had very little or no instruction in the doctrines of the Catholic Church and their folk religion was considered a “syncretic melding of ancient pagan beliefs, magical practices and Christian liturgy”.¹

This paper will examine the Italian “problem” in Australia. It will establish that the “problem” did exist in Australia before the Second World War, a period that has been considered by scholars to be a period of non-activity and has consequently been neglected. Quite often it is believed that, due to small numbers and remote settlement patterns, Italian migrants did not pose a “real challenge” to the Catholic Church in Australia before the Second World War.²

This paper will look at the attitudes of the Australian Catholic hierarchy to Italian migrants in Australia during the inter-war years and how the Australian bishops attempted to care for Italian migrants by providing them with Italian-speaking Irish priests who, in some cases, sufficed, but were not a complete answer to the “problem”. The Italian priests who worked among Italian migrants in Australia during the 1920s were Fr Vincenzo de Francesco, Fr Severino Mambrini and Bishop Coppo. This paper will examine the methods used by these priests to bring Italian migrants back to the Church.

¹ Rudolph Vecoli, “Cult and Occult in Italian-American Culture” in *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America*, (ed.) Miller and Marzik, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1977, p.26.

² Lidio Bertelli & Robert Pascoe, “Immigrant Italians and the Australian Catholic Church: Folk Festivals and the Evil Eye in Abe Wade Ata (ed.), *Religion and Ethnic identity: an Australian Study*, Spectrum Publishers, Victoria, 1988, p. 231.

Italians had migrated to Australia in very small numbers throughout the Nineteenth Century, but it was not until the 1920s, when the USA adopted a rigid quota system, that a much larger number of Italians chose Australia as their destination.³ In the space of twelve years, the number of Italians in Australia tripled from 8,126 in 1921 to 26,756 in 1933. The majority of these Italians settled in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia.⁴ Due to this large increase in migration from Italy in the 1920s, the Italian presence became conspicuous throughout most of Australia. Anti-Italian sentiments increased considerably when Italians were employed in the mines, on the wharves and on the cane fields, since the unions, in particular, accused them of taking the jobs of Australian labourers.

The Italian presence caused tensions not only in government circles, but also in the Catholic Church. This was the first time in Australia that the Catholic Church had been faced with a community that was not Anglo-Irish and with the perceived “problem” associated with large settlements of Italians, especially in some areas of Australia.⁵ Although Australia never received the number of Italian migrants that America did, problems and attitudes that were found in America began to be similarly noticeable in Australia. In Australia, just as in the USA, the difficulty of persuading Italian migrants to maintain their faith would eventually be called the Italian “problem”.

It was not until 1939 that the term “problem” was used in Australia by B. A. Santamaria to define the lack of religious participation on the part of Italian migrants in Australia.⁶ This is quite often seen as the beginning of the Church’s involvement in the pastoral care of Italian migrants. However, the “problem” had begun almost 20 years earlier, at the beginning of the 1920s, when the number of Italian migrants arriving in Australia began to increase. Most studies on Italian migration to Australia include only a small section on Italian migrants and the Catholic Church.⁷ On the other hand, Frank Lewins and Adrian Pittarello have made important contributions to the topic, albeit in works published several decades ago, in 1978 and 1980 respectively.⁸ In more recent years a relatively small number of studies that focus more exclusively on religion and Italian migrants in Australia have emerged. These include: Anthony Cappello, “Italian Australians, the Church, War and Fascism in Melbourne 1919-1945”, Masters Thesis, Victoria University, 1999; Anthony Paganoni, *Valiant Struggles and Benign Neglect. Italians, Church and Religious*

³ James Jupp, *Immigration*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 61.

⁴ Commonwealth Census of Australia 1921 & 1933. For detailed information on Italians in Australia before the Second World War see James Jupp (gen. ed.), *The Australian people. An encyclopaedia of the nation, its people and their origins*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde NSW, 2001, pp. 486 – 494.

⁵ The Church had, of course, ministered to the Aboriginal peoples. Missions had been established in order to convert them to Christianity.

⁶ B. A. Santamaria, “The Italian Problem in Australia”, *The Australasian Catholic Record*, XVI, no. 4, October 1939, pp. 291-305.

⁷ William A. Douglass, *From Italy to Ingham: Italians in North Queensland*, University of Queensland Press, Queensland, 1995, Robert Pascoe, *Buongiorno Australia. Our Italian heritage*, Greenhouse Publications, Richmond Vic, 1987, Nino Randazzo, & Michael Cigler, *The Italians in Australia*, AE Press, Melbourne, 1987, Naomi Turner, *Catholics in Australia*, Vol. 2, Collins Dove, Victoria, 1992.

⁸ Frank Lewins, *The Myth of the Universal Church*, Australian National University, 1978; Adrian Pittarello, “*Soup Without Salt*” *The Australian Catholic Church and the Italian Migrant*, CMS, Sydney, 1980.

