

Reconnecting with the Center for Migration Studies

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In 2016, during a presentation I gave at the annual conference of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, I mentioned that the Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS) had relocated to Manhattan. No one in the audience seemed to know that it was no longer on Staten Island. CMS has indeed traded its Staten Island estate for a Manhattan townhouse, the better to carry out its mission as “an educational institute/think tank devoted to the study of international migration, to the promotion of understanding between immigrants and receiving communities, and to public policies that safeguard the dignity and rights of migrants, refugees and newcomers” (<http://cmsny.org>). Part of that mission has historically been to make archival information on the Italian American experience available to scholars.

CMS is a mission of the Society of Saint Charles-Scalabrinians, an organization founded in Italy in 1887 by Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, bishop of Piacenza, to minister to migrants. He named it for its patron saint, Charles Borromeo, the archbishop of Milan who implemented the reforms of the Council of Trent. (Bishop Scalabrini’s name was added in 1969.) In Bishop Scalabrini’s American parishes, each rectory was headed by a “house superior.” In 1892, in addition to placing his fledgling religious order under Saint Charles’s protection, Bishop Scalabrini put the house superiors in the United States under the authority of a “provincial superior,” and the province took the name of the community’s patron, becoming Saint Charles Province.

The earliest Italian migrants were highly transient, and Bishop Scalabrini thought his missionaries would live together and visit Italian immigrant communities as needed. However, the Scalabrinians almost immediately began staffing parishes, partly because Italian communities had sprung up across the United States by the 1880s, establishing themselves in conjunction with the influx of migrant workers. Another reason for local staffing was that canon law had trouble managing Bishop Scalabrini’s circuit-riding missionaries. Canon law created parishes so all priests knew both whom they were supposed to serve and from whom they could expect support.

Still the Scalabrinians’ nonparochial ministry grew. Bishop Scalabrini had envisioned the pastoral care his priests provided being made available to all migrants from all different language groups and cultures. In the 1950s, this initiative received a big boost from the arrival in the province of two new missionaries from Italy, the brothers Silvano M. and Lydio F. Tomasi; both

received doctorates in sociology, Silvano from Fordham University and Lydio from New York University.

In the 1960s, Italian migration was slowing just as migration from other countries increased. It was time, the Tomasis decided, to consolidate what was known about Italian migration, to incorporate the study of other migrant groups, and to provide a knowledge base for the expansion of pastoral care beyond the Italian community and for the expansion of that care beyond hands-on care in parishes to include advocacy on behalf of all immigrants. In 1964 the Tomasi brothers organized the Center for Migration Studies of New York at the Scalabrinians' Saint Charles Seminary on Staten Island. Initially, CMS carried out its mission in three interrelated ways: Silvano and Lydio participated in conferences on migration; CMS held conferences on the topic; and CMS also communicated research on migration by publishing material about it, chiefly through *International Migration Review*. In addition, CMS collected information on international human migration and organized it into a library (currently housed at its sister institution Centro Studi Emigrazione-Roma) and an archive.

Silvano Tomasi served as the provincial superior of Saint Charles Province from 1977 to 1981 and again from 1987 to 1989. He used that position to encourage his confreres to deposit material from their parishes in the CMS archive. This formed the nucleus around which other material on the Italian American community came to be gathered.

The next turning point in the CMS's history was in 2001 when Father Lydio Tomasi was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease; in 2016, he retired to a residence the Scalabrinians maintain at Bassano del Grappa in Vicenza, Italy. In 2011, Don Kerwin, Esq., came on as CMS's executive director. Through this leadership transition, the CMS archives continued to grow and establish itself as a foundational element of CMS. (I have worked at the archives since 1994.)

The dot-com bubble of 2001 and the Great Recession that followed several years later forced the Scalabrinians to think of more economical ways to administer CMS. Ironically, one economic move was to leave Staten Island for Manhattan, where real estate costs more but where CMS could more readily attract attendees at its conferences and scholars to its archive and thus be more cost-effective in carrying out its mission.

The move to Manhattan has also enabled new collaborations and the recruiting of volunteers. CMS has hosted student interns from New York University's Masters in Archives and Public History program, Saint John's University's Master of Science in Library and Information Science program, Barnard College, and Marymount Manhattan College. CMS's staff is zealous about finding volunteer workers for the archive. When a retired librarian attending a CMS gala mentioned to her dinner companion that she might like to volunteer, the CMS administrative coordinator signed her on immediately.

