James Robb has covered religion as a journalist for more than 15 years. He also produces videos from his base in Frederick, Maryland.

The Scalabrinian Fathers

Catholic Apostles to the World's Immigrants

By James S. Robb

Persons closely following the immigration debate may be struck by how often they come across the name of the Center for Migration Studies, of Staten Island, New York. Led by the ubiquitous Father Lydio Tomasi, and founded by his tireless brother Father Silvano Tomasi, natives of northeast Italy, the center functions as a think tank supporting scholarly research and public advocacy on immigration issues.

However, fewer know about the center's sponsors, a Roman Catholic community known as the Scalabrinians. This specialized religious society is dedicated solely to aiding immigrants and their causes. With its corps of more than 600, mostly Italian-born, priests and brothers around the world — 200 in the U.S. alone — the Scalabrinian Fathers are well-positioned to influence the immigration debate for years to come.

Catholics Respond To Immigration

One reason for the Roman Catholic Church's remarkable success over the centuries has been its near-inexhaustible adaptability to new social and political challenges.

Although the church's responses to perceived social problems often seem idiosyncratic to outsiders, it does seem to respond, sometimes in dramatic fashion. The most usual method is to create a whole new unit within the church to address a particular need.

The Missionaries of St. Charles—popularly known as the Scalabrinian Fathers—take this religious specialization to its limits. The whole reason for this society of "religious" (priests and unordained lay "brothers" who take special vows) is to aid immigrants and the cause of immigration around the world. They have done this successfully for over 100 years.

Best known in the U.S. for their oft-quoted, well-published Center for Migration Studies, the Scalabrinians have occupied a leading role in the ongoing national discussion about immigration. The Tomasi brothers, highly educated, intellectual priests with an activist bent, have been the driving force of the center since 1964, when Silvano founded the organization. After Silvano resigned to work on immigration issues for the U.S. Catholic Conference in Washington, D.C., Lydio took over, and continues today.

"The center tries to be as objective as possible," states Silvano Tomasi. "We start from this premise. It's a social fact that there are almost 20 million people living in this country legally who were born in another part of the world. This is not our [center's] decision.[1]

The center does not view itself so much as an advocate of high levels of immigration as it does a promoter of balance and fairness. Although Tomasi says "everybody agrees that immigration has been good for America," he does not object if the U.S. decides to lower immigration quotas. "The issue is the good management of immigration, taking into account all factors," he says.

But the center, as a think-tank and publisher, is merely a small part of the Scalabrinians' work in the United States. According to Father Gianni (pronounced "Johnny") Agostinelli, editor of the society's U.S. journal *Scalabrinian*, that work is very broad and keeps getting broader. With a presence in nearly 30 nations, the reach of this religious society is very long indeed.[2]

Deep Roots In Italy

The origin of the Scalabrinian Fathers lies in Italy in the years after 1870, when a unified Italian state had been hammered together out of dozens of city-states and principalities. The unification left a great deal of acrimony, political unrest, and economic dislocation in its wake. One major problem was the hostility which developed between the Catholic Church and the Italian state. The Vatican had not been merely a religious headquarters incidentally located in Rome. The Holy See had for many centuries held title to numerous of the small states making up the Italian peninsula. The new Kingdom of Italy had seized control of those fiefdoms, creating much animosity in the church. Perhaps even more important to the Vatican was the anti-clerical mood which dominated the government. Many Vatican officials belonged to a movement known as the "Intransigents," that is, Catholics who refused any dealings with the new government. For a number of years Italian Catholics were forbidden to vote in state elections.

On top of this poisonous political atmosphere was the great, crushing poverty of the new nation. Things were so bad politically and economically that many Italians felt compelled to leave, and were leaving in great numbers. Between the years 1880-1920, 4.5 million Italians immigrated to the United States, a vast exodus exceeding biblical proportions.[3] Although about half a million eventually returned to the motherland, the others put a sizable hole in Italy's 1881 population of 28,260,000.[4]

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Enter a priest named Giovanni Battista Scalabrini (John Baptist Scalabrini), an industrious and devoted young pastor who came from an outstanding middle class family from the northern Italian province of Lombardy. Scalabrini attended seminary, was ordained in 1863, had a stint as a teacher, then was assigned to be a parish priest in Como in 1870.

Although emigration from Italy had not quite reached flood stage yet, many of his parishioners were already beginning to leave, especially for America. These individuals struck Scalabrini as being sheep going to slaughter. They knew no English, had no money, and were often preyed upon by unscrupulous emigration agents from their homeland (the *coyotes* of their day).

