

Chapter 1

The Soul of a Stranger

Complexity and Conversion

Some Italian American evangelists such as Angelo di Domenica converted in Italy, while others such as Luigi Turco converted in America. Italian-American Protestant evangelists defended conversion as a spiritual growth, while others attacked conversion as a gross Americanization, an insincere conversion meant to foster material advancement. Authors of the 1920s, such as Constantine Panunzio and Gino Speranza, considered the benefits of Protestantism in an America often conceived as a Protestant land. Did the small number of Italian Protestant immigrants have an easier time fitting into American society at a time period when many proclaimed America a distinctly Protestant country? In Italian American literature, Protestant missionaries or converts appear in various depictions from Anna Ruddy's (Christian McLeod's) *The Heart of a Stranger* (1908) through Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964) to Helen Barolini's *Umbertina* (1979). Ruddy's positive depiction may result from her missionary Protestantism, and Puzo's negative depiction may result from his Catholicism. Sometimes these converts return to Italy, to reminiscence about the homeland, such as Giuseppe Canzoneri, or like Angelo di Domenica they return to commence a cautious crusade for Protestantism. These stories that appear off to the side if not offstage in Italian American history (think of Jerre Mangione's Protestant uncle, for example, a minor presence in two memoirs) are complex. What is the relation of such evangelists or converts to America and to Italy? Are they Americanized through

Protestantism or doubly alienated: strangers from America because they are immigrants from Italy, and strangers from other Italian immigrants because they are no longer Catholic?

Near the end of Helen Barolini's classic Italian American family saga, *Umbertina*, the great-granddaughter of the magisterial and determined title character feels "as if her old ancestor, the Umbertina she had fruitlessly sought in Castagna, had suddenly become manifest in the New World and spoken to her" (408). Those tiny two words *as if* are crucial ones. At the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration, Umbertina may reach across time to her namesake Tina, but the latter does not fully recognize or identify that metaphoric grasp. All remains tangential, "as if. . . ." Tina looks at the beautiful bedspread that belonged to her great-grandmother and that an Italian Protestant mission worker, Anna Giordani, had obtained through some questionable trickery. Tina believes, "'Calabria—that's where my grandmother's people were from. In fact I'm named for the immigrant named Umbertina. She should have brought such a spread with her—isn't it gorgeous! Then it would have passed down to me, maybe'" (407). "Should have," "maybe," and "as if"—history speaks, but tentatively and tangentially. Readers of *Umbertina* understand the message more fully than the character in the story. We see the ironies and are moved by them, our recognition of them. Tina sees her great-grandmother's bedspread, but Tina doesn't know it. Tina does not know that the bedspread she sees actually did belong to her great-grandmother. If shadow covers all (*terra di ombra*), how will we ever know our past?

I want to know my great-grandparent Alfredo Barone's story. As I read about Italian American Protestants of the early twentieth century or the few specific documents of Alfredo's that I have in my room—the equivalent of Umbertina's *coperta* at the museum—do I hear only tentatively, tangentially: a strange echo, unclear and imprecise in its reverberations? "I read these articles as history. But also as a cave drawing on the inner walls of my own skull," Paul Auster said about reading of his grandparents' turbulent lives (37).

Temporal distance necessitates the time machine for truth seekers. In the early twentieth century, Monson, Massachusetts nearly had as many immigrant residents as its entire population today. "On October 18, 1904, delegates of the Westfield Baptist Association voted to receive the Monson Italian Baptist Church into fellowship. This little chapel at the Quarry was made possible by the untiring efforts of the Reverend

Alfred Barrone [sic]" (*History of Monson* 18). When I went there a few years ago and walked its streets, including one named Thompson, where my great-grandmother lived with her children while her evangelist husband proselytized in a different state, I did not see the chapel or the house or any sign of the immigrant crowd of yesteryear; nor could I imagine it, any of it, whatever it was. But from a multiplicity of texts, a message and a pattern may emerge: Italian American Protestantism as a negotiation between adopting the demands of Americanization and maintaining a cherished *italianità*. Robert Orsi believes that novelist Garibaldi M. Lapolla's "critique of American values is cast as a scathing satire of Protestant missionary activity [. . .]" (159) in the 1933 novel *The Grand Gennaro*. Yet, Lapolla does not depict the Protestants in a completely negative light. Although "to invite the Italians to sit with them in the gorgeous pews of their splendid edifices—that was another matter indeed" (172), Lapolla also states, on the other hand, that "the work done [by the Protestant missions] was often the means of saving many a family from sheer wretchedness and squalor, if not from starvation" (173). Lapolla modeled his fictional character, Emma Reddle, on the actual missionary Anna Ruddy. Lapolla's very mixed depiction differs from educator Leonard Covello's, who named an award at the high school he led in honor of Ruddy. Miss Ruddy, Covello says, "was a tremendous influence in East Harlem during a lifetime devoted to the cause of the recently arrived immigrant and his children" (32) and, he concluded, "in the unfolding of our lives, Miss Ruddy and the Home Garden filled a need we could find nowhere else" (34).