Societies in Diaspora: The Australian Experience from 1950 to 2000, CMS, New York, 2003; Desmond Cahill, *Missionaries on the Move: A Pastoral History of the Scalabrinians in Australia and Asia 1952-2002*, CMS, New York, 2004. There is also Pino Bosi’s book, *On God’s Command. Italian Missionaries in Australia*, published in the late 1980s, which provides a general, but unreferenced, account of the work of Italian missionary priests in Australia.⁹

The majority of the above works examine the Italian “problem” solely in the context of the period after the Second World War. Some scholars believe that the Italian “problem” did not surface in Australia until after the mass migration of the post-war period.¹⁰ However, a number of primary sources from the 1920s show that the Catholic Church in Australia recognised that the Italian “problem” did in fact exist. These include: Bishop Heavey’s letters to Propaganda Fide, as well as his diary and reports about Italian migrants living in his diocese; Fr Severino Mambrini’s report to the Apostolic Delegate on the census he conducted in the Herbert Valley; Fr Vincenzo de Francesco’s letters to his provincial about his work in Australia; Bishop Coppo’s letters and reports about his whirlwind trip around Australia. All of the above give us an insight into the Church and its dealings with Italian migrants from 1920-1927 – the first half of the inter-war years.

The above mentioned documents provide strong evidence that during the inter-war years the Catholic Church in Australia did try to implement procedures and policies to ensure that Italian migrants maintained their faith once they had arrived in Australia. More often than not the Australian bishops were prompted by the Vatican to care for Italian migrants in their diocese. They had had very little experience of caring for non-Anglo-Irish communities. The Vatican, on the other hand, had already seen the disastrous effects that migration could have on the religious lives of migrants. In short, they had seen what had happened in the USA and knew how the “problem” should be addressed: by sending abroad Italian priests.

In 1923 the Italian Catholic journal, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, reported on the great number of Italians living in Cooktown and pointed out that with time Italian priests would arrive to minister to them.¹¹ In response to the article, the Prelate for Italian migration in Rome, Mons Michael Cerretti, wrote to the Apostolic Delegate in Australia, Mons Cattaneo, asking for information on the religious situation of Italian migrants in Queensland. He also gave suggestions about the pastoral care of Italian migrants in the Vicariate of Cooktown, which was under the auspices of Bishop James Heavey.¹² He suggested that instead of the Irish Augustinians caring for Italian migrants, an Italian Augustinian should go to Australia.¹³ He wrote:

⁹ Pino Bosi, *On God’s Command. Italian Missionaries in Australia*, CIRC, Sydney, 1989.

¹⁰ Lidio Bertelli & Robert Pascoe, “Immigrant Italians and the Australian Catholic Church: Folk Festivals and the Evil Eye in Abe Wade Ata (ed), *Religion and Ethnic Identity: an Australian Study*, Spectrum Publishers, Victoria, 1988, p. 231. Naomi Turner, *Catholics in Australia, Vol. 2*, Collins Dove, Victoria, 1992; Patrick O’Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian history*, NSW, New South Wales University Press, 1985.

¹¹ *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 19 maggio 1923, fasc. 1750, p. 382 Archivio Prelato dell’Emigrazione (APE) (Italiani in Australia), Archivio Generale Scalabriniano (AGS), Roma, pos. 671 del prelado.

¹² Bishop Heavey was Vicar Apostolic 1914–1948.

¹³ Mgr. Michael Cerretti to Mgr. Bartolo Cattaneo, 15 maggio 1923, APE, AGS, pos. 671 del prelado.

Vorrei quindi pregare l’EV di sottoporre questo desiderio a SE Mgr Heavey, affinché egli stesso possa richiedere alla Curia Generalizia un Padre che possa occuparsi degli Italiani.¹⁴

It is most likely that this was the first time that Rome had discussed the care of Italian migrants in Australia and here began a struggle between the Vatican and the Irish bishops of Australia about how to care for these migrants.

In late 1924 Cardinal Van Rossum, the Prefect of Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, wrote directly to Bishop James Heavey, who had charge of the Vicariate of Cooktown in Queensland. The Cardinal said that it had come to his attention that there were a number of Italian migrants in the Bishop’s Vicariate that were without any spiritual assistance. He suggested that Bishop Heavey request some Augustinian priests from Italy to care for Italian migrants, since Bishop Heavey himself was an Augustinian.¹⁵ Bishop Heavey responded with a detailed two-page account of the strategies he had already put in place and the problems he had encountered.¹⁶ He denied that he had allowed Italian migrants to go without spiritual assistance and claimed that there were three geographical areas where Italian migrants were numerous, two of which were visited regularly by a priest who gave Italian migrants the opportunity to receive the sacraments and hear Mass. Despite his efforts and those of his priests, Bishop Heavey said that Italian migrants were not interested in religion and did not respond to any efforts made by the clergy. He had already seen the ill-fated attempt to employ an Italian priest. Fr Mambrini, a Franciscan Minor, had been working in Bishop Heavey’s Vicariate and according to Bishop Heavey “for a long time now they have turned the venerable Franciscan Friar Minor into a joke, which in one word did little or no good” (*ibid*). He, therefore, believed that Italian priests were not necessary since Italian migrants preferred to speak English and did not have any respect for Italian priests. He begged that he not be obliged to request Italian priests from his superiors (*ibid*). Cardinal Van Rossum responded that since strategies were already in place, it was not necessary to invite Italian priests to the Vicariate. However, he asked that the attempts made to help assist Italian migrants be increased.¹⁷

Bishop Heavey, like other Anglo-Irish clergy, did not hold Italian migrants in high regard when it came to religion. He continually complained about their lack of religious duty and their indifference in regard to religious matters:

Although living close to a church, they decline to hear Mass or receive the sacraments. Sometimes they make promises but very rarely keep them and, therefore, although they are in a secular sense the best citizens, sober, hard-working, [?], nevertheless they move with the speed of a beaver in their faith; having no doubt moved from the centre of Catholicism and

¹⁴ *Ibid*. “I would therefore beg His Excellency to present this desire to His Excellency Mons Heavey, so that he himself might request from the General Curia a priest who could look after the Italians”.