Moreover, since the American Catholic Church was Irish-American dominated and English-speaking, he feared his people would lose their faith in the new surroundings. Scalabrini decided the church could and should help resettle its migrating members. His first idea was to write letters of introduction and recommendation for his people preparing to leave. This practice gave the immigrants some standing with priests in America.

In 1876 Scalabrini was appointed bishop of Piacenza, where his social activism came into full flower. Shortly after his installation, the new bishop undertook a rigorous tour of his diocese's many parishes. He was appalled to learn that nearly 28,000 out of the original 200,000 parishioners of his diocese had already emigrated. Fourteen percent!

Worried about the drain of quality people from Italy, and even more concerned about what fate the émigrés would find on the other side of the ocean, Bishop Scalabrini approached the problem two ways. First, he issued a decree requiring his pastors to discourage Catholics from emigrating. Second, if they insisted on leaving, the priests should provide letters of introduction for them to ease their path.

In the next few years, while emigration continued to increase in the face of continued Italian poverty, the bishop involved himself in several large projects to help the poor. Scalabrini established a society to aid the *mondine*, impoverished women harvesting rice in the paddies of northern Italy. He also opened an institute for the deaf and mute in his diocese. During the famine year of 1879, he turned his episcopal residence into a soup kitchen, dishing out 4,000 bowls of soup each day, selling his horses and even a bejeweled cup, a gift of the pope, to keep the soup kettles boiling. But the immigration question kept preying on his mind.

He described coming across a group of America-bound emigrants at the Milan train station one day and being struck by their pitifully haggard appearance. He wrote:

> *Not without tears they bid farewell to their native village, to which many sweet memories bound them. But they were disposed to leave their country without regret, since they did not know it save under the hateful guise of conscription and the tax collector, and since for one who is disinherited the fatherland is the land that gives him bread, and yonder, far far away they hoped to find it. … Faced by such a sad state of things, I have often asked myself: how can one remedy such a situation?*[5]

One decision he made was that the outward flow of Italians might not be such a bad thing after all. Like Mexican politicians today, he began to view immigration as a necessary safety valve to help both the emigrants and those left behind. He also noted Italy had no foreign colonies where its citizens could go, so North and South America were the logical destinations. (Partially through his public writings, this view of immigration was adopted by the Italian government as well.)

In 1886, Scalabrini made contact with a former student, Father Francesco Zaboglio, who was also very concerned about the plight of Italian emigrants. Zaboglio's family had themselves emigrated to Wisconsin, and he urged the bishop to take leadership nationally in Italy in order to aid the immigrants. Seeing no practical alternative, Scalabrini decided to try.

In January, 1887, the bishop wrote to the appropriate officials in the Vatican, asking that he be allowed to form a society of Italian missionary priests whose sole purpose would be to help Italians leaving the country to enter and adapt to New World societies.[6] The initial response from Rome was encouraging, so he wrote up a detailed program for his initiative.

Noting that neither the government nor the church had extended itself to help emigrants, he suggested his missionary society would have five assignments: (1) protect emigrants from disreputable emigration agents; (2) open offices in the U.S. to help settle immigrants upon arrival, including attempting to find jobs; (3) provide material aid during passage and afterwards in case of emergency; (4) fight the growing white slavery and prostitution traffic; and, (5) provide religious guidance every step along the immigrant's path.

Scalabrini took strong issue with his church's "Intransigents" by urging that his society be allowed to establish official relations with the Italian and American governments. This was the only way to help root out exploitation by the emigration agents, stop white slavery, and bring order to the whole chaotic process.

In a significant point, Scalabrini argued that the

immigrants should be urged to congregate in a few large "colonies" rather than scattering upon arrival, so that the priests could help them and they could help each other. Moreover, Italians from the various, mutually antagonistic, provinces must be convinced to forget their regional differences and work together. The pope, an admirer of Scalabrini, approved the plan with some modifications, and the Missionaries of St. Charles, as they were officially known, were launched.

Scalabrini recruited for his new congregation (the Catholic term for a society of "religious" — vow-taking priests or nuns — sometimes called an "order") extremely dedicated men determined to live out their lives in foreign lands, ministering to their people. Scalabrinian priests have no property at all. Any salary they earn as parish priests, etc., has to be returned to the congregation for its missionary work. Further, they are trained to see themselves as fellow migrants and to live like the people with whom they work. Each is expected to speak several languages.

