THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE EVANGELISATION OF ‘NOMADS’ IN ITALY

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Abstract

It was only in the 1900s that the Catholic Church began to concern itself systematically with the evangelisation of ‘Nomads’. The pastoral strategies did not develop as a monolithic set of actions within the Catholic Church; rather, they varied in relation to specific events and showed considerable diversification. The article discusses this complexity and the interplay between different imageries about the Roma and Sinti and different evangelisation modalities. Eventually, it identifies three active lines which operated within the Catholic Church: the Church of ‘projects’ for integration, the Church that evangelises, and the Church that ‘smells of sheep’. Each line built on different categorisations of Roma and Sinti and proposed different pastoral strategies. The article sums up the history of each line, their evolution and their ‘evangelisation imagery’ by evoking the actions of three pioneer priests who, as of the 1950s, started pastoral action among Roma and Sinti in Italy.

KEYWORDS: Catholic Church, Evangelisation, Gypsies, Nomads, Roma and Sinti, Italy

Introduction: the exemplum Christi

This article discusses the attitudes and pastoral strategies that the Catholic Church addressed to the Roma and Sinti population during the second half of the twentieth century. Drawing from materials collected through a multiplicity of methods and approaches (literature review, archival research, ethnographic fieldwork among Roma, and interviews with clergymen and laymen involved in Catholic Church’s pastoral strategies), this article describes the interplay between different imageries about Roma and Sinti and different evangelisation modalities. I will show that the pastoral strategies implemented since the mid-1900s did not develop as a monolithic set of actions within the Catholic Church; rather, they varied in relation to specific events and showed considerable diversification in accordance to the different bodies, within the Church, that idealised and/or implemented such strategies on the basis of specific categorisations of the Roma and Sinti population. Finally, I will sum up the history
of three main active lines that operated with Roma and Sinti by evoking the actions of three pioneer priests who, as of the 1950s, started pastoral action among ‘Nomads’ in Italy.

That the Catholic Church has been contributing greatly in the organisation of missionary activities since 1622 with the institution of the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (nowadays the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples) is a well-known fact. European ‘Gypsies’, however, have never been the focus of attention, not even in the field of the so-called ‘people missions’. The Church distinguishes actions organised in non-European ‘mission countries’, from people missions in ‘Countries of Christianity’ – that is, where people have already received religious education but have then neglected or forgotten it (Châtellier 1993). In Italy, pastoral activities among ‘Gypsies’ do not seem to have been frequent during the modern age (Novi Chavarria 2007: 139–140, Stasolla 2003: 99). Actions were carried out in France, Spain, Holland, Belgium and Hungary in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but only on the initiative of individual priests or laymen. It was only in the late 1900s that the Catholic Church began to concern itself systematically with these people that Evangelisation workers had ‘overlooked’.

Even though the French Church founded the Aumônerie Catholique des Gens du Voyage in 1948 and the Spanish Church, through individual priests, also made intense efforts to evangelise the Gitanos, nonetheless, the idea of a capillary institutionalisation initially took shape within the Vatican in the early 1950s, alongside the affirmation of a ‘mobility world’ category. This ‘mobility world’ was to be built on Papal, Council, Episcopal and more generically, ecclesial directives that grew in number and complexity in the late 1900s and 2000s.

In 1952, Pope Pius XII enacted the apostolic constitution Exsul Familia, which is still considered as the fundamental text for the Catholic Church’s pastoral mission towards migrants (migrantes). The title originated from explicit analogy with the Holy Family of Nazareth who had experienced the reality of forced migration when obliged to flee to Egypt. The Exsul Familia sanctions eternal divine protection for all exiles and migrants around the world and defines the duties of the Sacred Consistorial Congregation, namely to organise their spiritual care.

In the first official sermon in the history of Christianity addressed to the ‘Dear Gypsies, dear Nomads, dear Gitanos’, in 1965, Paul VI reserved a fundamental place for ‘Nomads’ in the Church: the heart.