Thanks to these workers, researchers can expect new collections to become available more regularly. The retired librarian mentioned above has already brought order to CMS's audiovisual and microform collections, which include copies of dissertations on Italian American topics and also copies of rare Italian American newspapers.

Other new items include:

- An addendum to the records of the American Committee for Italian Migration (ACIM) that documents ACIM's successful effort to retain the brothers-and-sisters preference in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act
- An addendum to the records of the American Italian Historical Association that documents the organization's transition to the Italian American Studies Association
- Materials gathered by Daniel Santoro, a leader of Staten Island's Italian American community from the 1930s through the 1950s and a researcher into the island's Italian American history
- Papers that Judge Dominic Massaro gathered during his work with the American Society of the Italian Legions of Merit
- A donation from Miss Marian Caltigirone of nearly four hundred family photographs, including images from nineteenth-century Sicily and twentieth-century Brooklyn that might be of interest to historians of photography or of topics such as wedding customs
- Forty years' worth of material from the Italian Welfare League, a women's service organization founded in New York City in 1922 and still active, a crucial collection for researchers interested in studying immigrant social services, New York's Italian American community, and Italian American women
- A donation from Scalabrinian Father Charles Zanoni that includes photographs of his pre-Vatican II ordination ceremony and prayer cards from the 1930s to the present, a significant contribution to the history of personal devotional life.

In addition, CMS is reprocessing older collections as needed. Approximately half of CMS's archival holdings document activities in Scalabrinian parishes for Italian immigrants. Others document Italian American organizations and individuals. Papers come from people in a variety of walks of life, including artists (painter Alfred Crimi), entertainers (comedian and singer Eduoardo "Farfariello" Migliaccio), labor leaders (International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union official Luigi Antonini), and politicians (Brooklyn Congressman Victor Anfuso), among others. One of the archives's priorities is to reprocess photographs in these collections to meet modern needs for visual content for websites and publications. A recent project involves the photography of Alex Pisciotta,



LEFT: Marian Caltigirone saved this image of her mother's paternal grandparents, taken at a studio in Girgenti, Sicily. RIGHT: This imaginative image of the Holy Family appeared on a prayer card commemorating the profession of first vows of young men who entered the Scalabrinians in New York in 1958.



A column of soldiers, on the left, heads past damaged homes on the Western front in France in 1918. Photograph by Alex Pisciotta.

who in 1918 joined the American Expeditionary Forces and sailed for France armed with a camera that he used to take pictures of himself, his colleagues, the artillery their unit worked with, and their surroundings behind the front lines.

The work of interns has also been invaluable in getting information about CMS's archival holdings online. Researchers can go to <http://cmsny.org/cms-archive/browse-collections/> or Google the Center for Migration Studies of New York and choose "CMS Archives" and "Browse Collections." All the collections listed on the main archives page have been minimally processed—that is, the staff has some idea of what's in the boxes. Fully processed collections—the contents of which have been arranged, placed in archivally sound folders, and boxed and labeled—have links to their own pages and to searchable pdf finding aids.

Digitizing collections, as opposed to digitizing information about them, raises the usual questions of finding people to do the work and also the bandwidth to display it. With CMS's records, there is still another consideration. Some researchers study their own families. Few of them ask about digitization. They seem to appreciate that their information is confined to paper, sometimes in Italian, in a folder in a box in a darkened room. The trouble they go through to visit the archives is the price for not finding all their family secrets (however benign) on the Internet.

I came to CMS in 1979 to use the archives as an historian. Although most of my time now is spent caring for the collection, I still come across documents that spark my imagination. Here in the "diaries" (which are really documentation of expenses presented for reimbursement) of immigration activist Judge Juvenal Marchisio is his account of working with President Lyndon B. Johnson on the 1965 Immigration Act. Among the boxes of papers from the National Catholic Welfare Conference is correspondence from then-Congressman Fiorello La Guardia, trying to get an employee of the Italian Consulate of a small southern town removed because the man sold land to Italian immigrants at inflated rates. Now I also get to witness the excitement of other researchers when they find documents that spark their imaginations in ways that never would have occurred to me.

Interested researchers can email archives@cmsny.org and make an appointment for a Friday in the archives. They may bring computers, camera-phones, or whatever else is needed to conduct their research. There is parking around East 60th Street, but researchers may find it easier to use public transportation, as the N, Q, R, 4, 5, and 6 subways, the Q32 and M15 buses, and the Roosevelt Island Tram stop within blocks of the building.