

# TORONTO'S ITALIANS AND THEIR PLACES OF WORSHIP

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In 1908, the old parish of St. Patrick, built in 1869 for Irish immigrants, was re-consecrated Madonna del Carmine, to become Toronto's first Italian parish. Over the years Italian churches replicated the sites where Methodist and Presbyterian missions had been instituted for the conversion of Italians. After WW II and new flows of immigration, Italians, with their rituals and processions, changed the religious landscape of Toronto, transforming a Protestant city into a lively multicultural enclave of religious practices.

## *Gli italiani di Toronto e i loro luoghi di culto*

Nel 1908, la vecchia parrocchia di San Patrizio, costruita nel 1869 per gli immigrati irlandesi, fu riconsacrata Madonna del Carmine, per diventare la prima parrocchia italiana di Toronto. Nel corso degli anni si è sviluppata la strategia di sostituire con chiese cattoliche italiane i siti dove prima erano state istituite missioni metodiste e presbiteriane per la conversione degli immigranti. Dopo la seconda guerra mondiale e i nuovi flussi di immigrazione, gli italiani, con i loro rituali e le loro processioni, hanno cambiato il panorama religioso di Toronto, trasformando una città protestante in una vivace enclave multiculturale di pratiche religiose.

## **Toronto, a city of migrants**

Toronto, a city of migrants and the second most populous in Canada at the turn of the twentieth century, was just beginning to receive newcomers of non-British origin. The first to arrive and the most numerous were Jews from the Russian and Austrian-Hungarian empires soon followed by Italians. Mostly illiterate peasants from the *Mezzogiorno* considered unskilled by their employers, they built the city's rapidly expanding infrastructures or became small shopkeepers such as barbers, shoemakers or fruit vendors. Many more were sojourners who spent the winter in Toronto after having worked in the Canadian hinterland on railway construction following the government's announcement of the creation of two new transcontinental lines or in the mines as a result of the rise of com-

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modity prices on world markets (Ramirez)<sup>1</sup>. Citing in fact the instability of the city's Italian population and their financial inability to support a priest, Archbishop Denis O'Connor (1899-1908) in 1902 turned down their request for a place of worship of their own. Three years later *Madonna del Carmine*, the first ethnically-based parish in the country, was created in Montréal, Canada's largest city. This event, together with pressure coming from Archbishop Donato Sbarretti Tazza, the Apostolic Delegate in Ottawa (1902-1910), finally led to the establishment in 1908 of Toronto's first Italian parish.

### **Beginnings of Italian Catholic Parishes**

Over the previous twenty years, the Holy See had become very concerned about the missionary activities of North American Protestant Churches which had found intermediaries to speak to European immigrants directly in their language, offering them all manner of material assistance along with Bibles. To counter these efforts, Rome decided in 1888 to promote ethnically-based parishes in the hemisphere as well as the activities of new religious orders such as the Scalabrinians specifically catering to the needs of Italian immigrants (Perin. *Rome in Canada*: 158-186). In Toronto, Archbishop Fergus McEvay (1908-1911) adopted a more proactive approach than his predecessor in response to Sbarretti's pressure. In 1908 the old parish of St. Patrick, erected in 1869 to serve Irish immigrants, was re-consecrated as *Madonna del Carmine* and set aside for Italians, many of whom lived close by in the rundown St. John's Ward. Meanwhile a block away, a more commodious stone church named St. Patrick was erected in the same year for English-speaking parishioners. The archdiocese followed the same strategy six years later in response to Italians moving out of St. John's Ward westward to the area that would be identified as Toronto's Little Italy. St. Francis, a modest brick church dedicated in 1902, became an Italian-language parish called St. Agnes, while up the street, a substantial stone edifice, the reborn St. Francis, catered to English speakers (Perin. *The Many Rooms of this House*: 70). A mission was also founded in 1915 to serve the families of Italians working in industrial plants close to the West End's railway networks. The basement structure would serve as their church for the next twenty years, at which point a proper brick edifice was erected above it bearing the name *Madonna degli Angeli* (Zucchi 121).

<sup>1</sup> See also Roberto Perin and Franc Sturino (eds.).

The location of these places of worship exactly replicated the sites where the Methodist Church had earlier instituted missions for the conversion of Italians whom they categorized as 'un-churched' and quasi-pagan. Proselytizers such as Mansueto Scarlata attracted compatriots by speaking to them in their own idiom, not in the full-blown rhetoric priests had learned in the seminaries back home. These missions offered Italians a range of services from English language classes to child care, as well the distribution of necessities such as warm clothing, food, and coal for home heating. But as historian Enrico Cumbo has shown, newcomers were quite pragmatic and utilitarian in their dealings with the missions, gratefully accepting services offered free of charge, but generally rejecting accompanying religious forms and worldviews judged to be too alien ("Impediments to the Harvest": 155-176). Most could also discern condescending attitudes among the Canadian mission workers assisting Italian ministers, all too anxious to impart 'a clean, intelligent, British Canadian citizenship' to those they viewed as foreigners. One might be tempted to say that the latter preferred the expected cultural superiority of the Italian Catholic clergy to the unfamiliar one of Protestant mission workers. As well, the Catholic Church offered immigrants real churches in which to worship as opposed to storefronts or reconverted homes in which Methodist missions were housed. Be that as it may, conversion did entail a fairly radical break with family and community that few were willing to make.

