

HASTA VERTE JESÚS MÍO: MEXICAN TRANSNATIONALISM IN ROME*

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ABSTRACT. This paper addresses the struggle for renewed forms of Catholic orthodoxy currently taking place at the heart of the Holy See its connection to Mexican (but also, broadly speaking, Latino) migration to Rome. Different transnational religious orders (such as the Legionaries of Christ and the Scalabrinians) approach the issue of migration in ways that reveal, on the one hand, integralist Catholic impulses and an universal notion of Catholic truth and, on the other, an understanding of migration, in its relative cultural expressions, as a history arranged by Divine Providence. By focusing on religious priests as well as Mexican and Latino lay migrants, this article captures some of the contestations and connivances that take place not only between the nation-state and Catholic domains, but also the emerging struggles for the colonization of “new” territories within the Catholic Church. Finally, I argue that the production and reproduction of religious transnationalism and the transnational sacred are important prisms for the study of Mexican and Latino transnationalism in Rome.

KEYWORDS: Mexican transnationalism, transnational religiosity, transnational sacred, Catholic Church, Scalabrinian order, Legionaries of Christ, Rome.

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INTRODUCTION

A Jewish friend told me that the struggle for world power no longer takes place between the right and the left, but between Masonry and the conservative Catholic Church...

(Imelda, a Mexican immigrant in Rome)

This paper focuses on the intersections between some religious Catholic orders and the evangelization of Mexican and Latin American immigrants in Rome. A continuum, but also a contrast exists between segments of the Catholic Church that conceive of the migratory experience as an expression of a “spirituality of liberation”¹—a trend led, to an extent, by the Jesuits and Scalabrinians— and those who approach it from a perspective of illegality and criminalization. This last view is held by more conservative groups, such as, for instance the growing Mexican order of the Legionaries of Christ, which is highly influential in the Holy See. In order to understand this complex continuum and the strains it generates within the Church, I will examine the ongoing debates within the framework of the Italian nation-state’s responses toward migration.

Mexican transnational migration to Italy, although limited, is particularly important because of its religious component and must be seen in terms of the configuration of the Italian nation-state and its complex network of relationships with the Holy See. More importantly, it should be studied within the context of the transnational political ramifications of Catholic religious movements.

MIGRATION AND CATHOLICISM

Just like Mexico can be considered the Holy See’s “gate into Latin America,”² immigrants’ entrance to Rome is shaped by the diverse religious orders operating in the Italian capital. Given the lack of a welfare state, the Catholic Church has played a central role in the social and economic insertion of immigrants into Italian civil society. Although the Catholic Church is largely seen as an extra-territorial state, detached and independent of the Italian state, the Holy See has reaped substantial economic benefits from the Italian tax return laws (the law of *8 per mille*).³ Hence Holy See’s sovereignty as a state is still a very murky domain. As

¹ The words of a Mexican Jesuit in Rome.

² From an interview with Imelda, administrator at the Embassy of Mexico in the Holy See, June 2006.

³ Since 1985, Italian law decrees that the state will give the Catholic Church and other recognized churches the 8/1000 of the national resident tax (Imposta sul Reddito delle Persone Fisiche, IRPEF). Each contributor must declare which body benefits from this tax redistribution, but in reality less



is already the case in other western European countries, Italy is becoming a nation of immigrants. Recent data suggest immigration flow is increasing exponentially. Projecting the trends from 2004 and 2005, immigrant population in Italy is predicted to increase twofold in ten years and comprise 12 percent of the total population—a rate almost as high as that of Germany (Caritas/Migrantes 2006). This means that, in the past two decades, Italy transformed from a country of emigrants into a country of immigrants. According to CARITAS, the number of immigrants in Italy (including first and second generations) is about four million. Rome alone is home to more than 300,000 immigrants who comprise over 10 percent of the city's population. The largest groups are Rumanian, Filipino, Albanian and Peruvian (Caritas/Migrantes 2005). Studies involving Latin American immigrants in Italy are recent and focus on the Ecuadorian communities in Genoa (Ambrosini and Queirolo Palmas, 2005; Torre and Queirolo Palmas, 2005; Queirolo Palmas, 2004). And yet, Latin American presence in Rome is tangible and ranges from the invisible—many South Americans (Peruvians, Ecuadorians and, to a lesser extent, Mexicans) work indoors as caregivers for the elderly—to the evident—the Piazza della Repubblica and the Piazza Mancini bus stop are full of Latin Americans on certain days of the week, specially Thursday afternoons and Sundays.