1. In this article, the use of the terms in brackets such as ‘Gypsies’ (zingari), ‘Roma’ (rom), ‘Sinti’ and ‘Nomads’ (nomadi, or nomades in Latin, which still is the language of official documents) reflects the use adopted by the Catholic Church in its discourse concerning the persons that consider themselves as Rom, Sinti, Roma, Gitanos, Manuš etc., and who, for reasons of clarity, will be here referred to simply as Roma and Sinti.
In the Church you are not on the borders but, under certain aspects, you are in the very centre, you are its heart (Paul VI 1965: 1).

Knowing that in Catholic theology, the Church symbolises the mystic body of Christ, the ‘Nomads’, as the heart of Christ, therefore took a fundamental place in this mystic anatomy, indicating a spiritual promotion that inverts a centuries-old history of conflict. Ten years later, in 1975, the example of the Holy Family proposed by the *Exsul Familia* was taken up again by Pope Paul VI during a speech to a group of ‘Nomads’. After receiving them with an ‘Up with the Nomads’, he explained:

> Our liking [for you] besides being human, is also Christian because you reflect an aspect of the life of Jesus ... You have a similarity with Jesus. You have a kinship with the Lord. Why? Because our Lord, our Master, our Brother, Jesus, when He was still a defenceless child, He was a nomad too, He was a refugee too, He also had to flee to save his own life ... And so Jesus, I would say, mirrors us, reflects us, He becomes one of your children because He also had to experience the same fate ... Then He began to preach ... He had to go here and there, accepting occasional hospitality from some good person and sometimes had to spend the night in the open with nowhere to lay His head. See how Jesus is like you, how He is near you. And, like Jesus, the apostles did the same, Saint Paul did the same [... he who] followed the profession of nomad in order to be an apostle ... This is why you are dear to us. It is exactly because, in some way, you reflect the life of the Gospel and of Jesus (Paul VI 1976: 6–8).

This reference to the Holy Scriptures is a fundamental aspect for understanding the sense of ‘Gypsy Evangelisation’ work. Indeed, the interpretation of the set of actions that will be hereby analysed requires an understanding ‘from the inside’ of the cosmology within which Evangelisers operate, bearing in mind the essential role played herein by the distinction between the global dimension (*Ecclesia universalis*) and the local dimension (*Ecclesiae particulares*). Pius XII’s and Paul VI’s references to the Holy Family united the members of the ‘mobility world’ that Vatican bureaucracy was constructing at that time with a kind of mystic bond. Besides, while for centuries in modern Europe ‘Gypsies’ had been thought of as a ‘cursed race’, also due to their nomadism (Geremek 1988, Piasere 2011), with a complete twist, through the method of *exemplum Christi*, their life was suddenly portrayed as similar to that of Jesus and the apostles, exiles and preachers. Paul VI thus reconceptualised the nomadism attributed to European ‘Gypsies’ as ‘reflection’ of Christ’s life on Earth – and thus almost sanctified it.
The institutionalisation process: from *vagi* to *nomades*

In 1952, following the *Exsul Familia*, the Sacred Consistorial Congregation created its first agencies for organising pastoral care for circus and fairground workers and other nomadic people (‘Nomads’), known as (respectively) the ‘Religious Assistance at Travelling Shows and Equestrian Circuses’, and the ‘Catholic Gypsy Mission’ (Gabella 1990: 222, Spreafico 2014: 580–581). In 1958, the same Sacred Congregation set up the Spiritual Assistance Work for Nomads in Italy [*Opera Assistenza Spirituale Nomadi in Italia*] (OASNI), whose purpose was to ‘produce, among the circus and travelling show people and among Gypsies, persons and groups educated in Christ, able to direct their environment towards Evangelization’ (cited in Spreafico 2014: 584). These initial official initiatives were entrusted to don Dino Torreggiani, a priest from the Diocese of Reggio Emilia (see below), who, in the early 1960s, was alarmed to see Italian ‘Gypsies’ joining the Pentecostal Evangelist movement (Spreafico 2014: 585). This move was not surprising: the gradual but quite spectacular spread of this movement was a constant concern for the Italian Catholic Church (see Piasere 2012), and represents a fundamental reason for the development of a post-council pastoral campaign in the whole of Europe in contrast to the ‘sects’ (see Bellido Caro 1995), and an additional reason for the first beatification of a ‘Nomad’, the Spanish *Gitano* Ceferino Jiménez Malla, in 1997 (Peraboni 1998: 45).

