

1914

# Evangelizing the Italians in America

---

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/47154>

*Downloaded from DSpace Repository, DSpace Institution's institutional repository*

This is  
fronies  
'a'u

111

\*\*\*\*\*  
\*  
\* Evangelizing the Italians \*  
\* in America. \*  
\* A Thesis \*  
\* by \*  
\* Constantine M. Panunzio. \*  
\*  
\*\*\*\*\*

## EVANGELIZING THE ITALIANS IN AMERICA.

Among the many problems with which Protestant Christianity finds itself face to face in America, there is none which is more important and which demands more immediate attention than the problem of evangelizing the immigrant population.

"The very fact that there are some forty-five millions of people who are of foreign birth or parentage is in itself a tremendous challenge to American Christianity. Most of these aliens come from sections of countries where the standards of life, as well as the standards of living, are far inferior to those of America. The problem is plainly this, either America will lift these people or they will drag her down.

As by far the largest number of the immigrants come from Roman Catholic countries, it is fitting at the outset to ask the question; What must the attitude of Protestantism be, if it is to reach these people? What must be its attitude toward Romanism? History answers, Protestantism never can win Romanism by religious animosity and intolerance. All along its path history has posted warnings. Driven by centuries of hatred and mean persecutions, such as are portrayed in Browning's "Holy Cross Day", the Jews have become almost impervious to the onset of Christianity. Western antagonism in the early centuries drove the Eastern Church to organize and thence forth to remain independent of the Western Church.

The Poles are most devoted to the Roman Church. There was once a free Poland. But Russia and Prussia divided it in 1773, and much property was confiscated. Rome alone stood as the champion of Poland's liberty. When both Russia and Prussia were determined to push down the throats of the Poles the state religions, the Polish people clenched their teeth and drew nearer to Rome. They have never forgotten it. And what shall we say of the Irish? Protestantism has made him the bigoted Romanist he is. Centuries of tyrannical English rule have done more to Romanize Ireland than ten thousand "Roman Bulls" could have done in twice the time. The struggle now being waged over "Home Rule" has an indelible religious background. Humanity is all of one brand. Has not even Puritanism, with its fine moral power, caused much mischief, because it insisted that everyone should eat of its honey? Has not that very fact prepared New England for all kinds of "isms", as well as Romanism?

No, intolerance and bigotry is not the Divine plan to win peoples from error. The history of the world at many places points its finger of warning to those who would conquer by force. Will not the donkey kick if you prick him? Can he be blamed? Shall Protestantism in America foster the hardening of the shell of bigotry? Did not even Napoleon acknowledge his inability to win the world by force?

Did not Christ command Peter to put up the sword into the sheath? True, He also cleansed the Temple, but was not that the exception rather than the rule of His life and teaching?

What, then, must be the attitude of Protestantism toward Catholicism in America? If Protestantism is the purest form of Christianity as we believe, it is its place to take a positive stand in purifying Romanism. Thus far Protestantism has been satisfied with an occasional attack on the methods of Rome. It is time for Protestantism to unite. Let it cease ranting. Let it organize for a purely educational campaign. Let it, first of all, in a calm spirit educate its own people on the value of the position and teaching of Protestantism. Then, going still further, let the Protestant Church invade the very rank of Roman Catholicism to love and not to hate, to win and not to antagonize. Robert Speer says, "our Lord has taught us that the way to reach the best in men and to win them to their best, to the ideal of God for them, is to see in them the possibilities which are hidden even to themselves, and to claim these possibilities for them as their own. 'Thou art Simon', He said to the vacillating and unreliable one, 'Thou shalt be Rock'." (The Light of the World, p 313). And, quoting Bishop Bloomfield, Speer continues, "The surest way to bring a man to acknowledge his error is to give him full credit for what-

ever he had learned of the truth".

That there is much wheat among the chaff, much truth amid falsehood; that the Roman church has done a great work in the world and that still it has its place, we may all admit without lowering our ideals or fostering indifference on the subject. With this as a starting point, Protestantism may well make an effort to purify Romanism of its dross. But, you say, the walls of Romanism are impenetrable? The walls of the Vatican may be, but the walls of the human heart never will be, thank God! There is enough power in the message of the Cross to shatter the mightiest fortress, but it must be the message of the Cross. There may not be any difference in policy, but there is already a difference in spirit and in life in American Catholicism. The silent influence of the best in Protestantism lifts Romanism wherever it finds it. If Protestantism would avoid for America the mistakes of all the Latin countries it must adopt a winsome, Christlike policy; not indifference, not that, but a positive policy of purification. Let it do its very best in this direction, much trouble will then be avoided. If, then, the American people will not learn, it remains for us to follow Gamaliel's counsel: when the Sanhedrin was about to organize a bitter persecution of the Apostles, he arose, and casting the influence of his strong manhood in the balance, he advocated a mild policy, saying in substance; Child-