The diocesan colleges, seminaries and religious homes scattered throughout Rome have, on the other hand, become the hubs of temporary Latin American religious migration to the city. The Colegio Pontificio Mexicano (Pontifical Mexican College) currently has more than 130 Mexican priests studying in a number of religious Roman universities. Next to the college are the quarters of the Hermanas del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús (Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus), an order of nuns who attend to the daily needs of the priests at the College and follow a very demanding work schedule. These and other transnational (mostly, though not exclusively, female) missionary orders are in a subordinate labour condition to the colleges and dioceses in Rome, while most of the Latin American lay population finds work in the cleaning services industry or taking care of elderly (*badanti*).⁴

As far as documented Latin American immigration in Rome is concerned, Mexicans hold the highest number of student and religious training visas; as a national group they also have the lowest rate of family reunification when com-

than 40 percent of taxpayers declare this explicitly. The 8/1000 is thus distributed pro-rata and the Church ends up with an over 87 percent tax return (2001 data). This means that the Catholic Episcopal Conference received more than 930 million Euros in 2004: 34 percent went toward clergymen's salaries, 47 to evangelization, maintenance and construction of Church property and internal bureaucratic management, and eight percent was destined to Catholic programs of international cooperation (UAA, 2006).

⁴ This is the official and constitutionally recognized name given to caregivers in Italy. *Badare* means 'to take care of' and a *badante* is the person who takes care of children, the sick, or the elderly. S/he can live with the charges or have a private residence, but the first option is the most common.



pared to other Latin American communities. Despite this, an increasing number of Mexicans enter the country under a tourist visa and while overstaying find employment in the above mentioned labour market.. Mexicans are additionally perceived as the “aceite” (oil). In the words of a Nicaraguan unionist, “Mexicans feel superior ... they are like oil and want to float on water ... the Mexican women are the ones who usually marry Italians” and “they don’t want to mix with us.”

The Roman Latin American community has established several organizations in the city. Among them are the Comunidad Católica Mexicana (Mexican Catholic Community, or CCM), established in 2000, and the Missione Latinoamericana (Latin American Mission), established in 2003. The CMM organizes events involving Mexican national and religious celebrations, such as Independence Day, the Day of the Dead and the Virgin of Guadalupe Day. Its online site supplies Mexicans with information on job opportunities and immigrant services. The Missione Latinoamericana, on the other hand, is supported by a Roman diocese belonging to the Scalabrinian order and attends a variety of Latin American and Caribbean groups residing in the Italian capital.

Even though the Mexican community is relatively small its experiences are quite similar to those of other Latin American groups in Rome. To an extent, all lay Latin American immigrants are struggling against Italian immigration law, one of the most restrictive in the European Union (EU).⁵ Before I go on to contextualize the ongoing debate from an institutional and legislative Italian perspective, however, I need to underscore some of the implicated issues and the analytical mold in which they belong.

In Rome, the reproduction of certain religious orders and the presence of pontifical institutions play an important role in the creation of an immigrants’ pastoral. The Roman diocese is also interested in the evangelization, religious and social ministering of Latin American immigrants. Yet, what kinds of processes take place at the heart of the Catholic Church when its representatives are faced with the immigrant, the Other? What kinds of tensions emerge between the transnational sacred and a transnational religiosity in the context of Latin American –and particularly Mexican– immigration and its position within the Italian nation-state?

Most studies on migration and Catholicism focus on the United States and explore the meanings that daily gender- and embodied responses acquire in the religious practice of immigrants and their communities (Orsi, 1996). The studies indicate that Latin Americans residing in the United States embark on a creative rearticulation that surpasses reductionist conflicts between popular and official forms of Catholic religiosity (Nabha-Warren, 2005; Motolina and Riebe-Estrella, 2002; Orsi, 1997). These studies contribute to an understanding of Catholicism as practiced in a lay context, which sometimes presents a genuine challenge to

⁵ As I write, a new immigration bill is being considered in Italy. This paper refers to conditions previous to any changes introduced by the approval of this law.



the established Church. The celebrations and practices of Catholic laypeople constitute an important space in which to redefine and re-narrativize the emplacement of transnational immigrants between and throughout different nation-states.⁶ Nowadays, the effects of transnational migration are forcing us to historicize the concept and practice of religion in order to understand the ways in which it contributes to the formation of the subject, the creation of emplacement (Vásquez, 2005: 236) and the re-imagining of transnationalization (Scher, 2003).

The issues addressed in this paper contribute to a reconsideration of religion as a material experience lived from and through the body, a cultural process that creates meanings, and a historical, ethnographic, and migrational set of conditions. It is through this set that I examine the reproduction of Mexican and Italian religious orders and their interactions with lay Mexican (and Latin American) immigrants in Rome. This provides a complex and rich space for the understanding of some aspects of the transnational returns of national religious histories (i.e. Mexican) and their interweaving into Italian social reality. The goal is to show the ways in which the rearticulation of migration within the Italian nation-state is, to an extent, a political product derived from potentially antithetic transnational Catholic understandings regarding divine history and the division between the public and private spheres.