At any rate, the history of Italian American Protestantism is very complex in its accounting. In their introduction to the essay collection *The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism*, Philip V. Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer state that, "conversion to Protestantism was not an option for most Italians" (11). I would add that radicalism, which they say "provided an alternative to religion" (11), was also not an option for most Italians. Protestantism, like radicalism, may have originated, at least in part, in reaction to the authority of the Catholic Church and out of the liberalizing trends that led to and continued after the reunification of Italy. Both Italian American radicalism and Italian American Protestantism are somewhat less-discussed topics in Italian American studies. The former was seen by many as an affront to hard-earned mainstream American respectability. The latter may be ignored because of commonplace notions regarding the collapsing of the Italian and

Catholic identity. As friends invariably said to me when I told them about this project: aren't all Italian Americans Catholic? Similarly, near the start of their introduction, Cannistraro and Meyer say, "For most Americans, Italian American radicalism is an oxymoron" (2).

Just as during the years of peak immigration there were many and important Italian radicals, so, too, were there Italian Protestants. And just as radicalism relied on trans-Atlantic and transnational connection (Cannistraro and Meyer 5), so, too, did Protestantism. Rev. Agide Pirazzini, for example, noted an interesting mixed condition of Italian pastors: "Italian students for the ministry are generally divided into two great classes: Those who have lived and studied chiefly in Italy, and who therefore need to be Americanized; and those who have lived and studied chiefly in America and therefore need to be Italianized" (152–153). Cannistraro and Meyer believe that their work indicates that "the illiteracy of Italian immigrants in general has been exaggerated" (13). I agree with this observation, for every little storefront church, every evangelical tent meeting had its publication, usually in Italian, sometimes in Italian and some English and, if long-lasting, often reversing over time its proportion of Italian and English. I would add that the number of Protestants, like those of radicals—though again for contrasting reasons—might be underestimated. In his study of Italian emigration and its use in nation building, Mark I. Choate notes how the Italian Catholic church labored to maintain and strengthen ties with emigrants. He says that among the questions that authorities in Italy deliberated—questions that make a direct connection between Protestantism and radicalism—are these: "Should the church help immigrants learn English, and improve their prospects for success in their new homeland? Or might immigrants avoid church services in a language they did not understand and turn to Italian Protestants or Italian Socialists and anarchists for solidarity?" (136). The Protestants, like the radicals, must have had some success. Anna Ruddy, at the end of her fictionalized account of the Home Garden mission in East Harlem, offers the Protestant mission as a means to escape from the clutches of mobsters and anarchists, a different and better source of identity and community (211–215). In a newsletter of April 1916, Rev. Alfredo Barone claimed to have 2,000 members in his Alpha and Omega Assembly stretching across four states: New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

Why do I call these Protestants radical? After all, forsaking Catholicism for a Protestant faith during the heyday of immigration to the United States can be seen as a safe choice, an easy move toward quick assimilation. Some Italian Protestant leaders thought it not so much safe, as absolutely necessary. Sounding the bell of Anglo conformity, Rev. Angelo di Domenica in a 1918 essay claimed “[. . .] the Protestant forces in America ought to come together and study all the ways and means to do a real aggressive work [. . .]. The work must be done, not only for the salvation of the Italians, but for the salvation of America as well” (“Sons of Italy” 191). Connecticut-born (to Italian immigrant parents) Gino Speranza, a lawyer involved in settlement house work in New York City, similarly thought America a Protestant nation and, therefore, “the closer the likeness of mind and character of its people, the better will the American democracy function [. . .] the greater the divergences and differences from the historic homogeneity of the American people, the greater the strain upon American civilization” (27).

During the latter nineteenth century in Italy, anti-Catholic Church sentiment steadily increased and in the years after Unification, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian missionaries proselytized from end to end of the peninsula. The long-surviving Waldensians provided a rich Protestant heritage in the land of the Papal See. But, as Choate has shown, a countertrend also emerged. “Before World War I,” according to Choate, “Italian Catholic missionaries with critical Vatican support eased the transition of emigrants into the disorienting religious and social climate of the Americas. Though bitter enemies at home, the Catholic Church and Italian state were able to work together to ‘make Italians,’ and Catholics, in emigrant colonies abroad” (145).

To convert to a Protestant faith in either the liberalizing reunified Italy or in the self-proclaimed land of the religiously free (a land actually supremely rich in prejudice) required great self-sacrifice. This is why I call the Protestant converts “radical.” Italian born, and educated at Colgate and Brown universities, Baptist Antonio Mangano said quite simply, “It takes much courage and strong conviction to join a Protestant church, for alienation from friends and relatives may follow [. . .]” (*Sons of Italy* 207). Rev. Antonio Arrighi notes that after his conversion, he “was formally disowned at law for disobedience to the will of my parents, and also by the [Catholic] Church as a heretic” (221).