A profound institutional turning point occurred at the Second Vatican Council in 1965 when Paul VI proclaimed the *Christus dominus* Decree, dedicated to the pastoral office of bishops. Article 18 of this Decree stated that bishops were to show ‘special concern’ for those persons who ‘on account of their way of life’ could not be included in ordinary parish pastoral care. The official Latin text describes these people as: ‘quamplurimi migrantes, exsules et profugi, maritime sicut et aeronavigantes, nomades aliique id genus’ with the official English translation being: ‘the majority of migrants, exiles and refugees, seafarers, air-travellers, gypsies, and others of this kind’. The Decree represented the first formalisation of the *Ecclesia Universalis*’s interest in the *nomades*. It is interesting to note that, in the official translation, the Latin term *nomades* is always translated literally in the French (*nomades*), German (*Nomaden*) and Russian (кочевники) versions, yet in the English version, it is translated as ‘gypsies’ (in small case). Even the Spanish version speaks of *nómadas*, thus collocating the Spanish Gitanos, sedentary for centuries, among the ‘Nomads’. It should also be noted how the Council extended the ‘mobility world’ to all land, air and sea travellers. Similar pastoral needs (i.e., those connected to the purely momentary presence in parishes) thus grouped together migrants, refugees, tourists etc. with ‘Nomads-Gypsies’. The specificity of this
group was to be sanctioned in the new Canonical Law text of 1983. While the 1917 text (canon no. 94) used the old term of ‘vagus’ (translatable as vagabond, vagrant), establishing that a vagus’s parish priest would be the parish priest of the place in which he found himself at a given moment, the 1983 text (canon 568), deconstructed the concept of vagus, by identifying ‘migrantes, exsules, profugi, nomades, navigantes’ (migrants, exiles, refugees, nomads, seafarers) as people for whom the parish priest’s care was unsuitable and for whom it was better to nominate, when possible, specific chaplains. On the basis of this meta-category of ‘mobility’, which, despite modifications over the years, remained essentially unchanged, the Vatican Court forged its pastoral care organisation in both bureaucratic and catechistic terms.

In 1965, an ephemeral Opus Apastolatum Nomadum (Work for the Apostleship of Nomads) had already been set up but it had disappeared in 1970 when, on the basis of council formalisations and classifications, two parallel structures were created, marking a fundamental organisational turning point:

1) aimed at the Ecclesia universalis, the Pontificia commissio de spirituali migratorum atque itinerantium cura (Pontifical Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People) was set up at the Sacred Congregation for Bishops, a Council with an international function and that still publishes the People on the Move journal. In 1988 it was renamed the Pontificium consiliun de spirituali migrantium atque itinerantium cura [Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People], without any substantial changes. It was subdivided into nine sectors, including one for ‘Circus and Fairground people’ and one for ‘Nomads: Sinti and Roma’. As of 2017, this Pontifical Council was abolished and the new Dicasterium ad integram humanam progressionem fovendam (Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development) was brought in. The Statute of the new Dicastery still foresees assistance both material and spiritual – if necessary also by means of suitable pastoral structures – to the sick, refugees, exiles, migrants, the stateless, circus workers, nomads and other itinerant populations (Pope Francis 2016: art. 3, §3).