This rearticulation invites us to explore the dialogical relationship between “the religious” and the construction of citizenship, where the dissociation between the political, the sacred and the aesthetic is a historical production (de Certeau, 1988: 121). It also allows us to see how Catholic histories that are not recognized as an integral part of lay national history (e.g., Mexico’s Cristero War or *Cristiada*) reemerge more powerfully in a transnational context. There they can be transformed into an origin myth for a Catholic force that regains power through absence – “traces of ‘historical’ realities, missing indeed because they are other” (de Certeau, 1988: 46).

The Bossi-Fini Law

The lack of political stability in Italy, its various political parties and their fragile alliances have affected the coherent and stable formulation and implementation of legislation involving immigrants and political refugees (Danese, 2001). There is some hope that, during 2006, a bill including the EU’s recommendations regarding migration and political asylum will be approved by the new, center-left administration led by Romano Prodi. Prodi was elected after five years of center-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi, whose administration instituted the current and restrictive immigration law. The Bossi-Fini law, unilaterally approved

⁶ This includes the mutually constitutive relationship between map, space and migration through practices of emplacement (Tweed, 1997).



in 2002, shortened the grace period that allows immigrants to find a job and also implemented strict rules regarding family reunification and the request for political asylum.

This law applies to all migrants from either industrialized or non-industrialized countries and affects all nationalities outside of the EU (Artoni, 2005). It establishes a rather paternalistic bond between an employer and immigrant employees: in order to obtain a *permesso di soggiorno* (literally “stay permit”), a temporary, renewable residency permit that conveys legal residential status, the immigrant must be officially “sponsored” by an employer.⁷ A layperson lacking any kind of personal sponsorship in the form of a contract of employment has no legal access to a residency permit.

The conditions regarding family reunification (*ricongiungimenti familiari*) are equally restrictive. Elderly applicants seeking to reunite with their children must prove that they are directly dependent on these particular offspring and not any others residing anywhere else. Second generation immigrants are not considered citizens until they reach a certain economic standard and are eighteen years of age.⁸ In August of 2006, the government proposed to grant citizenship to all those immigrants who could prove they have resided in the country for a continuous period of five years, but this has yet to materialize in the form of a bill.

The Bossi-Fini law also established system of annual quotas for resident immigrants called *sanatoria*, which barring some exceptions, is promoted from time to time. A *sanatoria* grants extraordinary approval of additional regularization demands made by immigrants in possession of an employment contract but does not give the option of obtaining a residency permit outside of the established annual quota. This ad hoc regulation of the law has generated a lot of bureaucratic anxiety, rumors and confusion for both immigrants and police officers. The latter have to file great amounts of extraordinary regularization applications in a very short period while the immigrants have to wait for the *sanatoria* to be declared and then line up for days in the hope that their application will fall within the prescribed number of slots. The existence of the *sanatoria* evidences the need for immigrant workers, especially in sectors such as agriculture, caregiving and domestic services, nursing, and specialized industrial work in the northeastern part of the country. And yet, the numbers surpass the amount of applications permitted by the law.

⁷ This means that the employer must put money toward the immigrant’s national health insurance and retirement funds but, in reality, what often happens is that those contributions are discounted from the immigrant’s pay, or the contract is altered so that it officially shows the total amount of hours to be less than the time actually worked by the employee.

⁸ This has spurred a debate about the discrepancy between *ius sanguinis* and *jus solis*. As I write, the new Minister of Interior, Giuliano Amato, is promoting changes to the immigration law. Second and third generation Italian immigrants residing outside the country can be granted full citizenship rights if they can prove they are descendants of an Italian emigrant, but the Italian-born children of immigrants residing in the country do not have the right to citizenship until they are eighteen years of age –and even then, they must fulfill a certain economic criterion.



The result of these regulations is that immigrants, especially women, take an indoors job as the only path to a potential residency permit. They put up with abusive working conditions in the hope that, when the *sanatoria* is called, they can obtain legal status. The nature of the law has created a grey area that enables the exploitation of immigrants. At the same time, the working conditions of indoor jobs have a profound impact on immigrant subjectivity –a topic that can only be addressed briefly here.

In order to deal with this issue, immigrant associations such as CMM have become important centers for socializing, springboards that allow members to “go explore the city,” “get over depression” and “get back on track.” Unlike other Latin American Catholic immigrant groups that belong to the Latin American Mission in Rome, Mexicans attend the catechesis, Catholic ceremonies, and national and popular festivities they would celebrate in Mexico and continue to observe in Italy.