While the Catholic priest Aurelio Palmieri warned in 1918 that “long experience proves that Italians either are or have to be Catholics, else they will ramble about the labyrinth of an ungodly materialism” (177), becoming a Protestant preacher did not lead to earthly wealth, nor did these men lose their way in pursuit of material extravagances. As Luigi Turco recorded in his autobiography, “my financial condition has always been poor” (“Brief Story” 9). Turco, like other converts, noted that when he grew up in Italy “the prestige of the Roman Catholic Church was very low. The only thing I heard about it was the corruption of priests and nuns” (“Postscript” 232). When he did become Baptist: “A terrific persecution was started against me by my sister and her husband [. . .] I wrote to my father in Italy [. . .] He thought that I was getting insane” (“Brief Story” 4).

Invariably, in America the converted would be scorned by family and friends and kept at a distance by Anglo Protestants. The Methodist Constantine Panunzio, near the end of his autobiography *The Soul of an Immigrant* (1921), recalls, “one case where a young man was cast out of his home by his parents because they did not approve of his attending the meetings held in our little chapel. He came very near going insane under the strain” (204). Panunzio notes on the very same page that his supervisors in Boston were not really concerned with the welfare of Italians, they just wanted a good show of numbers, and the people in charge, Panunzio says, lacked any understanding of immigrant culture. In a brief biographical sketch of Alfredo Barone, my grandfather Melchisedec Barone noted that after conversion: Alfredo “was disowned by his aristocratic parents. From that day on he spread the Gospel throughout Italy when it was hazardous to do so. He was stoned, imprisoned, and an attempt [was] made to burn him to the stake.” Panunzio makes no mention in his autobiography of the particular Protestant faith he served and practiced: this imprecision may be a peculiarly Italian Protestant trait. My great-grandfather never became a United States citizen even though he lived in the US from 1899 until his death in 1950. These religious radicals wanted to retain some connection to their Italian past, even as they moved, successfully, into their American future.

Panunzio may not have mentioned his specific Protestant faith because these ministers and their congregants maintained an energetic fluidity rather than a strict sectarianism. In the “Foreword” to his autobiography, Panunzio also notes that his “tale depicts *the inner*,

the soul struggles of the immigrant more than his outward success or failure” (xi). The Italian immigrant navigated and negotiated the many channels of Christian churches. Alfredo Barone, like other Italian Protestant clergymen, started in a Catholic seminary. He rejected Catholicism and converted to Baptism, went to England for some religious training (according to my grandfather), and returned to Italy. After preaching there for some time, he left for America under the auspices of the Home Mission Society of London (according to my grandfather). After a little more than a decade of service throughout the northeast, he broke with the formal Baptist church and formed his own missionary society. According to my grandfather, he did so due to a severe curtailment in funds from the Baptist missionary society. I believe his cherished Italian identity and his interest in Apocalyptic Prophecy and classical philosophy contributed to his decision to strike out on his own (“Requirements”). (Eleven of his thirteen children had Biblical names: the thirteenth child—known as Bill—received Socrates for his first name.) Michael T. Ward, in an essay about the Waldensians in Texas, mentions the Rev. Arturo D’Albergo, who not only moved from place to place in Italy, and back and forth a few times between the United States and Italy, but served evangelical, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Waldensian congregations (196).

Some of these Italians converted to Protestantism in Italy (Alfredo Barone) and others in the United States (Constantine Panunzio). Some went back to Italy. Panunzio writes about this return as do others, such as Antonio Arrighi and Antonio Mangano. In his autobiography, Angelo di Domenica, the Angel of Sunday, recalls that when he returned to his hometown, everyone greeted him warmly and he “preached every evening in that church, which had been built where I was born in the flesh and in the faith. It was filled with people at every service” (*Protestant Witness* 160).

One of the returning minister’s main concerns was the spiritual health of his family members. The converted preacher (usually disowned by his Catholic family), put conversion of his family at the top of his goals. Luigi Turco, for example, notes that after his conversion (in America) his “first desire [. . .] was to lead” his “unreligious family in America and in Italy to the feet of the Master, The Great Master of Life, Jesus the Christ” (“Brief Story” 4). Twelve years later he returned to Riesi where he preached. During a “great revival,” he did convert his family and friends. Similarly, the older brothers of Angelo di Domenica

returned from New York to their hometown, Schiavi d'Abruzzo, "to evangelize their family and endeavor to establish a Protestant mission in their native town" (*Protestant Witness* 22). Angelo records: "On the very evening that they arrived home, Vincent and Tony began to preach the Gospel, not only to the members of their family but to the people who came to inquire about relatives who were living in New York. Every evening they held a service, and the people who came to hear them increased daily in numbers and in interest" (*Protestant Witness* 23). After many years of ministerial work in America, especially in Philadelphia, Angelo returned to Italy. Angelo recalls the start of this mission tour that began in Naples: "It was a magnificent sight to see a congregation of nearly two hundred people assembled in that Upper Hall on a hot summer Sunday morning to hear the message of the Gospel from an American pastor" (*Protestant Witness* 158). As noted previously, di Domenica had a triumphal return to his hometown, but he also preached in Boscoreale, Bari, Mottola, Florence, Ariccia, and Rome. He preached up and down the peninsula in big cities and small towns. He preached usually for two hours and sometimes to audiences as large as four hundred. He preached a mix of American civil religion, Italian pride, and evangelical Christianity. So successful was his preaching tour that he planned to return two years later for a full year, but ill health forced him to cancel this much anticipated trip.