2) aimed at Ecclesiae particulars in Italy, the Spiritual Assistance Work for Nomads in Italy (OASNI) was maintained but transferred to the guidance of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), (the assembly of Italian bishops), and particularly the Episcopal Commission for Migration and Tourism (CEMiT). The OASNI organisational structure establishes: a ‘promoter’ bishop, nominated by the CEI (every three years), a national delegate and national representatives (usually two, following the bipartition of the ‘Nomads’ between ‘circuses and fairgrounds workers’ and ‘Gypsies’). Then there are chaplains, selected by the bishops, who operate in the dioceses. Chaplains depend on the local bishop but
are invited to follow the pastoral lines indicated by the delegate and national representative.

This structure remained practically unchanged until 1987, when the Fondazione Migrantes was created, marking yet another important turning point. The Fondazione Migrantes was set up as a ‘specific pastoral commitment’ towards the migrantes, ‘intended as people involved in the phenomenon of human mobility’ (Petris 1997: 132) and answers to the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), in particular to a Migration Committee. The Fondazione Migrantes was divided into five Offices: the Italian Emigrant Office, the Foreign Immigrant in Italy Office, the Sea and Air Farers Office, the National Office for Circus Entertainers, Fairground Workers and Street Artists and the National Office for the Pastoral Care of Roma and Sinti (UNPReS). Each Office was coordinated by a national delegate and had its own specific organisation. The five Offices disappeared in 2012 and the Fondazione Migrantes underwent considerable centralisation. It was then taken over by a Board of Directors and a single national delegate with executive functions who now directs the pastoral activities regarding all migrantes.

In a recent work, don Agostino Rota Martir identified three active lines in the Catholic Church that operate with Roma and Sinti: 1) the Church of ‘projects’ for integration; 2) the Church that evangelises, 3) the Church that ‘smells of sheep’. He also stated that these three ‘presences sometimes intertwine, they communicate but also clash’ (2014: 58). In the following pages, I will refer to Rota Martir’s tripartition but also draw on materials personally collected through many years of research, in order to sum up the history of each line, their evolution and what Nicoletti (2008) would call their ‘evangelisation imagery’; and I will do this by retracing the steps of three pioneer priests who, as of the 1950s, started pastoral action among ‘Nomads’ in Italy: don Dino Torreggiani and don Bruno Nicolini (who aimed at integration projects), and don Mario Riboldi, (who pioneered the evangelising Church).

The Church of Works

Don Torreggiani (1905–1983) first came across ‘Gypsies’ as a newly ordained priest in the early 1930s. In 1948, he founded the Istituto dei Servi della Chiesa (Institute of Church Servants), which opened various types of pastoral activities in different places in Italy, Spain and Madagascar, with a focus on ‘forgotten souls’ and especially ‘nomads, prison inmates, irretrievable civilians’ (cited in Spreafico 2014: 579). Don Torreggiani and the Church Servants kept two categories of ‘Nomads’ well apart: the ‘Nomads for work (travelling and circus entertainers)’ and the ‘Nomads as people (Gypsies)’ (Altana 1993:
They always considered the mission among ‘Nomads for work’ as a specific pastoral terrain for their Institute, even though they were aware that many ‘Gypsies’ were part of it too. From 1952, don Torreggiani’s activity became very intense and two-fold. On the one hand, embracing the works of Saint Giovanni Bosco and his ‘preventive education’, he founded ‘institutes’ all around Italy, such as a hospice for retired circus and fairground workers (in the province of Florence), a college for fairground workers’ children (in the province of Treviso), and a college for Sinti children (in the province of Rovigo); on the other hand, he urged bishops and cardinals to visit caravan camps, perform masses and grant audiences to circus families. Don Torreggiani wrote letters and sealed alliances, so much so that he was nominated Director of the Spiritual Assistance Work for Nomads in Italy (OASNI), when this was set up by the Sacred Consistorial Congregation in 1958. He also inaugurated a highly successful and long-lasting practice: a periodical meeting between ‘Nomads’ and the Pope. Apparently, he was also the first to embrace the idea of promoting an ‘international Gypsy gathering’, which was systematically proposed in the 1960s and 1970s. The first ‘international’ gathering (held in Gonzaga, in the province of Mantua) in 1953, was a failure as very few ‘Gypsies’ attended. Don Dino’s comment on it is interesting:

> They feel the weight of great injustice upon them, which has been oppressing them for centuries: the injustice of being considered as outlaws, constantly sent away, constantly mistrusted ... The concentration camps, in which they were imprisoned and barbarically treated at the beginning of the war, have remained in the Gypsy soul as the saddest memory of their adventurous story ... Only eight tribes came to the gathering and they felt lost and humiliated by an unforeseen exhibition (cited in Spreafico 2014: 582).

This passage suggests that in the early 1950s don Torreggiani was well informed about the treatment that the Fascist government reserved for ‘Gypsies’ during the Second World War, such as their deportation and concentration in camps (which only recently have been the object of specific investigation and occasion for commemoration). The fact that don Torreggiani knew of the existence of concentration camps and never divulged it well expresses his substantially ambiguous attitude towards fascism. His ‘metapolitical spirituality’ (Spreafico 2014: 13), indeed, saw him linked to traditionalist cardinals and embrace a Catholic fundamentalism that disapproved of the Council’s new ideas and found its Catholicism ideal in Francoist Castiglia.

To this very day, the CEI entrusts the pastoral care of circus and fairground workers to the Church Servants (in a similar way as is practiced in mission countries where a congregation is assigned a given region to evangelise),
and the Servants follow pastoral lines that are substantially loyal to those laid down by don Torreggiani in the 1950s, based principally on proselytism, finding souls to save, the importance of administering sacraments and, a prime objective, discovering sacerdotal ‘vocations’. Just as the missionaries in the 1800s were convinced that ‘Africans were to be saved by Africans’ or that the Patagonians were to be saved by Patagonians, don Torreggiani was convinced that ‘Gypsies’ would be true Christians when they were evangelised by ‘Gypsies’ (Spreatico 2014: 589). On his original imaginary, we find striking formulations in texts reserved for religious operators rather than the public at large. In one of his pastoral care Manuals, for example, he invited the Evangelisers to help Gypsies come out of the ‘baseness of gypsyness’, since only travelling entertainment had a certain dignity in his opinion (cited in Scaramuzzetti 1998: 103). He complained that ‘for centuries, Gypsies have been in contact with the Christian world and the civilized world, without ever being absorbed into them’ (Torreggiani 1965: 36).

If don Torreggiani’s actions were aimed mainly at the religious world (also developing the ‘Church that evangelises’), don Bruno Nicolini (1927–2012) was instead oriented towards the ‘civil society’. A priest from the Diocese of Bozen/Bolzano, don Nicolini’s interest in the pastoral care of ‘Gypsies’ started in 1959, when his bishop entrusted him with this commission, which he initially accepted unwillingly (Placidi 2014: 26). Nicolini soon entered into the See’s hierarchy, initially in faraway provinces in Italy, and then in Rome as the organiser of the first international pilgrimage to Pomezia in 1965; from 1967 he was the international secretary for Opus Apostolatum Nomadum, a work that, as mentioned earlier, existed between 1965 and 1970. He envisaged pastoral care through a top-down, centralised perspective, envisioning regular international ‘Gypsy pilgrimages’ and ‘Gypsy gatherings’, public announcements of commitment and involvement of high members of the Church and State. Mindfully cultivating his connection with non-ecclesial organisations and sensitive to the issue of social promotion, in 1965 Nicolini founded the Nomad Assistance Work [Opera Assistenza Nomadi] which later became Nomad Work [Opera Nomadi] (ON), a ‘moral body’ recognised by the Italian State and aimed, above all, at getting the ‘Gypsies’ into school. Up until the end of the 1980s, Nomad Work played a rather ambivalent role, since it wanted to be both laical and non-sectarian while contemporarily inspired by Christianity (besides, don Nicolini himself was constantly registered in the OASNI list as a chaplain in the Rome Diocese). The journal Lacio drom