ren of Israel, leave them in peace. If they are of God they will conquer, in spite of all our efforts. If they are not of God they will be conquered sooner or later. It is not in the spirit of the fatalist that I say it, but I do say, that when Protestantism has done its uttermost to purify the Roman Church and it has failed, then America can only learn by vivid human experience, what Italy and France, Spain and Portugal, South America and Mexico have learned by the same sad method.

With this fundamental principle as a starting point we can then approach the question of evangelizing the Italians. With a positive message and positive methods it is comparatively an easy matter to conduct a most fruitful work among the Italians. Among the Poles or Irish such a work could not be very successful, if conducted by the Protestant Church, for reasons already referred to. With Italians the reverse is exactly the case. This is primarily true, because of the bitterly antagonistic attitude which Rome has taken toward United Italy. That Italy is as a whole separated from Rome no student of Italian life today will question. This is not merely a passive separation, but it takes a very positive form. Evidences of this antagonism are seen everywhere. We see it creep out as early as Dante, in his life and writings; Cavour had it in mind when he flung out the immortal slogan "A free church in a free State."

Mazzini and Garibaldi made capital of it in their brave struggle for the liberation and unification of Italy; it is seen in the attitude of the Quirinal toward the Vatican and in the popularity of the government of United Italy. Hundreds of patriotic monuments bear testimony to it; the popularity of Giordano Bruno; the fact that Rome has had a Jewish mayor and has applauded his anti-Catholic speeches; the movement now on foot to discover Silvio Pellico's Bible; the popularity of the Bible; accompanying as it does the "Secolo", one of the popular papers of Italy; the organizing of a Bible Society, "Fides et Amor", by a group of laymen; the large placards at election time, "Abbasso il Papa, viva il Re", or "down with the Pope, hurrah for the King"; the growth of anti-Catholic Socialism; the wide spread of Atheism among the educated, especially among college students, etc., these and many other signs bear testimony to the fact that Italy is probably the least Catholic country in the world.

Nor does the Italian leave this antagonism in Italy. He carries it wherever he goes. The Roman Church is fully aware that he brings it to America. Consequently Romanism takes very little interest in Italians, except when it attacks them as "dagoes", whenever they turn to Protestantism. A priest in Paterson, N.J., not long ago, came out with a bitter attack upon the Italians, because they



were attending the Methodist Mission. In it he repeatedly called them "dagoes". As a whole there is very little work in a constructive way being done by the Catholics in behalf of the Italians. The Catholic Directory for 1913 shows only one hundred fifty Italian Catholic Churches.

On the other hand, as the Christian Intelligencer says, "the great movement among Italians in America during the last five years shows almost a stampede from Rome". Herman F. Swartz, in his lecture "New Americans for a New America", states that of all the Churches, that of Romanism is by far the heaviest loser. "Possibly", he says, "two out of every three, who by birth and training should be reckoned as Roman Catholics, have been lost from all vital relationship with the Church." While during 1913 there were 838,172 immigrants, mostly from Catholic countries, the Roman Catholic Church in America officially reports a gain of only 138,000. The Zion's Herald made a statement some time ago to the effect that many people were leaving the Roman Church. In order to inquire into the truth of that statement, the Boston Transcript made an investigation, to find to its great astonishment that "an average of 5 per cent" of the entire membership of a large number of Presbyterian Churches "came from the Roman Catholic Church." A very large number of those who are turning from Romanism are Italians and many of them are as yet without the pale of any church.

Here, then, is Protestantism's opportunity and by common consent, more in particular, Methodism's opportunity, not to proselyte but simply to hold for Christianity this mass of unchurched people. To cope with this opportunity, the strategic move is to center all our effort in training leaders. Our Church is greatly in need of leadership among the Italians; it needs men who combine deepest devotion with broadest vision; men of deep sympathy born of a thorough knowledge of human history and particularly of Italy's history; hard working men, level headed, steady and with a goodly sprinkle of plain common sense. They must be men who are at once Italian and at the same time are American in temper, in language and in outlook. In order to command the respect of the rising generation a thorough knowledge of the English language and of American history is also needed. Above all they must be saturated, penetrated with a passion for men; a passion born of a warm, personal knowledge of Christ.