The conversion of the ministers themselves followed a standard Protestant progression: recognition of sinfulness, intense self-examination and self-abnegation, rebirth in the spirit, and public testimony. The autobiographies of converts are a part of their testimony and these spiritual self-histories are meant to inspire others. Antonio Arrighi, for example, divides his book of adventures, his tale of captivity and conversion into three sections: the first section describes his time as a drummer boy with Garibaldi's soldiers; the next section narrates the horror of his imprisonment and enslavement in Civita Vecchia, followed by his escape to America; part three tells of his life in America, his conversion and his return to Italy as a Protestant missionary. The first two sections create strong anti-Catholic sentiment. Without any direct criticisms, the Church is viewed as the power behind the injustices that our hero suffers. Recall that in his novel of 1867 Garibaldi said, "the despotism of the tiaraed [*sic*] priests is the most hateful and degrading of all" (11). Nonetheless, the third section follows the conversion form. In Des Moines, Iowa he attends his first Protestant

church service. Although he does not understand all that the Methodist preacher says and although he fears he has committed a sin just by entering, he does know that the preacher spoke about “Christ as the true bread of life” (201). He moves to Fairfield, Iowa, and in that town he converts at a revival meeting. Arrighi realizes he too often uses “profanity and harsh speech” (203) and begins to “examine” himself (204). He writes, “As I threw myself on the mercies of God and accepted Jesus as my Great High Priest who had given His life to save me, oh, what sweet peace came to my troubled heart? Joy like a river flowed into my redeemed soul” (207). At the annual meeting of the Iowa Methodist Episcopal Church, Arrighi tells us: “at a certain point I stood up before that body of more than two hundred Christian ministers, and in a simple way gave the history of my conversion” (208).

For di Domenica, sin manifested itself in card playing. “Before my conversion,” he writes, “I was addicted to card playing” (*Protestant Witness* 26). His older brother, Vincent, had been a card player, too, but after conversion Angelo’s brother never played cards again. Angelo tells his brother that he, too, has forsaken card playing, but this is a lie. “For several weeks,” after his lie, Angelo says, “I was tormented every night, because in my dreams I was playing cards [. . .]. I was desperate; I did not know just what to do; I could not rest” (*Protestant Witness* 27). He turns to prayer and after three months: “I gave my heart to Jesus Christ who gave me peace and rest. Ever since that time I have never handled cards” (*Protestant Witness* 27). Similarly, Turco reports that “a few months after my conversion God gave me the power to stop smoking, drinking, and illegal [*sic*] sexual relations” (“Brief Story” 4).

Many of the Italian Protestant ministers claim a nominal and corrupt Catholicism as a reason for their conversion. Panunzio, for example, describes his childhood religious education as “very limited, almost a negligible factor [. . .]” (18). He says that religion “was considered primarily a woman’s function” (18). He continues: “We children continuously heard our male relatives speak disparagingly of religion, if religion it could be called. They would speak of the corruption of the Church” (18). The Confirmation ritual for Panunzio, only meant a new suit and some sweets, and “the thing itself [. . .] excited no concern” in his thoughts (44). When he arrived for study at a Catholic seminary, he found it “like a dungeon,” “a tomb” (48). Mangano noted, “it is erroneous to suppose that because a man has spent ten or twelve years in a seminary for priests, he is an educated man” (*Sons of Italy* 48).

“Ritualism and true spirituality exclude each other,” according to di Domenica (*Protestant Witness* 75). He says: “The ritualism of the Roman Church has smothered all true spirituality” (*Protestant Witness* 74). Even though Panunzio could not understand the preacher’s words the first time he heard “a zealous young Baptist preacher,” “something strange gripped [his] soul” (134). He stays at the home of a “devout and practical Christian” couple that prays before meals and reads Scripture. “Their religion,” Panunzio writes, “was a matter of everyday use and this impressed me profoundly” (143). For Panunzio, alive and soulful preaching, the study of Biblical texts, acts of practice rather than ritual: these as well as the perceived half-heartedness of Catholicism inspired conversions. Robert Canzoneri records his preacher father testifying regarding his conversion: “I don’t call any man father but my own father, live in Sicily still. God is the Father, not somebody in a collar turn ’round say hocus pocus you don’t even know what it is’” (100). This statement by the senior Canzoneri contains a forceful appeal to individualism and straight talk.

Social Services and Soul Searching

Two matters, Americanization and preaching in Italian or English, were much debated by Protestant and Catholic missionaries. Choate, for example, notes how Bishop Scalabrini worried that “the emigrants’ identities as Italians and Catholics needed to be cherished, buttressed, and promoted by Italian and American prelates” (133). A rapid Americanization, some Catholic officials believed, might destroy the emigrants’ religious faith and practice (134).