3. Nomad Assistance Work and Spiritual Assistance Work for Nomads in Italy both originated from the Catholic Mission for Gypsies and the names betray common inspiration, as don Torreggiani seems to have suggested (Altana 1993: 45). For years, the ON and the OASNI had head offices at the same address in Rome and, for years, many members of the Institute of Church Servants were also members of Nomad Work.
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(1965–1999), originally a Nomad Work bulletin, reported continually on the pastoral care of ‘Gypsies’ and the ecclesial world.

In regard to his initial imagery, at the end of the 1960s don Nicolini spoke of ‘Gypsies’ as ‘almost pagans’ to be transformed into Christians by going through a process of ‘citizenization’ (Quijada 2000), that is, the process that has historically absorbed entire populations so that they ‘become citizens’ (i.e. respond to the requirements set by the nation-state). According to don Nicolini, ‘Gypsies’ sociological and psychological traits hindered ‘religious and civil elevation’, that is their evangelisation and citizenisation processes. By sociological obstacle he intended the allegedly archaic structure of ‘Gypsy’ world, which ‘has not evolved at all’ (1969a: 124); this backwardness depended in turn on the ‘Gypsies’ psychological characteristics (in don Nicolini’s words, a ‘Gypsy ethnotype’), featuring instability of character and allegedly provoking infantilism, profound self-insecurity, a fear of taking on responsibilities, a lack of foresight, falsehood and nomadism itself. Embracing the racist argument of the German doctor Hermann Arnold, Nicolini was not afraid of citing the thesis of Robert Ritter, the Nazi doctor who was co-responsible for the Roma and Sinti genocide during the Second World War, and according to whom, psychological instability and nomadism among ‘Gypsies’ were hereditary characteristics (Nicolini 1969a: 117–124). It is evident here that racist theories on ‘Gypsies’ in the Italian Catholic Church accompanied theological reforms and social promotion tension for a time, without this provoking any contradiction.

Another exemplar is the case of Mons. Giuseppe Marafini, the first bishop to promote pastoral care among ‘Nomads’. Mons. Marafini, indeed, specified in those years that, while travelling entertainment and circus workers’ life was gradually becoming ‘standardised’ (since they had a ‘well-classified type of work and well-rooted family morality despite being characterised by incessant permanence in caravans’), the ‘Nomad’ situation (that is the ‘Gypsy’ situation), was ‘extremely more difficult and complicated due to the effect of hereditary and racial habits’ (1969: 6).

The Church that evangelises

While don Torreggiani founded ‘houses’ all around Italy and don Nicolini founded sections of Nomad Work, don Mario Riboldi (born in 1929), the

4. The entire chapter on ‘psychological and sociological obstacles’ was reproduced word for word as an autonomous article (Nicolini 1969b) in an issue of Lacio drom published to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights. Ritter and Arnold’s names therefore appear beside works devoted to human rights, Nazi extermination and daily anti-Gypsyism!
parish priest of a small village in the Milan Diocese back in the 1950s, started visiting Roma and Sinti camps. He was the spokesman of yet another type of pastoral care, whose main path consisted in daily testimony and little or no visibility, in living with the ‘Nomads’ and praying in their language. The differences between don Nicolini and don Riboldi’s positions were clearly expressed from the first international meeting of ‘Gypsy chaplains’ held in 1964. For Nicolini ‘Gypsy evangelization’ was ‘a missionary problem ... also because it requires training and education’ (Nicolini 1965: 33); hence the enormous religious commitment needed to ‘transform the structures, shape personalities’. Riboldi instead, only explained how to activate a ‘mission of friendship’:

I live among the caravans, carts, tents, in summer and in winter: I share food with the Nomads, that they obtained by begging ... I travel with horses and makeshift vehicles on the roads from Milan to Pavia, from Como to Bergamo and even as far as Bologna and Trieste (Riboldi 1965: 34).