In this, as in much other work, experience has taught us lessons. I would not for a moment cast any reflection upon my Italian brethern. They are men of great energy and perseverance. Still it must be admitted that our Italian pastors, as a whole, born as they are of an untoward time in Italian life, have been mostly men of a negative spirit. Their work has been directed mostly against

Catholicism and not for Christ. A certain Italian writer correctly diagnoses the situation in Italy when referring to the Protestant propaganda, he says, "The missionaries use repulsive methods. \* \* \* \* They do work which is more anti-Catholic than Christian." Is this not even more true of the work in America? As far as my observation goes, the answer is in the affirmative. For some three or four years I observed the pages of the leading Protestant Italian paper, published in America. Its pages were filled almost from cover to cover with reports of ranting debates between the opposing camps. My protest is raised even against the "Fiaccola", the official organ of our Italian Church, for containing so much which is purely anti-Catholic. As we have seen it to be true of other peoples so it will be true of Italians, Anti-Catholic sentiment will only drive them away from the evangelical appeal, to the ranks of bigoted Romanists. One man argued for a whole afternoon against the use of pictures in the Sunday Schools, on the grounds that the Catholics use them. Three refined Italian ladies recently attended the service of the Italian Evangelical Church in a New England city. The pastor on that day was in an anti-Catholic fit. The ladies have not been in that Church again. They may not have been driven away by that sermon, but they might have been won to Christ by a wholesome Christian message. I am in perfect agreement

with the Italian writer just quoted, that "if Protestantism desires to conquer Catholicism it needs to love it in order to understand it. \* \* \* \* \* The essential point is not so much to denounce the defects of Catholicism as much as to create an atmosphere both moral and intellectual in which such defects cannot live." It is most significant that the one man who has been preeminently successful in Italian work; who began as a pioneer and has spent thirty-three years of his life in the heart of an Italian colony; who has built up a church of nineteen hundred members; who on a rainy Sunday, November 30, 1913, had a Sunday School attendance of five hundred forty eight; who has sent out from his flock twenty three ministers, one of whom has become the District Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church, \* \* \* \* \* it is significant, that this man bowed his silver-crowned head before the Almighty and he was heard to pray, "Almighty God, ruler and judge of the world, men pray for governors and princes, kings and presidents, today we would humbly pray that thou wilt bless the Pope. Lord give him spiritual illumination. Open ~~that~~ his eyes that he may see the grand opportunities of service that are his. Save him, Lord, from eternal ruin." It was a strange, but warm and genuine prayer. It was the echo of that mighty prayer of Jesus, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This is the kind of men that we need for our work. Where are we to get them? One thing we may be certain of we cannot recruit them from the ranks of ex-priests. The type of men that we are liable to get from their number is illustrated by the following incident. A bright, middle-aged priest, disgusted as he said with the Roman Church, recently came to Dr. Greenman, our Superintendent of the Naples District, offering himself for the Methodist ministry. He was especially aiming at a certain good pulpit which was vacant. "But you know", said Dr. Greenman, "that we do not believe as you do." "Well," said he with perfect confidence, "you give me any book you want and if I do not preach your doctrines within a month you may discharge me". This is a glimpse of the morality of the priesthood. A priest of about forty years of age lay upon his death bed. Turning to a relative standing by his side, he said, "Karl, the soul of the priesthood is as black as the gown it wears."

But aside from their morals, ex-priests not only cannot readily gain the confidence of the people, they also are just the persons who become the bitterest and most rabid antagonists. Professor Harlan P. Beach, of the chair of Missions at Yale, says, "If only converts from among the priesthood are used as propagandists, they are likely to be ranting opponents of their former faith or else men of little constructive ability. Men, trained from the start un-

der the healthful influences of Christian schools and in a Christian Church of an Evangelical type, are far more likely to do a constructive, Evangelical work than a company of ex-priests, even though they may have had a full theological training in the Methodist Seminary (of Rome).

We must then begin at the very bottom. We need to build and not rebuild, form and not reform. With a world vision in the leaders of our Italian work, we may select the most promising young men from our Italian missions, one here and one there; then direct, encourage and actually assist them in gaining a liberal education in the best American schools and colleges. While the payment of all expenses would be impracticable and unwise, may we not create scholarships; prizes and fellowships, for the encouragement of these young men? When graduated from colleges, let them be gathered at one of our leading theological schools, which shall make a specific effort to meet their needs. The result? We may be confident that the onset of fifty such men upon the small Italian world would be irresistible and overwhelming.