Many of the Protestant clergy debated the use of Italian and the different needs for different generations regarding the language. Panunzio notes that he became Americanized precisely because of separation from all Italian colonies (251). “Immigrant colonies as they now stand,” he claims, “are impenetrable citadels, whose invisible walls no amount of Americanization can batter down” (256). For di Domenica, “The real American spirit is the production of Protestantism, anything foreign to it does not mix” (*Protestant Witness* 154). The logic behind this claim is simple: “America was founded upon Christian principles such as were conceived by people of Protestant faith; hence anything which is not in harmony with the Protestant ideal is foreign to America” (*Protestant*

Witness 137). Like Speranza, di Domenica asserts, “In proportion as the Protestant church fails to evangelize the foreigners, in that proportion the foreigners will ‘foreignize’ America” (*Protestant Witness* 137). In this section of his autobiography, he offers the strangest proof of the success of Protestant Americanization and assimilation. He notes that many people associate Italians with criminals and specifically with gangsters, but, di Domenica writes, “I am glad to tell you that, insofar as I know, there has not been one Italian gangster of Protestant faith who has suffered capital punishment in this country” (*Protestant Witness* 138).

Ruddy draws on criminal sensationalism at the end of her autobiographical novel *The Heart of the Stranger*: if not the mob (she makes use of the Black Hand earlier in the story), then the anarchists. One of the favored youths at the mission house, who has mysteriously disappeared, returns secretly at the novel’s end. The boy’s treacherous father has forced Luigi into committing violent acts. “‘Miss Lindsay,’” Luigi declares in the novel’s moment of highest drama, “‘I am an anarchist!’” (211). He has lost all hope. Miss Lindsay reassures him, “‘There is a way out. Jesus Christ can reach down to where you are now and take you out just as He did before [the time Luigi ran into trouble with the mob]. You are not too far lost for Him to find and save’” (212). According to Ruddy, “The forces of heaven and hell were arrayed against each other for the possession of a human soul, and so strong was the battle that one could almost hear the noise of combat” (214). They kneel in prayer “and when they arose from their knees his face was radiant with joy” (214). Though Luigi’s future remains uncertain as he slinks off into the night, he tells Miss Lindsay before leaving the mission house, “‘You are the truest friend a boy ever had’” (215).

Yet, the mission settlement house frequently promoted Americanization more than the advancement of one’s spirituality. Ruddy’s fictionalized Garden Settlement appeals to city youth by the nontheological means of popular music and sports. Music works because the boys are “little music loving Italians” (96). “The ability to appreciate good music, which others acquired by training and culture,” Ruddy states, “came to them naturally as their rightful heritage” (96). Hence, Miss Lindsay seems ever “at the piano” (110). Isabel Fielding, famed for her voice, joins the mission staff: “she wielded untold influence over the children of a music-loving race” (198). But music alone and her performance of it cannot suffice to reign in these little devils of

the street. "There was much that she could do for the boys," according to Ruddy, "but a young man of the right stamp, whose example could safely be followed, could do infinitely more." That right man is: "Lloyd, the captain of Columbia's famous eleven who had beaten Yale in the football field the year before" (111). These mission leaders sacrifice much to serve others. Robert Lloyd abandons his old family firm on Wall Street for the less earthy, more heavenly "business of soul-winning" (198).

Various activities beyond the bounds of religious services and instruction became central to the Italian American Protestant churches and their missions. In his work from the 1930s, *Protestant Missions to Catholic Immigrants*, Theodore Abel (an immigrant from Poland and a Columbia University professor) rhetorically asks: "Is the social program consistent with the main purpose of mission work, or does it imply that the churches are promoting a new objective which is non-religious in character?" (11). He finds that the social program, as he puts it, meets church needs and aids the church by attracting members and, at the same time, builds character and better social relationships (11). He considers the school programs for young children and such activities as "sports and home-craft" to be especially important for the second generation (12).

Abel's conclusions resemble the prescriptions of Mangano from a decade and one-half prior and the activities of the Hartford Episcopal Italian Mission, which existed for more than forty years. Mangano said that missions must build "Christlike character in those we aid," but he insisted all activities must be "conducted from a religious point of view" (*Sons of Italy* 149). He warned: "The appeal of the social settlement that ignores religion is to self-interest, a motive not lofty enough to stimulate the development of nobility of character" (*Sons of Italy* 149). His advice seems to mirror precisely what the Hartford mission practiced:

The ideal method of work is a union of a social settlement ministering to the physical side of life through athletics, health talks, and visiting nurses; to the mental, through clubs and English classes, music, drawing, and handcraft; to the need of fun, through entertainments and social gatherings; and to crown all and give purpose to life, a spiritual ministry, the preaching and teaching of the gospel of Jesus as the way of salvation, by means of religious services,

Sunday-schools, prayer-meetings, and a modern evangelism.
(*Sons of Italy* 149–150)