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This strict regime has never seemed to deter volunteers. Although the Scalabrinian Fathers have not been immune to the world-wide crisis in new priest recruitment, they have managed to keep their numbers steady, with more than 600 members. Many other "religious" congregations have seen their numbers plummet.

With the first missionary priests joining his cause, the bishop opened houses in New York and major Italian ports and established lay-led societies of sympathetic Catholics to provide material aid. The first Scalabrinian assigned to the port city of Geneo was Father Maldotti, a remarkable man, typical perhaps of the Scalabrinians. So protective was he of the naive emigrants moving through the port city that he personally met every train, the better to escort emigrants past unscrupulous innkeepers, ticket agents, and the like.[7] At the other side of the ocean other priests were soon stationed to provide immediate help and guidance to the newcomers. Before long, priests also sailed with many of the ships to help in the event that sickness or death struck en route.

Although material help has always been one priority for the Scalabrinians, of equal concern has been preventing the disorientation of adjusting to a new society from destroying the immigrants' faith. As the society grew in number, Scalabrini assigned many of them to found Italian-speaking Catholic churches in America. The first began in Chinatown, Manhattan. Others were established in New York, Rhode Island, the upper Midwest, and other centers of Italian immigration. The Scalabrinian priests performed this work under the immediate supervision of the local American bishop, so conflict with the U.S. Catholic establishment was avoided.[8]

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Eventually, Scalabrinians were administering scores of Italian immigrant churches in America. Bishop Scalabrini, ever energetic, visited many of these new churches personally in 1901. He also traveled to South America to inspect the fast-growing work there. During his U.S. tour, Scalabrini met with President Theodore Roosevelt in the White House. The president heaped a good deal of praise on the Italian immigrants in general and on the Scalabrinians in particular. They discussed several crimes committed by Italian immigrants, although Roosevelt said the Italians were no worse than other groups. Scalabrini explained that his countrymen were often provoked by their ill-treatment in America, and related what he had told the president:

> *I cited an incident of which I had been an eyewitness at Ellis Island just a few weeks before. At Ellis Island I had seen a guard strike an immigrant across the legs as if he had been an animal and not a man. The blow had been dealt by one who was supposed to uphold the law and protect it. The immigrant had turned against his tormentor and had slapped him soundly, adding the remark that it was luck he had no weapon handy. I admitted to the President that the man had done wrong in lifting up his hand against a duly-elected officer of the law, but, I inquired, did the President consider it correct for that officer to treat a humble immigrant in such a way? The President deplored the occurrence....*[9]

The ethnic churches created by the Scalabrinian Fathers often grew quite large and prosperous, serving as social centers for the immigrant community. It seems they did help to smooth the transition to life in America. Today, many of the parishes are English-speaking. Still others have switched to Spanish, as immigrants from Latin America have become more numerous than those from Europe. Of course, parishes "die out sometimes because people move," explains Father Agostinelli.

After the great wave of migration ending in 1924, the Scalabrinians turned their attention to building

institutions. Many fine church buildings, a string of retirement homes (some quite large), publications, and, of course, the influential Center for Migration Studies.

Evolution of the Scalabrinian Mission

As times have changed, so has the society's mission. No longer does it restrict itself to helping Italian immigrants. The goal now is to work for the poorest of the world's immigrants, no matter where they are from or where they are going. Not to say that Italians have stopped coming to the U.S. — in the quarter century ending in 1976, more than half a million new Italian immigrants poured into America. The trend, if anything, may be increasing.

"According to some statistics," said Father Agostinelli, "Italians made up the biggest illegal group immigrating to the New York area last year." He said he believed 30,000 illegal Italian immigrants arrived in the New York City metropolitan area in 1994 (out of Italy's 1994 population of 57,200,000[10]). But though they are still numerous, Italians are now far from the poorest immigrants.

The work of the Scalabrinians now is conducted in the Philippines, Mexico, Colombia, all over Europe — about 30 countries in all. Interestingly enough, although the focus of the work has shifted from Italian immigrants, most of the Scalabrinian Fathers still hail from the Italian peninsula. Of the 200 Scalabrinians in the U.S., for example, about 160 of them were born in Italy.

New strategies and tactics abound today in this most creative and industrious organization. "In the last 25 years we have slowly been becoming an international community," Tomasi explains. Italian-born priests are now being joined by volunteers from several other nations.