May I here utter my protest against a practice that is injuring our Italian work. Often the remark is heard by Italian young men who are in school or college, "You ought to be in Italian work. There is such a crying need." So strong and persistent is the cry at times that some are

actually persuaded to leave school. The result is men half or scarcely developed. I do not permit myself to think of the inestimable loss that would have come to me had I heeded such appeals. The matter of preparing an Italian youth for the Evangelical ministry is one of molding anew a whole life. There is a background that cannot easily be altered. It is a matter of slow change. He may be soundly converted, but to effect a complete change of attitude is a matter of years. The vision of Christ, of the world's needs and of service come only with time, they come only by years of contact with the purest evangelical environment. Therefore, the youths that are to be prepared for the most effective Christian service, need to be separated, for the time being, root and branch, from the Italian Roman Catholic environment; we must transplant the tender plants into soil where the Master hand can work down the thorns that have grown into their very lives by centuries of neglect; we must plant them where life is aglow with love, where King Jesus supremely reigns; then all bitterness will cease, all mere negative attitude will be displaced by positive and vigorous life, then with a positive passion aglow we may trust our trained men to do valuable work for Christ. To accomplish this, young Italians need to be encouraged to go to school, great care being exercised that they are sent to the real Christian schools and colleges

They need also to be encouraged with American charges as soon as they are able to assume such a responsibility. This will give them a very valuable experience and a taste of pure Christian ideals. Some day they will give their lives in return for these benefits.

When trained in this manner these men will be capable of assuming ~~other~~ great responsibilities in the Church. While plain mission work must still be conducted in large Italian colonies, a door is opening which gives great promise. Reference is made to the bi-lingual Churches. There are several down-town Churches in various cities which are just across the street or within very short distance from large Italian colonies. A small American constituency still clings to the time-honored building. Such churches face the alternatives of either undertaking work among foreigners or "moving out west". But how undertake such work? Realizing that we are face to face with the dilemma our Church issued a call for bi-lingual preachers, some three or four years ago. The method suggested would produce just the men to meet the need. Men, who trained in American institutions, could command the respect of the remaining American constituency; but who being of Italian birth or parentage could by a process of years draw a large following from among the Italians. Thus, they would save many down-town churches from total collapse and at



the same time save Italians in large numbers for Christ. And since these churches generally have a good equipment, it would make it all the more possible to reach the leading men of the Italian colonies. Thus far, in many cases, our Church has been satisfied with offering to the beauty, art-loving Italians a down-town-<sup>shop-</sup>store-worn Christianity. By some it is swallowed, but it does swallow hard.

Men trained in the way suggested above will also be able to undertake the very important task of interpreting Italian life to Americans and American life to Italians. There is much need for this, for while a most cordial feeling is to be found among the educated Americans, there are in the public mind some very erroneous ideas regarding Italy and Italian life. Men of Italian birth and blood trained amid the healthful and broadening influences of American schools and colleges will be just the men to bridge this gulf between Americans and Italians.

There needs to be added only one word and that is in regard to the opportunity of the average American pastor among the Italians. The Italian is naturally very proud. He respects the American and enjoys to be catered to by him. When he becomes acquainted he thoroughly respects the American pastor, because he furnishes a splendid contrast to the average priest the Italian has ever seen. An invitation to attend the services will be responded to much more readily, if

it comes from an American pastor than if such an invitation came from an Italian preacher. The success of the attempt made at Milford, N.H. along this line, shows what can be done. There are a dozen or more very effective preachers both in Italian and in American churches who were won by the personal interest of some preacher who believed in hand-picked fruit.

This, then, is the approach to the problem of evangelizing the Italians in America. Starting with a positive point of view and message; beginning at the very bottom, selecting our workers not from among ex-priests, but from the choicest of Italian youth; training these by means of scholarships, prizes and fellowships; giving them all possible opportunities for development; inoculating them with a passion for men's souls; placing them, when well trained, in bilingual churches and in positions of leadership, - - - when this is done our problem will begin to be solved. . . . Meantime, may those who hold the wheel in their hand realize their responsibility and may they be guided by the Great Pilot of our salvation to take the right steps at this the most opportune time in the life of our Italian work.

Finis.

This essay was begun some  
three years ago. Since then  
I have worked over it now  
and then. This year I have  
spent some 150 hours on  
it, including typewriting  
etc.

Respectfully,  
Constantine M. Pomonio