Such was the form and action of the Hartford Episcopal Italian Mission. Saint Paul's Italian Episcopal Mission aided immigrants in the negotiation of two cultures more than it propelled them to assimilation through Americanization. According to Jon C. Watt, "Those Italians who converted to Pentecostalism, generally, were not seeking to assimilate but rather to maintain their *italianità* in the face of pressure to assimilate" (177). And Choate observes, "By design Italians abroad would learn of their Italian identity, but, more broadly, *italianità* itself would be deepened, defined, and elaborated for Italians at home" (59). The Rev. Paolo Vasquez led such efforts for his congregation to negotiate two cultures. Born in Sicily, he studied for five years in a Catholic seminary. In a July 1915 article, *La Croce*, the Italian/English Episcopal newsletter, informed its readers that Rev. Vasquez left "for personal reasons" (3). At the very beginning of this missionary work, the Sunday school, "that great fundamental adjunct of the church" (*La Croce* 1), had seventy-eight students and a staff of twelve. In the 1920s, the student number would nearly double: a printed report from the mid-1920s notes that there were 130 students in thirteen classes. The report indicates that during the past year there were twenty-nine baptisms, five confirmations, twenty-five marriages, and seven funerals. Church organizations included the following: the girls' friendly club, the communicants' league, the sewing school, the boy scouts, the choir, a music study group, and the St. Paul's Society (a men's club) ("St. Paul's Italian Church").

Within the realm of the sanctuary the report states that certain renovations at Saint Paul's had taken place: "To look through the dark rounded arches of the Rood Screen past the fine oak choir stalls where our little red-vested choir takes its place so well, to the chancel, with its cream walls and white and gold altar, is a bit more inspiring than receiving impressions from white walls and plain windows." In an earlier report of November, 1920, Rev. Vasquez stated, "It is necessary that something be done to give the people of St. Paul's a more churchly Church. It is a vital question, for the growth of the Mission depends largely at the present time upon having a real Church" (Minutes of the Meetings). Rev. Vasquez believed such church improvements crucial because Italians found storefront worship to be nonchurch like given

that Catholic churches, especially those in Italy, tend to be ornate and outstanding architectural edifices. Interestingly, the church services “are equally divided in language. Two are held in Italian, that the mature may praise God ‘in the beautiful language of the Peninsula,’ and in English, that the juniors may praise Him in their adoptive tongue” (“St. Paul’s Italian Church”). In the notes of the men’s club, English became the standard in late 1947.

In the difficulties St. Paul’s and its congregants faced, can be seen aspects of a negotiation between old world and new world ways. In 1920, Rev. Vasquez explained to the Committee in Charge of St. Paul’s the importance of an upcoming festival for Italians, the Festa San Paolo. Similarly, in 1925, he wrote the Dean of Christ Church Cathedral to explain why the Italians could not attend a planned service in honor of George Washington: “It is an old custom for the Italians to have dances the week before Lent. In this account most of our Italian people have already pledged their attendance to one social or another” (Letter, February 12, 1925). Rev. Vasquez suggested that the Washington service be held at a later date.

If the church and its congregants sometimes held on to the old ways, on other occasions they adopted the new. In 1920, the summer Sunday school celebrated its completion at the Elizabeth Park playground with every child receiving the treat of an ice cream cone. A month later, on the other hand, the church sponsored a celebration “for the Unification of Italy, at which [there was] a collection made for Italian earthquake relief” (Minutes of the Meetings).

A 1943 fund-raising letter takes a partly defensive tone: “I am impressed by the patriotic spirit that is being manifested there [at St. Paul’s] on the part of those people who, either by birth or immediate ancestry, are related to one of the countries with which our country is now at war [. . .].” Then the letter continues: “Thirty-five young men of the Mission are now in the Service with our Armed Forces,” and many of the women perform Red Cross work. The letter conflates church and country by asserting that, “these Italian-American young people are being inculcated with that high type of patriotism which has its source and sanction in the Church [. . .].”

When Panunzio returned to Italy in 1918, he proclaimed the land of his birth “wonderful” (302). He closed his eyes because he “could not bear the glory of the sight” (302). When he reached his home, Molfetta, his “relatives and friends asked all kinds of questions about America”

(310). He “spoke of all the good things,” but did not tell them about all he “suffered” in America because “they would have been shocked beyond expression” (310). And Panunzio stated, “When they asked my advice about their going to America, I could not honestly council them to do so” (310–311). Yet, when he made a speaking tour of Sicily on behalf of his adopted home, he brought with him “small ribbon American flags, and distributed them by the thousands [. . .]” (322).

Panunzio revealed at the close of his memoir his ongoing conflicted feelings about his adopted land and his homeland. Protestantism offered this immigrant a kind of compass. This memoir, its author wrote, “tells of the agonies and the Calvaries, of the bitter sorrows and high joys of an immigrant soul [. . .]” (xi), and it “shows that even a southern Italian can make something of himself under the inspiring influence of America when he has the proper opportunity and is thrown in the right environment” (xii). Some believed that “proper opportunity” and “right environment” depended on a Protestant foundation; others did not. For some, Protestantism offered a spiritual alternative to a Catholicism perceived to be lackluster and authoritarian; for others it did not.