Camila’s story is a good example of this. Around thirty years old and a native of Mexico City, Camila spent over eight years in Rome caring for an old woman who eventually died. Thinking back on it, she says she was depressed for a long time. It was not until after her employer died that she went to the CCM and made friends with whom she began to explore and enjoy the city. Camila is now an active member of the organization and was recently confirmed as a Catholic: while in Mexico, she never belonged to any Catholic group and her family was only “faintly” Catholic. The CCM gatherings and communal life have signified both a personal encounter with God and contact with a group of friends. Remembering her life as a *badante*, she says:

That kind of life turns you into something different; you lose your youth and then one day you wake up. I don’t know how I managed to live for so long with that lady [the old woman]. She used to wake up four times a night. I became tough, very tough; you learn not to cry. I was able to go out every afternoon and not just Thursdays, but emotionally it was really intense. When she died, [her family] asked me to get her things in order and told me to keep some of them but I couldn’t, I could not keep a thing. You do all this to save some money, but then, that too is gone...

Camila’s response to her immigrant employee condition was to become “tough.” She expresses her experience as a form of sleep and a long (very long, according to her) deprivation of agency and control over her own life. At the end of this working experience she had become someone she herself could not recognize.

The subjective responses of immigrants have been part of the regional and municipal interventions involving immigration regulations (which can alleviate or not immigrants’ condition in a given regional context). Until Prodi came to power in 2006, a lot of the tensions involved the government’s center-right position on immigration issues (a stance heavily influenced by the Lega Nord, a



rather xenophobic party) and the action plans proposed by municipal coalition governments with usually center-leftist leanings. Rome is the most obvious example of this national-municipal dilemma. A leftist coalition led by Mayor Walter Veltroni has promoted a benevolent and less restrictive approach to immigration that clashes with the stance taken the government.

Mexican immigrants in Rome mention that Roman police is quite different from California's *migra* (the U.S. immigration police): "[here] you keep your head low and the police don't bother you," says Olga, a *badante* from the Estado de México. According to Olga and her sisters, all but one of whom currently live with Italian families, being in public spaces is not a risk in Rome, but it is quite difficult to profit from living in Italy. Given immigrants' limited mobility in the labor market, life in Italy is still quite difficult for them; "a better future" is a difficult thing to achieve. Olga is very clear when she points out that "not even Italians can get good jobs in Rome. So, why should immigrants?"

THE WELFARE CHURCH

In the face of Italy's unstable and fragmented political scene, voluntary Catholic associations have taken on the responsibilities of the weak Italian welfare system. The work of these non-profit volunteer organizations has married Catholic notions of charity with leftist concepts of solidarity and support for non-EU immigrants (*extracomunitari*). The Roman Catholic Church has several organizations that specialize in immigration problems. The large institutional apparatus within which they operate consists of two different but interdependent branches. The Pontificio Consiglio della Pastorale sulle Migrazioni (Pontifical Council of the Pastoral on Migration),⁹ based in Rome, is the Holy See's office in charge of coordinating the pastoral for migration and international mobility. On the other hand is the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (Italian Episcopal Conference, or CEI), which operates within Rome's Archdiocese and promotes the Commissione Episcopale per le Migrazioni (Episcopal Commission for Migration, or CEMI) and the Fondazione Migrantes (Migrants Foundation), which organize and articulate the evangelization of immigrants residing in Italy. The Fondazione Migrantes is led by a Scalabrinian priest.

The Scalabrinian order plays a central role in these last two institutions, and translates the existent need for immigrants' social and economic insertion into an evangelization process: the immigrant Other is turned into a recognizable

⁹ The idea of creating the Pontificio Consiglio sulle Migrazioni was given to Pio X by the founder of the Scalabrinian order, Father Giovanni Scalabrini, in 1954. However, in the spring of 2006, Benedict XVI decided to merge it with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, leaving Cardinal Martino in charge of both. This could be seen as a strategic maneuver and some Scalabrinians who work with immigrant bases are worried that the social and pastoral interests involving migration and mobility will be obscured by larger issues such as human rights and social justice.



Catholic subject (Napolitano, 2007). Founded in 1887, the order was created to support Italian immigrants in America at the turn of the 20th century. To this day, Scalabrinians have more than 600 priests around the world, mainly in North America, Brazil, Italy, the Philippines and Australia, and are intrinsically connected to the recent pastoral activity and evangelization of Latin American transnational migrants in Rome. The Missione Latinoamericana in Rome, which is located in the central neighborhood of Trastevere, in the small church of Santa Maria della Luce, is led by a Scalabrinian Mexican priest, father Omar. Santa Maria della Luce itself has a long and fascinating history, having served as a shelter for the working classes and faithful Catholic immigrants since the Middle Ages (Napolitano, 2007).

