

## Abstract

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

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”.<sup>1</sup> They had a sense of awe, fear and reverence for the supernatural and anything that happened in their lives was attributed to divine intervention. This way of thinking was entirely out of place in the new land and was frowned upon by the Anglo-Irish clergy.

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.<sup>2</sup> In 1939 B. A. Santamaria published an article entitled “The Italian Problem in Australia”, which is usually seen as the

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

beginning of the Italian “problem” in Australia and the Church’s dealings with Italian migrants.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will look at the attitudes of the Australian Catholic hierarchy to Italian migrants in Australia during the inter-war years. Some Australian bishops did not take kindly to the religious practices of Italian migrants and considered them to be a lost cause, believing that they would not be able to bring them back to the true faith. On the other hand there were other Australian bishops who were more sympathetic to the religious problems of Italian migrants. This paper will look at 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”. Consequently Italian priests who had come to Australia to minister to Anglo-Irish Catholics were asked to assist their co-nationals. The two Italian priests who worked among Italian migrants in Australia during the 1920s were Fr Vincenzo de Francesco and Fr Severino Mambrini. They ministered to Italian migrants in Victoria and Queensland respectively. Their ministry to Italian migrants will be analysed.

Despite the hard work of Frs de Francesco and Mambrini, many Italian migrants were still without spiritual assistance. It was during the 1920s that the Vatican realised that the two above-mentioned priests were not sufficient to care for Italian migrants dispersed throughout Australia. The Vatican, having seen the situation in the USA, was quite conscious that Italian migrants in Australia were being left spiritually desolate and began to take matters into its own hands. The Vatican saw that there

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<sup>3</sup> B. A Santamaria, “The Italian Problem in Australia”, *The Australasian Catholic Record*, XVI, no. 4, October 1939, pp. 291-305.

needed to be a more co-ordinated and centralised effort to care for Italian migrants throughout Australia, preferably by a religious order that would dedicate itself to caring for Italian migrants. Already present in Australia were the Salesians, headed by Bishop Ernesto Coppo, who in 1923 had come to take over the Pallotine mission for the Aboriginal peoples in the Kimberley, Western Australia. Considering that, prior to his arrival in Australia, Bishop Coppo had spent 20 years ministering to Italian migrants in New York, it was no surprise that the Vatican insisted that the Australian bishops ask Bishop Coppo to attend to the spiritual needs of Italian migrants in Australia. This was the first time in Australia that there was an organised attempt to care for Italian migrants in Australia.

This paper will examine the methods used by Bishop Coppo to bring Italian migrants back to the Church. The Australian bishops were so pleased with his ministry that many offers were put forward to encourage him to continue his work among the Italian migrants rather than go back to the Kimberley. Since the Salesian mission in the Kimberley was not very going very well, the offers were very appealing, but the fate of the work of Bishop Coppo and his fellow Salesians in Australia lay with the Salesian superiors in Rome. The final outcome of this situation and its implications will be explored.