Italian Protestants in Fiction and Memoir

As spiritual autobiography requires a conversion, so fiction needs its fall guy. In some Italian American fiction and memoir, it is a Protestant character who plays this role. By such narration and character construction, an author of modern secular appearance may reveal an ongoing immersion in Catholic culture. Jerre Mangione refers to his Protestant uncle in both *Mount Allegro* and *An Ethnic at Large*. This uncle, Mangione writes, “was the only renegade” in the family, for he “was a non-conformist and a Baptist” (*Mount Allegro* 38). The Italian American who follows a Protestant path will be at least atypical, if not an outsider within a group of outsiders—a religious minority in an ethnic minority. Mangione describes this uncle humorously, if not endowing him with a touch of the buffoon. Luigi “was a celebrity among the relatives” (75–76) because of his conversion. Mangione says when Luigi first came to America he saw an Italian Baptist church and went inside where the minister greeted him kindly, Mangione recounts his uncle saying:

“It was the first happy face I had ever seen on a cleric [. . .] so I joined. We had a long talk first and he told me that you could go much further in this country if you weren’t a Catholic. He said he had in his congregation some of the best-known Italian lawyers, doctors and politicians in town. The minister told me the truth. Did you ever hear of a Catholic who ever became President of the United States? Of course, I can’t say that being a Baptist has got me anywhere in particular; but it is better than fussing over a lot of saints.” (*Mount Allegro* 76)

Here we see the oft-repeated paradox that one becomes a nonconformist in the immigrant community so that one may better conform to the adoptive community.

Perhaps one of the reasons for Luigi’s limited rise in America is the fact that he failed to attain proficiency in English. As Mangione puts it: “My Uncle Luigi, more than any other of my relatives, had to depend on his smiles and charms to maintain good relations with Americans. His English was so rudimentary that it could be understood only by Sicilians” (*Mount Allegro* 57). And his relatives kidded him about his attempts to sway them from their faith. “Whenever he ranted against Catholicism,” Mangione writes, “my mother would smile patiently and tell him that he should certainly have become a priest instead of a mason” (*Mount Allegro* 79). Uncle Luigi, then, becomes a comic figure in the author’s writing just as he was for the elders in his Rochester, New York, immigrant family.

The depiction of Italian American Protestants in Mario Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim* and Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina* expresses strong disparagement of Protestant characters. Chapter 6 of Puzo’s novel almost entirely follows the interaction of Italian American Protestants and a recent convert, Frank Corbo, the husband of protagonist Lucia Santa. Are these fictive depictions critical because the authors are Catholic, because fiction necessitates a villain, or because as Lucia Santa believes, “Life was unlucky, you followed a new path at your peril. You put yourself at the mercy of fate” (12–13). In other words, even if, like Lucia, you never went to Mass and had no use for priests, some believe that it is better to stick with the devil you know.

Although Lucia Santa distrusts and dislikes the Protestant Coluccis from the moment she first meets them, she does not object to her

husband's association with them for two reasons. Puzo writes, "She gave not her assent, for that was not hers to give; the father could not be vetoed. She gave her blessing" (94). And besides—and more importantly—Mr. Colucci promised Frank a job at Runkel's chocolate factory.

This section of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* also points to a connection between Protestantism and literacy. One of the tasks of missionaries in Italy had been the distribution of Bibles. Similarly in the New York of Puzo's story, Frank "took a red-edged holy book from the pocket of his jacket" and then bemoaned, "'This book has the truth and I can't even read it. It's in Italian and still I cannot read it'" (91). Mr. Colucci, however, "promised he would teach Frank Corbo to read and write. They would use the Bible as text" (94).

Lucia Santa's eyes are ours here; we see the scene from her perspective. Although these deeply religious missionaries have wrought "miracles"—"drunkards became total abstainers, evil men who regularly tattooed their wives and children black and blue became sweet as saints" (95)—"Lucia Santa raised her eyebrows in polite astonishment" (thus mocking Rev. Colucci's claim) (95). And although everyone in the room is "Italian," she sees differences between her family and the Coluccis: in class, in origin, and in language, as well as in religion. Lucia typifies the in-name-only Catholic that Protestants—both immigrant and native and both in the United States and in Italy—thought necessitated conversion to a living spirituality, at least from their Protestant perspective. Puzo writes that Lucia "had long ceased to think of God except to automatically curse his name for some misfortune" (96).

It is misfortune (not prosperity or renewal) that the Coluccis and their Literal Baptist Church bring to Lucia Santa and family. Frank soon sinks into the abyss of an extreme Protestant melancholy. Italian American converts followed a classic conversion process. Many of the autobiographies, as we have seen, record a standard path of sin and self-abasement, recognition and self-examination, testimony and sanctification. Luigi Turco recounts in his autobiography how he hungered "for a better moral and spiritual life" ("Brief Story" 3). The young Turco tired of his life, as Lewis Turco puts it regarding his father, as "a young hedonist" ("Father and Son" 34). But the desire for a rebirth had at first, Luigi notes, "created in me a melancholic attitude; the spirit of despair!" ("Brief Story" 3). Some spiritual pilgrims lose their way and remain stuck in this conversion stage, suffering Protestant melancholia. So it happened with Frank Corbo.