Father Omar's vision of the Church is greatly inspired by Brazilian liberation theology. He points out the contradictions between the Catholic hierarchy that predicates against sexual licentiousness, birth control and extramarital sex and the realities faced by the immigrants with whom he works. He passionately defends immigrants who live in unstable economic and familial situations that lead them to form extramarital bonds and live in socially marginal conditions. The way he puts it, the parameters within which priests take action, not so much as missionaries but as curates, must follow the Archdiocese's line instead of voicing the real-world conditions of those whom the Church should help.

According to Scalabrinians, migration is a result of Divine Providence. In the words of the Italian Scalabrinian priest in charge of SIMI, the Scalabrinian Institute on Migration Studies:

In the Scalabrinian tradition, migration is approached from a holistic perspective that takes into account the causes leading to it: it is often not a choice but an impediment, and we seek to promote respect for migrants' rights and their dignity. At the same time, migration is not exclusively a problem; it is also an opportunity for society and the Church. Migrants are not just victims in need of aid; they are also people who have much to contribute to their community, subjects of transformation and mission.

For this priest, migration is the product of God's agency in history, and part of this history of religious providence lies in the fact that Catholic immigrants are rejuvenating the 'old' heart of the Catholic Church in Rome, even in the face of its feared and potential 'cardiovascular paralysis' (Pera & Ratzinger 2004: 64). Italian and Latin American Catholics articulate and emphasize different aspects of Catholic practice in Rome.

This process of rejuvenation was enacted during a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the Madonna del Divino Amore organized by the Missione Latinoamericana of Santa Maria della Luce. Although the 2006 pilgrimage was not as large as those of previous years, it was joined by more than seventy Latin American immigrants and a group of Mexican nuns belonging to the order of Santa María Inmaculada. They



walked at night, leaving from the centrally-located Coliseum and marching all the way to the sanctuary, which lies some eighteen kilometers outside the city. The Latinoamerican Mission had planned to do a series of Latin American chants and prayers, but a few days before the walk it was decided that they would join a group of Italian pilgrims who would be leaving for the Divino Amore on that same night.

I joined the group. After a few hours we united with the Italian group, which had more than four hundred people, and the Scalabrinian priest leading our group started talking with the priests in charge of the other group. So we had to remain quiet and follow the Italian pilgrimage. Some of the immigrants were disappointed and during the first part of the night we prayed seven rosaries in Italian while guided by the Italian pilgrims with megaphones at the head of the procession –no music or instruments. The rosary, of course, is about the Virgin’s suffering and her role as Christ’s mother, and the prayers asked for the welfare of clergymen, the strength of the Catholic family and women, who are its pillar.¹⁰ After we had stopped for a rest and were back on the route, suddenly the immigrants started singing Latin American Marian and Catholic songs in Spanish, playing guitars and drums. The lyrics were about the joy of living in the Catholic faith and the joy of receiving the Marian and Christian spirit inside us, in our body. The rest of the group, the Italian priests in particular, were taken by surprise. After a little while, some of the Italian pilgrims joined in. From then on, our group’s mood and spirit changed completely: some immigrants commented how happy they were to have participated, to have eased the previous suffering and unease, and have sung their songs in Spanish.¹¹

These kinds of religious experiences, which are personified through their voicing, point to what I term the *transnational sacred*: the creation of a sense of religious identification through the use of common symbolism (the Virgin) and an experience of sacred inclusion (the invocation of the Catholic spirit entering the body), even when this implies undertaking negotiations in a transnational space and sometimes results in exclusion (the Italian pilgrimage).

If the Latinoamerican Mission promotes this type of events to create the sense of a “common” Latin American Church in Rome, it must be pointed out that the goal of establishing a “Pan-latinamerican” Church has not been entirely successful, as it is fraught with national, ethnic and class tensions. The Catholic Church has attempted to create a Pan-Latinamerican ethos on top of national ones, a strategy which, in Central American and U.S. contexts, has been employed to avoid confrontations and ruptures in national policy (Menjívar, 1999). Although these attempts have been successful in some North American cases (Levitt, 2004), this has not been the case in Rome.

¹⁰ Marian cults and devotion are regaining popularity in Italy; although this is also the source of debate, this issue is complex and cannot be discussed in this article (Lilli, 2001; De Stefano, 2001).

¹¹ This was expressed in the words of a Latin American immigrant who reflected on the pilgrimage after reaching the sanctuary at dawn.



Father Omar complains that the Latinoamerican Mission in Santa Maria della Luce “does not grow,” and that “many immigrants go through it, but not many stay.” And if they do, part of them ends up participating in the activities organized by the national groups, which, even if they are officially coordinated by the Santa Maria della Luce Mission, were assigned to seventeen different Roman parishes by John Paul II. For instance, the CCM does not actively participate in Santa Maria della Luce’s activities, an issue that highlights the conflict between different Catholic practices and the immigrants who follow them. The CCM criticizes some of the Scalabrinians at Santa Maria della Luce because they feel they are “patronizing” and treat them like “children”. The spiritual head of their group, a Mexican Jesuit priest, states that:

There is a need to respect the differences among [immigrant] groups. They are not parishioners, they do not wish to be controlled or follow orders (do this, celebrate that...). They have their own life, they’re not children; let them celebrate their cultural and national festivities, the Day of the Dead... let them lead their own lives.