¹⁵ Letter: Cardinal Van Rossum to Bishop Heavey, 21/27 [?] November 1924, Diocese of Cairns Archives (DCA). Translated for the author from the Latin by Frances Conroy. All of the Bishop Heavey correspondence and reports obtained from the Diocese of Cairns Archives have been translated by Frances Conroy, whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

¹⁶ Letter: Bishop Heavey to Van Rossum, 3 February 1925, DCA.

¹⁷ Letter: Cardinal Van Rossum to Bishop Heavey, 7 April 1925, DCA.

from under the shadow of Peter, they hold nothing else much [no other opinion] towards the Church and religion except one of negligence and, let me not say it, mockery. On which account I say that very few of them are our greatest hope of making progress. I would be the last to want, for myself, Italian priests to be fetched to work among them.¹⁸

He described the circumstances of Italian migrants not attending Mass and not receiving the Sacraments as “lamentable and disgraceful”, but said that the priests were not to blame (*ibid*). Bishop Heavey perhaps thought that the problem of making Italian migrants conform to the ways of the Irish Catholics should have been easier than it was:

We have been told by the former Apostolic Delegate [Cattaneo] that we don’t understand the Italian mentality, which, perhaps is true; but Irish logic is simple and plain and so is Canon Law also (*ibid*).

For Bishop Heavey, having Italian migrants in his Vicariate was just another burden, and this attitude would not have been uncommon among many of the Anglo-Irish Bishops. He did what he considered to be appropriate to encourage them to attend Mass and the Sacraments. But he employed only superficial strategies that did not get to the bottom of the “problem”, even though he seemed to be aware of the cause of these problems.¹⁹

Not all bishops were like Bishop Heavey. The Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, was quite concerned about the spiritual welfare of Italian migrants in his Archdiocese. In 1921 an Italian Jesuit arrived in the Archdiocese of Melbourne whose primary task was to care for the parishioners of Richmond who were predominantly Australian. But it did not take long for Archbishop Mannix to realise the value of having an Italian priest living in one of his parishes. By 1922, not long after Fr de Francesco arrived in Australia, Archbishop Mannix had given him special care of the Italians of Victoria.²⁰

During his first ten months in Melbourne Fr de Francesco said and sang Mass, gave benedictions and made visits to some Italians, first accompanied by an Italian from the parish and then on his own.²¹ Even with regular visits, Fr de Francesco found persuading Italian migrants to fulfil their religious duties was quite an undertaking. He believed that Italians on the whole were very respectful people but saw their neglect of religious obligations as their greatest defect. He said that many were ignorant of their *doveri religiosi*,²² others were vagabonds, while others had arrived in Australia when they were still young and had never been encouraged to attend Mass. In addition, many men had come to Australia without their families and had intended

¹⁸ Letter: Bishop Heavey to Van Rossum, 3 February 1925, DCA.

¹⁹ In Bishop Heavey’s letter to Cardinal Van Rossum he refers to Fr Mambrini’s report on Italian migrants on the Herbert River. It is unclear if he had read the report or had merely heard about it.

²⁰ “Fr de Francesco, S. J., of Richmond, who has a particular charge of the Italian Catholics in Victoria, is now on a visit to Geelong”, *The Advocate*, 11 May 1922, p. 28.

²¹ *Lettere edificanti dei Padri della Compagnia di Gesù della provincia napoletana, 1921-1923*, Tipografia Commerciale, Naples, 1924, Italian Historical Society, Melbourne.

²² Religious duties.

to stay for only a short period of time.²³ Therefore, the absence of the close-knit family with whom religious occasions were celebrated contributed to their lack of interest in religion.

Fr de Francesco also blamed self-employment for the lack of interest Italian migrants showed towards religion. He claimed that many Italian migrants worked very hard for material benefits and did not have the time to attend Mass.²⁴ Underlying all of this was the influence of Protestantism, which he referred to as “l’ambiente pagano che spirano queste città protestanti.”²⁵ He saw overcoming Protestantism as one of his greatest challenges. Marriages between Catholics and Protestants were of enormous concern to him. He commented in one of his letters: “Sembra una disdetta, ma ho sempre parecchi matrimoni da regolare, non ostante che ne abbia regolati già un buon numero.”²⁶ He went on to say that it was difficult to convince both the husband and wife that they were in fact not married and to have them promise that they would raise their children as Catholics.²⁷ In order to persuade them to send their children to Catholic schools Fr de Francesco kept in regular contact with the family through frequent visits to the family home. By doing so, he made his presence felt and became part of each family’s life.

He found that the majority of Italian migrants had not received the Sacraments since they had left Italy twenty to thirty years earlier, and in some cases even fifty years.²⁸ As a consequence, he then began to organise devotions and the Rosary with sermons in Italian especially for Italian Catholics.²⁹ At this point he decided to send out to all Italians flyers that gave details of the upcoming devotions and religious events he was holding. He found that, although it was a laborious task, it worked quite well and, as a result, the rate of attendance increased.³⁰ In addition, Fr de Francesco had a picture of the *Vergine di Pompei* brought to Australia, presumably from Naples, as Fr de Francesco was himself a Neapolitan. The Italian community gave contributions to build a small wooden altar on which the picture could be placed. One lady even offered to pay for the frame (*ibid*). When it was ready Fr de Francesco

²³ *Lettere edificanti dei Padri della Compagnia di Gesù della provincia napoletana*, 1921-1923, Tipografia Commerciale, Naples, 1931, Archives of the Society of Jesus in Australia (Jesuits).