As he recently also recalled:

I didn’t get on very well with don Dino [Torreggiani] because I was thinking about travelling around with the Sinti and he did not see this avenue as apostolate among people who were still so nomadic (2015: 26).

Riboldi’s pastoral care, which was not led astray by demands for social promotion, was austere. ‘Of course Gypsies are excluded’, he said at a meeting of diocese chaplains, ‘but, after all, it’s their own fault because European people are basically welcoming, as the fact that they allow the Gypsies to live on begging would show ... Moreover, theft is widespread among them; there are exceptions, to be proved’ (cited in Baroni 1971: 27). Here he overturns the guarantees established in modern juridical systems based on the principle of innocence. ‘Gypsies’ would be sinners whose souls must be saved by adhering to the Church and practicing the sacraments. Contrary to don Nicolini’s Nomad Work, don Riboldi saw nomadism as a trait to be protected rather than eradicated. This is why he went to live among Roma and Sinti, learned their language (becoming an expert in romani dialects spoken in Italy), and translated prayers and passages from the Gospel and the Bible, even caressing the idea of creating a ‘more appropriate Christian language’ for them (Riboldi 1998). He edited Rom comunità in cammino, an OASNI publication with articles, accounts and passages from the Gospel printed in capital letters so that the semi-illiterate Roma and Sinti could read them. For romani transliteration, he invented an alphabet based on the Italian one. He also held the national position for ‘Gypsy pastoral care’, in accordance with the Vatican organigram of 1970, for about ten years. When he was replaced, in contrast to the new management, he set himself another mission: to take the first ‘Gypsy’ saint to the altars. He achieved this in 1997, when, thanks to his
effort (drafting the biography required for the beatification process), Ceferino Jiménez Malla, a Spanish *Gitano* killed by anti-Francoists in 1936, was beatified by Pope John Paul II.

As of 1970, pastoral care for ‘Nomads’ underwent considerable progress, as if ‘repairing the sin of omission in the past’, as Mons. Dino Tomassini (the bishop promoter who most radically re-organised the OASNI) said (Baroni 1972: 17). The number of priests, monsignors and monks involved in this mission went from 39 to a peak of 82 in 1973 and 1974, and to 54 in 1984. In addition to these (who were under the orders of their bishops), there was also a fraternity of Little Sisters of Jesus, which was joined over the years by a fraternity of Luigine Sisters, a fraternity of Little Brothers of the Gospel and another from the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. These were further joined by various types of laymen who assisted the nominated priests. Some of these religious figures and laymen, following don Riboldi’s example, decided that they could fulfil their duties better by living among the ‘Gypsies’. But there is more: trained in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the ideas of the 1968 youth movements, and marked by their experiences of life among Sinti and Roma, many began to contest old ecclesial practices, to develop an innovative ‘on-site imaginary’ and to propose unexpected pastoral and theological reflections. I will now briefly analyse this third line, which, for thirty years between 1981 and 2010, influenced evangelisation among Roma and Sinti in Italy.