The CCM celebrates national Mexican events such as the Day of the Dead and Independence Day. In the past few years, these celebrations have attracted both the Mexican and Italian communities. Unlike the parties organized by other Latin American Catholic communities (such as the Ecuadorians), the Mexican festivities enjoy visible Italian participation. This could be due to the fact that Mexicans hold the highest number of visas granted through marriage to an Italian citizen. But Mexico, as a country, also has a strong symbolic presence in the Italian social imaginary, which is not necessarily the case with other nations of Central or South America. After speaking with an official at the cultural section of the Mexican embassy and Italians who have married Mexican women (this seems to be the preponderant gender/nationality permutation among Roman residents), I encountered two major types of cultural imaginaries. On the one hand, Mexico is perceived as a beautiful and exotic land, a center of urban civilizations that conjures up early Italian narratives of Mexico dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries (Benzoni, 2004). At the same time, Mexico and, particularly, its northern territory, are imagined as a deserted land. Even the growing, half-built suburbs of Monterrey are jokingly characterized as an “urban desert.” So, for some of the Italians who join the Mexican celebrations or are in direct contact with the immigrant life in Rome, Mexico is an imagined land of the past, with urban civilizations and desert landscapes.¹² This imagined place of civilized and

¹² I suggest that the Mexican landscape of the Italian imaginary is, to an extent, the product of the so-called “Spaghetti Western” genre. Since the 1960s and, particularly during the 1970s, the Italian film industry has produced many of these popular movies depicting the North American West. Director Sergio Leone and composer Ennio Morricone are two famous names associated with the genre.



empty lands constitutes the wide tapestry upon which transnational Mexican identities are traced.

THE COMMON THREAD: TRANSNATIONAL HISTORIES

The Catholic Church in Italy has a relatively coherent approach to migration, but there are still differences of opinion. If migration is interpreted as a history of Divine Providence, Catholic evangelization and catechesis should go hand in hand with relativist cultural practices. For the Scalabrinians, learning the language, culture and religious expressions of immigrants—both at home and in their host country—constitutes an important step. A relativist immigrant perspective is part of an integrated Church:

In the complex, laborious and oftentimes contradictory process of integration [*inserimento*], the immigrant must be recognized as a citizen in an integrated society that wishes to construct a cultural democracy and a Church that responds to the call of Catholicism. The immigrant is called to walk the path of the death and resurrection of cultures along with autonomous others, and becomes capable, along with them, of participating in a pentecostal communion of reconciled diversity (Scalabrini, 2005: 293).

Another segment of the Church, however, interprets migration (particularly Muslim) as an element in the decline of Catholic civilization and a threat to its values, beliefs, and universal truth. These conservative sectors of the Church emphasize the “otherness” and “uncivilized nature” of immigrants and, in Italy, this stance appeals to political groups with a tendency to criminalize immigrants. It is precisely this link between secular and religious impulses that needs to be understood in order to explain the production of a transnational religiosity that takes the shape of historical and transnational religious returns.

There is an episode in the Mexican history of the Catholic Church that serves as a transnational link to current Italian immigration policies. This common thread involves the repression of Catholic demands and the participation of civil society; the events surrounding the Cristero War during the late 1920s; the establishment of Catholic movements such as the Legionarios de Cristo, or Legionaries of Christ, in 1941, and the influence of this order in religious higher education both in Rome and in Mexico. The increasingly influential Legionaries have benefited from the diminished involvement of the Jesuit order in the formation of the Mexican and Italian elites, where Jesuit influence has been in decline since the 1960s and 1970s.

The Legionaries of Christ and their lay movement, *Regnum Christi*, had profound political influence on Berlusconi’s government and are part of a wave of



resurging “integralist” Catholic movements in Italy.¹³ In the remaining section of this article I will attempt to explain how this initially Mexican and now international religious movement has played a role in the restrictive stance on immigration and the Bossi-Fini law.