In the early years, Toronto's Italian Catholic churches were mired in conflict and controversy grounded largely though not exclusively in monetary questions. Priests perceived their parishioners as being tight-fisted, dimwitted, or devious, stubbornly resisting making donations for the betterment of the parish; the latter retaliated with accusations of clerical embezzlement. These clashes also concerned differing notions of religiosity. The laity generally subscribed to a highly gendered form of peasant Catholicism focused on the feast day of the village patron saint and combining Church-sanctioned practices with pre-Christian ones whose origins were lost in the mists of time. Seeing them as superstitious and even idolatrous, priests scolded parishioners for ignoring their religious obligations, especially the sacraments. They, for their part, charged the clergy with hypocrisy and sexual misconduct. Regionalism was a third ingredient fuelling tensions between the two groups. Most priests came from northern Italy, carrying with them notions of superiority based on class, education, and experience of urban life. For example, the Piedmontese Giuseppe Longo regarded his Toronto parish as no better than an African mission. In time these difficulties were straightened out as religious orders, notably American Franciscans, took charge of two parishes, ensuring continuity and greater stability (Zucchi 122-132).

As for Methodist proselytizing, it was severely compromised by the world wars. In the first conflict, the head missionary, Nestore Cacciapuoti, left Toronto in 1915 to enlist in the Italian army. Eighty members of the three missions followed his example. In the second one, St. Paul's Italian United Church was closed in 1941 and congregants were told to share the facilities of a nearby English-speaking congregation<sup>2</sup>. Libero Sauro, their minister, was interned for five months soon after Italy's declaration of war for being a member of the Grand Council of the Order Sons of Italy of Ontario, an organization suspected of being a conduit of fascist propaganda. Be that as it may, thirty-four of Sauro's congregants enlisted in the Canadian army. Years before, Pentecostalism had challenged the Methodist monopoly of the Italian mission field. Exposed to revivals led by Christian fundamentalists, some early converts to Methodism became Pentecostals. In 1922 they purchased a former Adventist Church located in Little Italy, renaming it *Assemblea cristiana*. Seven years later, a schism among Chicago's Italian Pentecostals led to the formation of a second Pentecostal congregation in Toronto that met in a private residence. The split ended in 1944 and soon after a distinct overarching Italian-language organization was formed called the Christian Church of Canada initially affiliated to its US counterpart, but later joining the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, the main Canadian body (Cumbo. "Your Old Men Will Dream Dreams": 35-81).

### Postwar Italian Churches in Toronto

After the Second World War, Canada took in 500,000 Italians, as many as did the United States. These newcomers settled mostly in Ontario, primarily Toronto and environs, and they overwhelmed the earlier immigrant cohort by their numbers (Iacovetta, Stranger-Ross). Within the old city boundaries Italians now constituted over eleven per cent of the population, three-quarters of whom were recent arrivals<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, a general movement of the urban population to the suburbs could be observed in the wake of the difficult years that marked the Great Depression and the war. These demographic shifts produced significant changes on the geography of worship. After sixty years of serving downtown Italians, *Madonna del Carmine* became a Cantonese-language parish catering to Chinatown's Catholic residents. The following year, St. Agnes was transferred to Portuguese immigrants, while Italians moved up

<sup>2</sup> The United Church of Canada was formed in 1925 as a result of the union of Methodists, Congregationalists, and most Presbyterians.

<sup>3</sup> Dominion Bureau of Statistics. *Census of Canada, 1961, 1.1 Population*.