²⁴ *Lettere edificanti*, 1924.

²⁵ *Ibid*. “The pagan environment that these Protestant cities emanate”.

²⁶ *Ibid*. “It seems an annulment, but I always have plenty of marriages to regularise notwithstanding that I have already regularised a large number”.

²⁷ In his letter Fr de Francesco tells the story of a man, named John Antonio, whose father was Catholic and his mother Protestant: “Mi disse che il padre era uno spagnuolo di Cadice...Sposò disgraziamente una protestante, però fece battezzare i figli col rito cattolico. Ma dopo il battesimo e forse un po’ d’istruzione di catechismo la madre li aveva educati protestanti...I suoi fratelli sono tutti morti protestanti e protestanti sono pure i suoi nipoti, solo lui è stato risparmiato dalla bontà del Signore”, *Lettere Edificanti*, 1924. “He told me that his father was a Spaniard from Cadice...He unfortunately married a protestant, but he had the children baptised according to the Catholic rite. But after the baptism and perhaps a little teaching of the Catechism the mother had had them brought up as Protestants... His siblings all died Protestant and even his nephews and nieces are Protestants, only he has been saved by the will of God”.

²⁸ *Lettere Edificanti*, 1931, p. 312.

²⁹ *The Advocate*, 26 October 1922, p. 14.

³⁰ *Lettere Edificanti*, 1924.

invited all Italian migrants to a benediction at the new altar. After having sung “una canzoncina alla Madonna” the Apostolic Delegate,³¹ who was visiting Victoria, blessed the image, which was adorned with flowers and lights. The Italian Consul, Antonio Grossardi, was also in attendance with his wife and daughter. The occasion was well received by the Italian community and Fr de Francesco prayed: “La Vergine Benedetta, che sparge per tutto il mondo dal suo trono di Pompei, attiri e stringa intorno a sé tutti gl’italiani di questa Colonia e conservi nel loro cuore la Fede.”³²

Even though Fr de Francesco had never had contact with migrants before he arrived in Australia, which was quite common among Italian priests who were entrusted with the care of migrants, he realised early on that he had to find the religious strengths and weaknesses of Italian migrants. The Church in Australia had neglected them for many years and they lacked religious organisation and structure; there had been no one to remind them of their religious obligations. He was also able to give Italian migrants a style of religious devotion to which they could relate,³³ such as communal devotions to the Madonna of Pompeii, something that was missing from the Irish-Catholic way of life.

Another Italian priest who had come to Australia to join his confrères in ministering to Australian Catholics was Fr Severino Mambrini. He had been asked by the Apostolic Delegate, Mons Cattaneo, to compile a census of the Italian migrants living on the Herbert River around Ingham, Queensland.³⁴ The twelve-page report on Italian migrants and their religious habits written by Fr Mambrini is commonly used by researchers to estimate the number of Italians living in the Herbert River district, as well as their provenance and work status. The report’s main and original purpose, however, was to inform the Apostolic Delegate of the religious situation of Italian migrants in Queensland, and to offer remedies for those problems.

In his report Fr Mambrini wrote that the Italians in North Queensland were financially well off but their religious life left much to be desired. They worked long hours, in many cases more than what was allowed by the Union,³⁵ and as a consequence they had little time for their religious duties.³⁶ Furthermore religious customs were foreign to the Italian migrants:

It is very hard to say how they stand before God, because after all, the conditions of their life in Australia are all against their religious life. They come into a country which is new and strange to them – the customs, the

³¹ “A short song to the Madonna”.

³² *Lettere edificanti* 1924. “May the Blessed Virgin, who spreads throughout the world from her throne in Pompeii, draw and keep close to her all the Italians of this community and keep the Faith in their hearts”.

³³ See Bertelli, Lidio & Pascoe, Robert, “Immigrant Italians and the Australian Catholic Church: Folk Festivals and the Evil Eye” in Abe Wade Ata (ed), *Religion and Ethnic identity: an Australian Study*, Spectrum Publishers, Victoria, 1988, pp. 230-244; Carroll, Michael P., *Madonnas that Maim. Popular Catholicism in Italy since the 15th Century*, John Hopkins University Press, London, 1992; Varacalli, Joseph A., et al, *The Saints in the Lives of Italian-Americans*, Supplement to *Forum Italicum*, 1999; Wilson, Stephen, *The Magical Universe. Everyday Ritual and magic in Pre-Modern Europe*, Hambledon and London, London 2000.

³⁴ Rev. Father Mambrini, “Report of a Two Months’ Visit to the Italian Settlement of the Herbert River (Parish of Ingham)”, c.16 September 1925, Mitchell Library Sydney p. 1.

³⁵ J. M. Bertei, *Innisfail*, 1959, p. 33.

³⁶ Mambrini, Report, p. 7.

language, etc. everything is new. When they go to church they are entirely at a loss as they do not understand the sermons and they find the deportment of the people in church so different.³⁷

Italian migrants could not afford to buy “Sunday” clothes to wear to Church, which resulted in their feeling despised and humiliated (*ibid*). Anglo-Irish priests at this time were not aware of the hardships Italian migrants faced when they arrived, so there was a lack of understanding between them. When Italian migrants arrived in Australia they would not contribute to the financial support of the Church. According to Fr Mambrini, “the understanding between the priest and the Italians has been spoiled by the necessity on the part of the priest of asking Italians for money” (*ibid*).