The Cristero War or *Cristiada* is a difficult and complex chapter in 20th century Mexican history, a confrontation between the secular government and religious Catholic powers that involved the public sphere. President Plutarco Elías Calles ordered the closing of certain churches and forbade Catholic participation in public and educational activities, which were being restructured by the post-revolutionary state. Historians and journalists argue that there is a connection between the killings of Catholic priests and laypeople ordered by the government during the war and the Catholic fervor that led priest Marcial Maciel to create the Legionaries of Christ in 1941¹⁴ (de Cordoba, 2006, Berry and Renner, 2006). The Legionaries link their own history to that of the martyrs of the *Cristiada*. This is evidenced by the recent beatification of José Sánchez del Río, a fourteen-year-old who was killed on February 6, 1928, while accompanying the Catholic group of General Guízar Morfín,¹⁵ and the sanctification of the Church’s first Latin American bishop, Rafael Guízar y Valencia (Bishop of Veracruz in 2006), who played an important role as a defender of the Catholic Church during the *Cristiada* and went on to establish a seminary in Mexico City during the 1930s.¹⁶

The Legionaries seem to rearticulate ideas first postulated during the *Cristiada*, such as the call to arms on behalf of the Catholic Church and strong commitment to Papal authority. Their focus is on the “Church of Christendom” or, as a Mexican priest in Rome puts it:

The Legionaries of Christ say “I am faithful” and seek to return to the Christian Church, where there are churches and public buildings and where the Catholic space is all encompassing, where there is a crucifix on every wall and there are Catholic schools. This is the *Cristero* spirit: to have a powerful Church that confronts the State.

There is an implicit and fundamental struggle between the secular State and a Church that is presented as the repository of universal (catholic) truth. The

¹³ See, for example, *Alleanza Cattolica* (<http://www.alleanzacattolica.org/index.htm>) and the magazine *Il Timone* (<http://www.iltimone.org/index.php>)

¹⁴ The order was originally known as the Foundation of the Apostolic Mission of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In 1965 it received final approval from the Holy See and became the Legion of Christ.

¹⁵ Paradoxically, the recent wave of beatifications of *Cristiada* martyrs, which was led by John Paul II in 2000, worried those who did not take up arms during this period but chose to participate as “active pacifists” (González 2004: 282). Some of those Jesuits who led violent confrontations and lost their lives in the process have not been beatified as yet, a stance that supports the idea that the Catholic Church is still maintaining a “neutral” position in regard to this war.

¹⁶ The Bishop (now saint) is also uncle to the Legionaries of Christ founder Marcial Maciel, who spent some time studying at the seminary.



modus vivendi of the Legionaries takes a very clear stance regarding this division. In the words of a Spanish Legionary priest in Rome: “The secular and neutral State is in reality [an expression of] relativism, the assertion that there are values that apply to all of us equally, and this leads to the prevalence of power over truth.” This is why the Legionaries emphasize universalism vs. relativism, which leads them to forget the importance of cultural difference. In this sense, their concerns are vastly different from those of Scalabrinians, who emphasize cultural respect and multiplicity as a key element in an integrated Church.

The sexual scandals attributed to the Legionaries’ founder, Marcial Maciel, or the order’s particular penchant to hunt for rich and powerful members to support their *Regnum Christi* movement are outside the scope of this paper and not important for my research. My main interest lies in the growing influence of this group in the realm Roman higher education and the implications their evangelizing has on Italian civil society (and, for that matter, Latin America, although a study of these particularities escapes the boundaries of this article).

The Legionaries are playing an increasingly important role in worldwide Catholic education. Their intent is to “train” Catholics who will bring “the passion and fire of Christ’s heart” into the lay and secular world. They seek to form the minds that will be at the heart of governmental institutions and subtly revert the dreaded secularization of the state. This is the case of the Master’s Program in Migration Studies offered by the Università Europea, a link in the network of Universidad Anahúac and purportedly sponsored by Carlos Slim (de Cordoba, 2006). This University is tied, physically and institutionally, to the *Reginae Apostolorum*, the religious college of the Legionaries. Their maxim is to teach, educate and form. In the words of the Rector of the Scalabrinian order in Rome, “They are the modern Jesuits and they feel like they were the Jesuits during the ecclesiastical crisis of the 16th century; they see the Church as being in crisis now and are determined to save it.”

They pay particular attention to the individual and see the human being as an *integer homo*. They have become spiritual mentors to some upper class Mexicans and Italians, but they also focus on the common people. Or rather, they focus on people as individuals, as Solis, a Mexican student at the Jesuit Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, explains:

I don’t know much about their ideas on migration but I do know that they [the Legionaries of Christ] are very sensitive to those in need. I was taking a stroll with father Rodolfo when a beggar asked him for money, and he stopped to have a conversation with him: what was his name, where was he from, how long had he been there; they had a long conversation. He showed real interest in the guy, who was clearly a foreigner, sitting there begging... I don’t know, but they have a particular way of treating people, they make you feel important.