“Every night,” Puzo narrates, Frank “went to the Coluccis’ for reading lessons and then to the chapel for services and more lessons” (100). All goes well for a while, but Frank’s favorite Bible verses are those “in which man was brought to book by a wrathful and revengeful God” (100). Frank begins to change. He does not eat. He stares at the ceiling. He rarely sleeps and when he does “he would wake in the middle of the night and curse his wife, first in a slow, then a quickening, rhythm—the rhythms of the Bible” (102). Frank Corbo declines into madness and a permanent institutionalization at Bellevue Hospital and then Pilgrim State Hospital for the Insane. Lucia Santa thinks of Colucci: “Callow, criminal in his meddlesome religiosity—he was the cause of her husband’s illness” (105).

Even worse, even more villainous than the Coluccis are the Giordanis of Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina*. Anna Giordani, a nurse—social worker among the Italians, comes from a northern Italian Waldensian background. She has some money and education. In other words, Anna and the main character Umbertina have little in common. Like Anna Ruddy or Mr. Colucci, it seems Anna’s intentions are honorable, even if the benefits are arguable. Read to the end of the novel, read those final two pages of chapter 33 when Tina, the great-granddaughter, unknowingly sees Umbertina’s beautiful *coperta*, wedding bedspread, at the Ellis Island Museum in an exhibit of artifacts from the Anna Giordani Collection (407). Umbertina sold this blanket to Anna in order to finance the family’s move out of their decrepit life in tenement New York. Anna said she had arranged for a Quaker woman to buy the *coperta*, and when Umbertina has a change of fortune and wants to buy back the bedspread, Anna calls her an “Indian giver.” Umbertina replies, “What have I to do with Indians?” (77), but she might as well have been Chippewa as Calabrian because Umbertina, the narrative proves, was correct when she “wondered why this woman, who felt so superior because she was English-speaking and Protestant, still bothered to call herself Italian” (74). This Protestant missionary steals Umbertina’s past and with it, a piece of her identity. Although this realization at the end of the saga both saddens and surprises the reader, Umbertina’s message seems to reach Tina, her great-granddaughter. The *coperta* on display, Barolini says, spoke to Tina: “Of Italy and the past and keeping it all together for the future” (408).

Like Tina, I also seek “the past” as a way to keep “it all together for the future.” Have I discovered my great-grandfather in a still-stand-

ing storefront along Congress Avenue in New Haven, a building that he once owned and where the *Alpha and Omega Assembly Newsletter* originated? Have I discovered him (or myself or you) in a photograph of a congregation in Monson, Massachusetts? Have I discovered him in these pages?

Alfredo Barone had a brother who also came to America, who also converted to the Baptist faith, and who also preached in the United States. Giovanni, or John, Barone settled in Waterbury, Connecticut. Angelo di Domenica mentions him once in his autobiography (*Protestant Witness* 55). I remember my father saying that John became a banker. Is this the actual American story? Alfredo wore the dark traditional clothes his entire life. Did John adopt the flannels of American business? I have one book that my great-grandfather gave to my grandfather. Alfredo gave it to his son twice. He gave it to Melchisedec in Calitri, Italy, on the occasion of his fourth birthday in 1897. Alfredo kept this book and gave it to his son again in May 1950, shortly before he died. Inside the volume are two inscriptions. The latter reads: “Conservato per mio figlio il Dr. Barone da me suo Padre per più di 50 anni” (“Saved for my son Dr. Barone by me his father for more than 50 years”). The book is *Gli Animali Della Bibbia e le Lezioni Che Ci Danno* (*Bible Animals and Lessons Taught by Them*) by Richard Newton and translated by Giovanni Luzzi. Luzzi, a Protestant, preached in both the United States and Italy and wrote a history of Italian Protestantism. Newton wrote many books in the late nineteenth century of what might be called popular religion, for example, *Bible Models Or the Shining Lights of Scripture: A Book for Every Home* and *Five-Minute Talks for Young People; or, The Way to Success*. What is the relation between the late-nineteenth-century awakenings in Italy and in the United States, and what is the relation of these awakenings to the social gospel typified by Charles Sheldon (*In His Steps* 1896) and the commercial gospel of Bruce Barton (*The Man Nobody Knows* 1925)? Madison Grant in his anti-immigrant ranting proclaimed: “These immigrants adopt the language of the native American; they wear his clothes, they steal his name; and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals [. . .]” (81).

The history of Italian American Protestants in the early twentieth century shows that they did indeed do all of these things, though one might be reluctant to say Luigi Turco “stole” an Anglo girl. Yes, they might have changed Giovanni to John or they might have retained an

Italian name and mode of dress, but they also profoundly understood Protestantism, American ideals, and struggled to match that understanding to challenges both behind them in the home country and those still to come in their adopted land.