With such a dispersed population Fr Mambrini found it hard to interest Italian migrants in religion. Italian migrants did not have any desire to read religious books and papers.³⁸ At that time the majority of Italian migrants in Australia were from lower socio-economic families, not necessarily the poorest but equally, in the main, they had a very basic education or none at all. Therefore, the reading of such material would not have assisted them in maintaining their religion. Lyn Henderson observes that Italian migrants in and around Ingham were from the rural parts of Italy, but none were teachers, priests, lawyers, academics or skilled workers.³⁹ Printed materials such as pamphlets, holy pictures, books, etc., would have provided a constant reminder of one’s religious duties, more than just when the priest knocked on the door.

Fr Mambrini faced many difficulties encouraging Italian migrants to attend to their religious obligations. Other priests who were given charge of Italian migrants had similar results because, just like the Australian bishops, they too had never been trained to deal with this “problem”. It appears from Fr Mambrini’s report that he did not offer Italian migrants any “of those devotional practices” to which they were accustomed. There is no mention of religious feasts or Italian religious observances such as offered by Fr de Francesco. The priests tried to minister to Italian migrants as if they were still in Italy, with the knowledge that they had acquired in their own ministry, which belonged to a completely different milieu. In their pastoral work in Australia they did not take into account the Italians’ experiences as migrants. It was necessary to find someone with the right experience who had ministered to Italian migrants before and knew how to draw Italians back to the Church.

While Fr Mambrini was working in Queensland many attempts were made to find a religious order that would care for Italian migrants. In 1924, not long after he began working in Queensland, Bishop Shiel of Rockhampton approached the Apostolic Delegate for approval to establish a community of Franciscans in Ingham who would care for Italian migrants.⁴⁰ Mons Cattaneo agreed to the proposal and said

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁸ *Ibid*. In 1931 20 per cent of Italians were illiterate. In 1933 43 per cent of Italians who settled in Australia could not read or write. Gianfranco Cresciani, “Italian Immigrants 1920-1945”, in Jupp, James (gen. ed.), *The Australian people. An encyclopaedia of the nation, its people and their origins*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde NSW, 2001, p. 502. By the end of the Second World War 13 per cent of Italians were illiterate, Sam Dimattina, “A priest-sociologist’s reflections on the situations of Italians and the Church”, *The Australasian Catholic Record*, vol. LVI, no. 1, January 1979, p. 25.

³⁹ Lyn Henderson, “Italians in the Hinchinbrook Shire, 1921-1939: Motives for Migration”, in *Lectures of North Queensland History*, Third Series, James Cook University, 1979, p. 200.

⁴⁰ Letter: Mons Cattaneo to Bishop Shiel, 25 September 1924, Catholic Diocese of Rockhampton (CDR); handwritten note attached to 25 September 1924 from Bishop Shiel to Mons Cattaneo, undated,

that he would write to the Cardinal Prefect of Propaganda Fide “explaining the situation to him, and asking him to use his high influence with the Superior General of the Franciscans”.⁴¹ Even though the Apostolic Delegate and Bishop Shiel did not receive a positive response from the Franciscan Fathers in 1924, they were still keen to find an order to care for the Italian migrants, which they saw as the only solution to the Italian “problem”. In 1921 Propaganda Fide offered the troubled Pallotine-run Aboriginal mission in the Kimberley, Western Australia, to the Salesians, an Italian religious order based in Turin.⁴² In 1923 the first Salesians arrived, headed by Bishop Ernesto Coppo.⁴³ Before leaving Italy Coppo had been consecrated Bishop and made Vicar Apostolic of the Kimberley.⁴⁴

It seems that the Australian bishops were quite excited that the Salesians had accepted the Kimberley Vicariate. When Bishop Coppo arrived in Australia the Australian bishops were already offering the Salesians foundations in various States. On his way from Sydney to the Kimberley, Bishop Coppo stopped in Melbourne where he met Archbishop Daniel Mannix. At a meeting with the Archbishop it was proposed that the Salesians take over the parish of Diamond Creek.⁴⁵ On his journey to the Kimberley Bishop Coppo received a telegram from Archbishop Duhig, asking him to accept a foundation in his Archdiocese.⁴⁶ Of course both offers had to be thought through and superiors informed before a decision could be made.

Given that Ernesto Coppo was a bishop, he was invited to attend the Triennial Bishops’ meeting held in Wagga Wagga in 1925. At the meeting the Apostolic Delegate, Mons. Cattaneo, presented a letter to Bishop Coppo from Cardinal Van Rossum, Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, the same Cardinal who had offered the Salesians the Kimberley Vicariate.⁴⁷ The Cardinal had written that he was concerned about the spiritual welfare of Italian migrants in Australia and was anxious that they be cared for. As we have seen this was not the first time that Cardinal Van Rossum had taken an interest in the spiritual welfare of Italian migrants. The letter prompted Bishop Coppo to raise the issue at the meeting and he also made an appeal for the formation of an organisation that would meet and care for foreign Catholic immigrants. Bishop Coppo was subsequently nominated to prepare an outline of a Missionary Society to aid migrants.⁴⁸ Dr Shiel, the Bishop of Rockhampton, also

CDR; 22 August 1927, John Maguire claims that it was “Fr Mambrini’s ambition to have Italian Franciscans ministering to the people of Italian origin in the Herbert Valley”, John P. Maguire, *Prologue: A History of the Catholic Church as seen from Townsville 1863-1983*, Church Archivists’ Society, Toowoomba, 1990, p. 167.