The Reginae Apostolorum was founded in 1993 and is a Pontifical University that trains religious members of different orders and missions under the supervision of the Legionaries. The Università Europea, which is located on the same campus, was established in 2004, and the opening ceremony was attended by some key Italian politicians such as the President of the Senate, Marcello Pera. One of the Master's programs offered by this university during the 2005-2006 academic year was that on Scienze delle Migrazioni, or Migration Sciences. Most of those who attended the courses (more than sixty people enrolled) work at the Ministry of Interior, and the course was considerably popular when compared to similar programs offered by other Roman institutions. The mind behind it was Alfredo Mantovano, a former official at the Ministry of Interior and coordinator of the Department of State Problems of the right-wing party Alleanza Nazionale. Mantovano, who is currently a member of the Senate, has played a central role in the creation of certain sections of the Bossi-Fini law, and the focus of the Master he designed is on the illegality and the criminalization of migration. The students were informed about the current and prospective legal and social status of migrants, as well as of the dangers of legal and illegal immigration in Italy –but little thought was given to the cultural variety and experiences brought by immigrant flow. In this case, migration is not an act of Divine Providence: it is a nightmare for the state.

Mantovano invited some intellectual “experts” such as Giovanni Cantoni and Massimo Introvigne, both of whom lead a small but powerful Catholic conservative group called Alleanza Cattolica. This Italian group has created new institutes such as the Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religioni (Center for Studies on New Religions or CESNUR) and Istituto per la Dottrina e l'Informazione Sociale, (Institute for the Social Doctrine and Information or IDIS). The Legionaries of Christ, with their efficient educational and ideological apparatus, could well create a new space for the political and legal understanding of migration.

To say that the Bossi-Fini law is implicitly connected to the Mexican *Cristiada* of the 1920s does not make a lot of sense. On the other hand, it would not be far-fetched to argue that the spirit of the *Cristero* movement has been reactivated by a currently very powerful religious transnational order and that this, in turn, has echoed with the resurgence of Catholic right-wing and conservative movements that have played an important role in Italian politics (particularly during Berlusconi's government), and have promoted a restrictive and criminalizing approach to immigration, portraying the immigrant as an Other. This is a clear example of what I mean when I refer to the reproduction of a transnational religiosity contained in a historical network of repression and historical return, which are in turn inscribed in the production of renewed forms of Catholic citizenship (*integer homo*).



CONCLUSIONS:
TRANSNATIONAL RELIGIOSITY AND THE TRANSNATIONAL SACRED

The link between transnational religion and the religious practice of transnational immigrants should pay attention to the role of states, as it is these that, to certain extent regulate the migrant movements and religious expressions. They also influence the breadth and character of immigrants' transnational religious practices and "the ways in which ordinary individuals live their everyday religious lives across borders," so we should "explore the impact of these activities on their continued sending and receiving-country membership" (Levitt, 2003: 852). When studying these aspects we should go beyond the implicit separation between the secular, the nation-state, the transnational Catholic Church and the immigrant's subjectivity in order to view them as fields of mutually constitutive practices. This dialogic formation seeks to go beyond readings of religious transnationalism as part of a reductive framework of "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002: 236). It also seeks to understand the way in which transnational social fields contribute to the reproduction and, at the same time, to the undermining of reemerging forms of religious (Catholic) imperialism (Glick Schiller, 2005: 455-456).

In the specific case of Italy, transnational religiosity can subtly support or curtail particular governmental regulations that, for this reason, cannot be understood as being isolated from the politics espoused by transnational religious orders. On the one hand, the religious popular practices of transnational immigrants reveal the process of renovation undergone by the Catholic Church, but they also show the frictions between inclusion and the autonomy of specific practices. As in the case of the pilgrimage, the frictions generated in the "cultural" practices of immigrants are acted out and lived (sometimes in a state of exclusion) within a national matrix.

The transnational sacred takes meaning against the experiential backdrop of Mexican (and Latin American) lay immigrants, which in turn is structured around legal conditions of partial citizenship and the restrictive framework of the Bossi-Fini law. The immigrants' search for communion, inclusion and the corporeal presence of the divine becomes a tender spot in a Catholic Italy where lay immigration bears the stigma of social and cultural diversity and where the social mobility of immigrants is very limited. This is highly paradoxical in a city like Rome, which presents itself as the "heart" of the "universal" Catholic Church.

On the other hand, not all Mexicans belong to the Catholic Church and not all Catholic Mexicans who reside in Rome participate in the CCM. In fact, the CCM is seen by some as an overly popular organization "where the *morenos* [i.e. the lower classes] get together."¹⁷ In short, the expressions of the transnational sacred

¹⁷ The words of a CCM member explaining why certain Mexicans residing in Rome do not wish to participate in the organization.



reveal that even the search for spiritual inclusion cannot be understood independently of what a Latin American Catholic Church in Rome could signify to both lay and religious actors and how, at the same time, “Mexicaness” is contradictorily represented, racialized and imagined.

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