to the adjacent St. Francis of Assisi Church, a larger and loftier edifice. It was there that the elaborate Good Friday procession, replete with centurions, statues of saints, and a Christ figure bearing the cross, began in the early 1960s later attracting an estimated 100,000 spectators (Pietropaolo). At *Madonna degli Angeli*, the third historic Italian parish, more Portuguese-language masses were being said by the mid-1980s than Italian ones. It was not long before a Portuguese-speaking pastor was appointed. By contrast, three former Protestant churches, renamed St. Sebastian, St. Alphonsus, and San Nicola di Bari, the last two being located on what came to be known as *Corso Italia* (St. Clair Avenue), became Italian parishes. St. Sebastian and St. Alphonsus would later serve multilingual congregations with Spanish or Portuguese being added to Italian and English. As for San Nicola di Bari, its facilities are now shared by immigrants from Eritrea and Ethiopia who attend masses there according to the Ge'ez rite. During the era of heavy immigration from the peninsula when Italian churches barely kept up with the ever increasing number of worshippers, the archdiocese of Toronto designated other sites where masses would regularly be celebrated in one or more languages. Those offering Italian services within Toronto's historic boundaries were St. Clare (1959), St. Peter (1960), St. Anthony (1964), and St. Helen (1967). This perimeter nicely delimits the broad area of the postwar Italian settlement in the old city's West End. Today Italians are heavily concentrated in only one of its neighbourhoods, Corso Italia-Davenport where they form thirty per cent of the population<sup>4</sup>. Outside of this territory, but still within the Greater Toronto Metropolitan Area, another twenty-four churches were designated by 1975 for Italian speakers (Marchetto 109).

The postwar era held out new prospects for Italian Protestants. Christian fundamentalists, such as Fellowship Baptists and adherents of the Church of Christ, initiated largely ineffective campaigns of conversion, perpetuating stereotypes of Italians as religiously indifferent and barely Christian (Brown. "The History of the Keele St. Church of Christ, Toronto": 244)<sup>5</sup>. Recent immigrants who were members in Italy of the *Chiesa cristiana evangelica dei fratelli*, used a Plymouth Brethren hall off the *Corso Italia* to evangelize com-

<sup>4</sup> Toronto Social Atlas, Toronto Neighbourhood Profiles, Corso Italia-Davenport, Weston-Pellam Park, Wychwood, Social Profile #2 - Immigration, Ethnicity, and Language, Top Ethnic Origins (Ancestry).

<sup>5</sup> In 1928 a schism occurred among Canadian Baptists. A fundamentalist faction founded the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in 1953. The Italian mission was a joint initiative of Ossington Avenue Baptist and Dufferin Street Baptist. See *Baptist Yearbook*. Baptist Archives, Home Mission Board Annual Report 1962. The Church of Christ was a denomination founded in the United States in the nineteenth century.

patriots. Their efforts later led to the formation of an Italian-language congregation (Pizzolante 56-79)<sup>6</sup>. Meanwhile in 1957 St. Paul Italian United Church and reborn after a fundraising campaign begun by Libero Sauro and successfully completed by his successor Michael di Stasi. A new brick building with Gothic accents was erected not far from where *Madonna degli Angeli* stood. In 1980 a congregation named Pietro Valdo United Church, founded fourteen years earlier in the East End, merged with it. Declining numbers toward the end of the century due to ongoing suburbanization compelled members to share their church with other congregations, notably Italian-speaking Seventh-Day Adventists and Korean Presbyterians. Recently the building was sold and turned into condominiums.

Italian Pentecostals, for their part, grew as a result of postwar immigration. Their old church was demolished and replaced by a larger modern one thanks to the donation of an entrepreneur of Sicilian origin who found success in the 1950s manufacturing and selling soft drinks. But it soon proved to be inadequate and was relinquished in favour of a spacious former United Church in the fashionable High Park district. Although the congregation, which in the meantime had spawned five new ones, counted 900 members by 1996, the building was sold in 2003 and transformed into condominiums. Members established new quarters in the city of Vaughan, on the northwestern fringe of the Greater Toronto Area, where Italians were now concentrated.

### Contemporary Religious Landscapes

Over the last century, Italians have marked the Toronto religious landscape. Their language was heard in the churches they occupied or built over a wide swathe of the western part of the city and suburbs. Their rituals – such as the feast of *San Rocco* celebrated at *Madonna del Carmine* since its founding; the processions in honour of St. Anthony which have become multicultural events encompassing such diverse immigrant groups as Filipinos and Tamils; the Good Friday spectacle which is now an integral part of Toronto life; the lay-initiated annual pilgrimages to the Augustinian monastery at Marylake, in which different hometown groups wishing to venerate their particular saint have come together since the late 1960s in a day of religious and secular festivities (reminiscent of the *feste* back home)<sup>7</sup> – have deeply transformed notions

<sup>6</sup> The missionaries operated out of Bracondale Gospel Hall.

<sup>7</sup> I wish to express my thanks to Vienna Paolantonio, a doctoral candidate in history at York University, for generously providing me with information on the Marylake pilgrimages.

of acceptable devotional behaviour in what was once a dour and profoundly Protestant city. Immigrant artists and artisans from the Veneto and Friuli embellished Italian and other churches with terrazzo floors and mosaics (Pugliese 93). All of these achievements have challenged negative images of Italian immigrants perpetuated by Italian and Canadian élites, as well as the Canadian public more generally.

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