⁴¹ Letter: Mons Cattaneo to Bishop Shiel, 25 September 1924, CDR.

⁴² Cooper, Fr Ted, *Unless the grain falls...*, pp. 22-23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24. For more information on the work of the Salesians in the Kimberley see *Il Bollettino Salesiano*, febbraio 1923, pp. 38-40; giugno 1924, pp.156-157; settembre 1924 p. 234; febbraio 1925, p. 38; ottobre 1926, pp.263-264.

⁴⁵ Cooper, p. 31. Diamond Creek was accepted by the Salesians in 1925, p. 94.

⁴⁶ Cooper, p. 33.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁸ Letter Bishop Coppo to Fr Rinaldi, 14 April 1925, Salesian Provincial Archives, Australia (SPA).

expressed his concern for the spiritual welfare of Italian migrants and said that there was still a need for assistance to cope with the work of reaching the spiritual needs of the Italians and others who were arriving in large numbers in North Queensland.⁴⁹

Although Bishop Coppo had arrived in Australia from Italy with the intention of ministering solely to Anglo-Irish Australians and to the Aboriginal peoples, he too, like many other Italian priests who came to Australia during the inter-war years, ended up taking an active part in the spiritual care of Italian migrants in Australia. Following on from the Bishops’ meeting, the Apostolic Delegate, together with the Queensland bishops, insisted that before Bishop Coppo returned to the Salesian mission in the Kimberleys, he should visit the Italian migrants who lived in Queensland.⁵⁰ As a result, Bishop Coppo spent the next four months ministering to Italian migrants living not only in Queensland but also in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

Bishop Coppo expressed his desire to establish an association, the Italo-Australian Association, for the spiritual, moral, and economic assistance of Italian residents in Australia.⁵¹ According to Douglass, Bishop Coppo had “planned to seek out new arrivals from Italy and organise them into religious and moral societies” and had wanted to found a Catholic newspaper and schools for Italian migrants that would help them to learn English.⁵² It was reported in the *Brisbane Age* that the Association would publish a weekly newspaper called *Australia*, but it is unknown if it was ever published.⁵³ In an interview with the *Queensland Catholic Advocate*, Bishop Coppo commented:

From what I can see, the Italians here are more or less the same as in America, and I am convinced that we can make them a real asset. The first thing we have to do is to organise them into good religious and moral societies, and then teach them the laws and language of the country, and keep them attached to the Christian faith. Unless they are religious, little by little they will drift and some of them will become Socialist, Bolsheviks, and so on.⁵⁴

He also said that his aim was to set up English schools at which migrants would be taught English and to establish a weekly newspaper “to give them Australian sympathies and knowledge”.⁵⁵

Considering the short period of time between the Bishops’ meeting in Wagga-Wagga and the arrival of Bishop Coppo in Brisbane, it seems quite remarkable that he had thought of the idea of setting up an association to assist Italian migrants in

⁴⁹ Minutes of the Triennial Meeting of the Bishops held in Wagga-Wagga, 21-23 March 1925, p. 4-5, Box 135, General Files, Adelaide Catholic Archdiocesan Archives (ACAA).

⁵⁰ Letter: Bishop Coppo to Fr Rinaldi, 14 April 1925, SPA.

⁵¹ *Italo-Australian*, 16 May 1925, p. 3.

⁵² William A Douglas, *From Italy to Ingham. Italians in North Queensland*, University of Queensland Press, 1995, Queensland, p. 144.

⁵³ *The Age*: Brisbane, 16 May 1925, p. 4.

⁵⁴ *The Southern Cross*, 22 May 1925, p. 3.

⁵⁵ *The North Queensland Register*, 4 May 1925, p. 36.

Australia. However, Bishop Coppo was no stranger to working with Italians. Before he arrived in Australia he had spent over twenty years working with Italian migrants in New York where he had encountered the many problems that they faced in a new country.⁵⁶ It is most likely that the *Italo-Australian Association* that Bishop Coppo established in Australia was based on a mutual aid society called the *Holy Name Society*, which had over two million members in America,⁵⁷ one that he and two other Salesians had founded in New York during their ministry to Italian migrants.⁵⁸

In a letter to Fr Peter Ricaldone, a Salesian, Bishop Coppo expressed his regret for the religious situation of Italian migrants in Australia. He claimed that their spiritual well-being was urgent and that they needed to be taken care of, otherwise they would be lost forever to the Church. From his visits Bishop Coppo found that the Italian migrants who were recent arrivals still had a strong faith, however “quasi tutti corrono a gran carriera verso l’indifferentismo”.⁵⁹ This was especially the case in Ingham, despite the efforts of Fr Mambrini and Fr Kelly to encourage Italians to attend Mass and receive the sacraments.⁶⁰ Bishop Coppo observed that there was a great need for Italian priests to provide spiritual care for Italian migrants:

Nel distretto di Innisfail trovai due sacerdoti Agostiniani, di cui uno parla poco italiano ed ha ottima volontà. Quanto ho detto per il distretto di Ingham va ripetuto con maggior ragione per quello di Innisfail, dove urge specialmente la presenza di almeno un altro sacerdote italiano, perché non basta che il sacerdote conosca l’italiano, ma deve conoscere bene il carattere e l’indole degli italiani e possa visitarli spesso per richiamarli alla fede.⁶¹

A grave concern for Bishop Coppo was that the children of Italian migrants were not being properly instructed in the Catholic faith and that they would grow up “assolutamente pagani”.⁶² He wrote: “In gran parte continueranno a farsi chiamare cattolici, ma i loro figli non sapranno neppur più che cosa significhi tale parola”.⁶³ He blamed this on there not being any Catholic schools and, as a solution, he suggested

⁵⁶ *The Italo-Australian*, 2 May 1925, p. 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22 May 1925, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Michael Mendl, “Founding the Salesian Work in New York”, *Journal of Salesian Studies*, Spring 2000, vol. XI, no. 1, p. 108.

⁵⁹ Copia della Relazione presentata da S. E. Mgr. Coppo al Delegato Apostolico Mgr. Cattaneo, 1925, SPA, p. 211. “almost all are running headlong into indifferentism”.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 210. Bishop Coppo writes in his report that no more than five per cent of Ingham’s Italian migrants attended Mass and in Innisfail no more than two per cent.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 211. “In the district of Innisfail I found two Augustinian priests, one of whom speaks a little Italian and is full of enthusiasm. What I said about the district of Ingham, there is all the more reason for repeating it in the case of Innisfail, where another Italian priest is vital, because it is not sufficient for a priest to know Italian, but he must know well the character and temperament of the Italians and be able to visit them often to call them back to the faith”.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 210. “absolutely pagan”.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 211. “Largely they will continue to call themselves Catholics, but their children will not even know what that word means”.

that Italian priests visit schools to teach the children. In the case of Ingham he recommended that a school be established at Halifax and one in Seymour with a bus that would take the children to and from school.

The majority of people who came in contact with Bishop Coppo held him in high regard, especially Fr Mambrini who had great admiration for him. In a letter to the Apostolic Delegate, Fr Mambrini said that nobody had done as much for the Italians as Bishop Coppo, and he even suggested to the Apostolic Delegate that a way be found to keep him in Queensland.⁶⁴ Indeed, Bishop Coppo would have liked to continue his work among Italian migrants and give up his mission in the Kimberley where he believed the efforts of the Salesians were wasted:

I get the temptation to observe that my presence there [in the Kimberley] is much less useful than being around those poor immigrants who insist that I should stay in their midst.⁶⁵

He visited Melbourne in 1925 for approximately two months and preached a two-week mission to the Italian migrants assisted by Fr de Francesco.⁶⁶ It was during his stay in Melbourne in 1925 that Archbishop Mannix asked him if he would remain in Melbourne as an Auxiliary Bishop “to direct all missionary work, particularly for the good of the Italian migrants Australia-wide”.⁶⁷ In addition, Archbishop Mannix was willing to offer any form of assistance necessary to persuade Bishop Coppo to take up the offer. Even Cardinal van Rossum was keen for Bishop Coppo and the Salesians to hand back their mission in the Kimberley to the Pallotines so that they, the Salesians, could put all of their energy into caring for the Italians.⁶⁸ Bishop Coppo himself was in fact quite keen for the Salesians to pull out of their mission in Western Australia. In a letter to his Superior he wrote: “I am equally sure that you will find no difficulty in believing that I see no future for us in the Kimberley”.⁶⁹

It seems that the reason for Bishop Coppo’s visit to Italian settlements in Queensland, Melbourne and Sydney was firstly to assess the possibility of the Salesians taking over the Vicariate of Queensland, which was to be created for them, and secondly to consider the option of the Salesians ministering to Italian migrants.⁷⁰ The care of Italian migrants was on the mind of many bishops in Queensland, who decided that a permanent arrangement needed to be made for the spiritual care of Italian migrants in that State. The opportunity of having Bishop Coppo work amongst Italian migrants was too good for the Australian bishops to lose. He had been a priest for quite some time and had the title of Vicar General, he had worked with Italian migrants in the USA and, more importantly, he believed in the need to assimilate Italian migrants, which was very appealing to the Anglo-Irish Bishops.

⁶⁴ Letter: Fr Mambrini to the Apostolic Delegate, 14 July 1925, SPA.

⁶⁵ Letter: Bishop Coppo to Fr Ricaldone, 30 June 1925, SPA.

⁶⁶ Copia della Relazione, p. 1, SPA.

⁶⁷ Letter: Bishop Coppo to Fr Rinaldi, 14 April 1925, SPA.

⁶⁸ Cooper, p. 80.

⁶⁹ Letter: Bishop Coppo to Fr Rinaldi, 14 April 1925, SPA.

⁷⁰ Letter: Bishop Coppo to Fr Rinaldi, 3 December 1925, SPA.