The Fathers are now busily opening new semi-naries around the globe (they already have several) with the unique aim of training priests from sending countries to come and minister to their people in immigrant-accepting nations like the United States. Since the recent U.S. occupation of Haiti returned order to that land, for example, the Scalabrinians have busied themselves establishing a new seminary there. The idea is to repeat the Italian process, this time making Haitian priests available and commissioning them to come to the U.S. and Latin America to give spiritual and temporal aid to new arrivals.

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Other Scalabrinian-sponsored projects are ethnic newspapers in various North American cities, a mission to farm workers in Florida, and short-term mission projects staffed by laypersons. A comparable congregation of nuns calling themselves the Apostles of the Sacred Heart has been an outgrowth of the Scalabrinian mission. Lately, a group of contemplative missionaries has been added.

Perhaps taking their cue from the founding bishop himself, the society has remained committed to political discussion, at least to the extent that it affects immigration issues. Sometimes, however, society members will mark out broader, "social justice" issues to pursue. Like Scalabrini, today's Fathers do not shy away from tackling the secular states in which they operate. "We have to evolve according to the needs of migration," says Agostinelli.

According to *Scalabrinians* magazine, the Fathers "labor on a `grass-roots' level with those who suffer the trauma of migration and on the level of government and scholarship to sensitize society to the needs of those displaced and uprooted."[11]

The congregation's work has deeply influenced the attitude of the larger Catholic Church. Dozens of official church statements issued from the 1950s until the present illustrate the church's commitment to the rights of immigrants, including the right to emigrate freely. Beginning with the 1952 document, "Exsul Familia," the Vatican has increasingly emphasized the duty of prosperous nations to accept immigrants from overcrowded, poor countries.[12] This pro-immigration stance seems more dogmatic than the one adopted by the Center for Migration Studies, which is careful to maintain a certain academic neutrality.

As to the good bishop himself, he is far from forgotten. Since his death in 1905, his followers have worked steadily to convince the church to recognize Scalabrini as a saint. The first steps have been taken, and his indefatigable followers predict ultimate success. ■

NOTES

[1] Interview with Father Silvano Tomasi, March 16, 1995. Most of the information in this article concerning the center's purpose and viewpoint is derived from this interview. Tomasi is currently on special assignment in Rome.

[2] Interview with Father Gianni Agostinelli, March 10, 1995. The primary information concerning the administration of the Scalabrinians and their present mission objectives was supplied by Father Agostinelli.

[3] Tomasi, Rev. Silvano, "Italian Catholics in America," in *Catholics in America: 1776-1976* (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1976), pp.95-96.

[4] A wealth of population data can be found in B.R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics: 1750-1970* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1976). This source lists Italy's 1901 population as 32,475,000, an increase of 14 percent from the 1881 figure, despite the heavy migrant outflow.

[5] Quoted in Edward E. Stibili, "The Interest of Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini of Piacenza in the `Italian Problem,'" *The Religious Experience of Italian Americans*, Silvano M. Tomasi, editor (Staten Island, NY: The American Italian Historical Association, 1975).

[6] For a detailed discussion of the formation of the Scalabrinians, see Stibili, *op cit.*

[7] An excellent (though highly Catholic) biography of Bishop Scalabrini with a good account of his activities is *Father to the Immigrants* by Icilio Felici (New York: P.J.Kennedy & Sons, 1955), translated by Carol Della Chiesa.

[8] Brief histories of several of these Italian-speaking parishes can be found in Olha Della Cava, *A Guide to the Archives* (Staten Island, NY: Center For Migration Studies, 1979), Vol.III.

[9] *Father to the Immigrants*, p.195.

[10] This statistic is found in *World Population Data Sheet: 1994* (Population Reference Bureau: Washington, DC, 1994).

[11] Unsigned statement, *Scalabrinians*, Vol.14, No. 3/4, 1993.

[12] A good overview of modern Roman Catholic teaching on immigration is found in Gianfausto Rosoli and Lydio F. Tomasi, "The Attitude of Rich Western Christian Societies Toward Immigrants," *The Dignity of the Despised of the Earth*, Jacques Phier and Dietmar Mieth, editors (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), pp.100-103.

[Editor's Note: Readers may wish to inform themselves on the little-known "Minister of Religion" clause in U.S. immigration law, under which special provisions are made for admitting religious workers. See "The Minister of Religion Clause" by James Dorcy, **THE SOCIAL CONTRACT**, Vol. III, No. 2, Winter 1992-93, pp.126-127.]