Not long after he returned to the Kimberley from his trip around Australia Bishop Coppo wrote, once again, to Fr Ricaldone about the proposal made to him by the Apostolic Delegate to create a new Vicariate in Queensland and give the Kimberley Vicariate back to the Pallotines.⁷¹ In 1926 the Procurator General of the Salesians wrote to Propaganda Fide asking about the historical, political and religious situation of the Queensland Vicariate. In the report sent to the Salesian Procurator by Propaganda Fide it was estimated that there were 40,000 Italian Catholics living in Queensland *alone* who received very little spiritual assistance.⁷² It is no wonder that the Vatican was so apprehensive and insisted that something be done. However, the Vatican’s estimation was completely wrong.⁷³ The Vatican report went on to say that the Bishops of Queensland supported the proposal that the Vicariate of Queensland be handed over to a religious Congregation and that the Vicar Apostolic live in Ingham, “which is central both for the Italian and native people”.⁷⁴ However, considering the failure in the Kimberley Region Bishop Coppo was not keen on taking over another mission for the Aboriginal peoples. Nevertheless, by 1926 rumours were spreading that the Holy See had given permission for the Salesians to move to Queensland.⁷⁵

Bishop Coppo had to seek permission for the venture from his superiors in Turin. But he and his confrères in the Kimberley were kept waiting for a reply about the future of the Salesians in Australia, despite the efforts of Bishop Coppo who continually wrote to them asking for a decision to be made. It took approximately seven months before Bishop Coppo received permission to go to Italy so that he could put his case before his Superiors and Propaganda Fide. Fr Ted Cooper, who wrote the history of the troubled Salesian Kimberley mission, notes that there are no records of the meeting that took place, so we do not know how events unfolded.⁷⁶ After hearing Bishop Coppo’s story, the Superiors decided that the Salesians would withdraw from the Kimberley Region and hand it back to the Pallotines and not take up a Vicariate in Queensland. Bishop Coppo resigned as Vicar Apostolic of the Kimberley and went to America for some years before returning to Italy, where he died in Ivrea in 1948.

Despite Bishop Coppo and the Salesians not taking over the Vicariate of Queensland, the Apostolic Delegate still saw fit that some Salesian Fathers set up in Queensland to minister to the Italians. In a letter to Bishop Shiel, Mons Cattaneo wrote:

Now that the Salesians Fathers of Don Bosco have got a solid footing in Australia, a few fathers of their Institute could easily be obtained for this purpose for which, I might say, they have really specialised. Their splendid achievements in the Argentine and in the United States especially, where they have made the Italian immigrants excellent Catholics and good and loyal subjects of their adopted country, is a strong

⁷¹ Cooper, p. 86. Letter: Coppo to Rinaldi, 3 December 1925, SPA.

⁷² Commonwealth Census 1933.

⁷³ According to the 1933 Commonwealth Census, in 1921 the total number of Italians living in Australia was 8, 135. By 1933 the number had risen to 26, 756.

⁷⁴ Letter Fr Francis Marchetti-Selvaggini to Fr Francis Tomasetti, 19 February 1926, SPA.

⁷⁵ Letter: Fr Cerutti to Fr Ricaldone, 20 February 1926, SPA.

⁷⁶ Cooper, pp. 94 - 95.

guarantee that they would be successful also in North Queensland. If you could see your way clear to entrust to the Salesians a district, I think that the serious problem that has been occupying our minds for so many years would be easily solved.⁷⁷

He believed that only Italian priests would be able to do this and tried to persuade the Queensland bishops to employ only Italian priests in the spiritual care of Italian migrants:

It is an established fact that for religious activities amongst them to be successful, priests of their own nationality are required. Other priests speaking Italian, however zealous and efficient, can hardly understand their character and win their confidence.⁷⁸

After the Kimberley mission was handed back to the Pallotines in February 1928, the remaining Salesians concentrated their efforts in Melbourne where they already had a house, with the result that the idea of the Salesians going to Queensland was no longer pursued.⁷⁹ It was not until 1945 that the Capuchins, the first religious order whose main task it was to minister to Italian migrants, arrived in Queensland.

The mid-1920s marked the beginning of the pastoral care of Italian migrants in Australia. The Triennial Bishops’ Meeting in Wagga Wagga in 1925 was the first time that the Australian bishops together discussed the spiritual care of Italian migrants, which suggests that they realised that there was a “problem”, although, to what extent the bishops realised that the Italian presence in Australia was a religious “problem” is unknown. One can conclude, in any case, that the Australian Catholic hierarchy became aware of the need for Italian priests to minister to Italian migrants in Australia from in the mid-1920s.

In many instances the support Italian migrants received from local bishops throughout the 1920s was varied. In reality, the Catholic Church in Australia did not have enough resources to care for both Anglo-Irish and Italian Catholics and some bishops even feared an Italian take-over if they were to invite Italian priests into their parishes. Even with visits from an Italian priest, Italian migrants still lacked interest in religion. It was not necessarily the Church’s fault, because as we can see it did try to encourage Italian migrants to participate in religious life, even if at times it was prompted by the Vatican and ministered in an Anglo-Irish way. The success of Italian priests came down to the presence of an Italian “community” into which the Church could penetrate. In some instances a “community” had to be built.

The next step, as the Vatican knew, was to have an order of Italian priests who would care for the Italian migrants living in Australia, instead of individual Italian priests from various orders. But, due to factors beyond their control, it was impossible to realise this until after the Second World War.

⁷⁷ Letter: Mons Cattaneo to Bishop Shiel, 22 August 1927, CDR.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* Bishop Heavey was most probably referring to this comment by the Apostolic Delegate when he said, “We have been told by the former Apostolic Delegate [Cattaneo] that we don’t understand the Italian mentality, which perhaps is true; but Irish logic is simple and plain and so is Canon Law also”. See footnote 29.

⁷⁹ Cooper, p. 100.

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