The paradigm of sharing: the Gospel ‘with feet’ and the Gospel ‘that smells of sheep’

Following the teachings of their founder, Father de Foucauld, and in the spirit of imitation of Christ (who went to dwell among men and share their life), the Little Sisters of Jesus and other similar fraternities went to live among the ‘Gypsies’ and shared their lives. They wanted – I use the words of one Little Sister in one of the very first reports – ‘to be one of them, to accept being treated and despised as the world treated them’ (Anonymous 1965: 23); ‘our lives should, in any case, be the imitation of Jesus of Nazareth – a contemplative life immersed in the world’ (ibid.: 24). These persons were determined to be witnesses of faith without teaching anything, but rather sharing their days with the ‘Gypsies’. About thirty years later, Sister Mercedes, a Franciscan nun, who lived in a camp in Rome, repeated similar ideas:

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We live in a caravan, with the presence of Christ in the Eucharist to whom we all refer to as: our daily life (Amostegui 1995: 21).

Sister Mercedes called this style of sharing an ‘attempt at incarnation’, and criticised pastoral workers who went among the ‘Gypsies’ as ethnocentric catechesis teachers:

By putting ourselves totally on their side, we start to see the world differently although just as valid, rich and beautiful. Therefore we experiment the partiality of our humanity, our culture and even our experience of faith (ibid.: 22).

She also valorised a relationship of communion that, although ‘less structured’, attenuated ‘rivalry and competition’ (ibid.: 24). The following report from two Luigine sisters, who live with the Roma in Turin, is another significant articulation of what they call ‘our style’:

It is a problem for us when religious communities are obsessed with works, with the organisation of activities and services ... We are constantly experimenting our being ‘useless servants’ faced with the recurrent mentality that clings to success (Rita and Carla 1995: 9–10).

This approach is miles away from the pastoral tradition of don Torreggiani’s Church Servants and don Nicolini’s ‘Works’ for civil development, but also from don Riboldi’s traditional evangelisation method. The nuns underline the importance of ‘listening’ and ‘respect’: so, ‘rather than thinking about evangelising, we find that we are being evangelised by them’ (ibid.: 10). The Second Vatican Council had insisted on the need for the missionary to ‘adapt’ (called ‘enculturation’ in the documents), but here everything was totally overturned and there was no boundary between evangelised and evangeliser.

With don Francesco Cipriani’s nomination (Diocese of Verona) to OASNI’s national representative for the ‘pastoral care of Gypsies’ in 1981, and don Piero Gabella’s nomination (Diocese of Brescia) in 1984, the role of sharing became increasingly relevant. These two priests both implemented this choice by living in a caravan with, respectively, Rom and Sinti communities. Sharing life was not ‘an ornamental element’ (Simonelli 2012: 125), a tactic to further indoctrinate, as was obvious in the case of don Riboldi; rather, it became ‘an evangelic idea, an ecclesiologic vision and an anthropological prospect’. When OASNI became UNPReS in 1987, don Gabella became the national Director and held the position until 2007. Unlike the afore-mentioned fraternities of nuns, these priests who lived among the Roma and Sinti also practiced an intense activity in the roles that ecclesiastic hierarchy progressively granted them, and the laymen in their communities also had responsible roles in Vatican committees and in the editorial boards of journals. Thus, we have the case of Cristina Simonelli, considered as one of the most innovative
theologians in Italy and currently the President of Italian (Female) Theologian Coordination, and Giuseppina Scaramuzzetti – the inspiration behind many UNPReS National Congresses.

In those years, the laymen who were part of that network and who bordered on positions close to Catholic anarchism, like Daniele Todesco and Marcello Palagi, were members of the UNPReS Pastoral Council. The line that the group continually proposed was based on the idea of contemplating ‘the Gypsies’ life’ through immersion into their daily living, in order to find signs of the presence of the Spirit. As Mons. Garsia, the bishop who was then President of the Ecclesial Commission for Migration, recognised

all in all, these pastoral workers all seem to be contemplatives to me [ ... but] since no-one is paying them ... they are working like Gypsies, [ ... they] collect iron ... do lots of little manual jobs, [ ... there are those] who live in St. Francis-style poverty, giving up the use of money and sometimes resorting to begging (1998: 2–3).

Don Gabella had well-explained the ‘urgent need’ for this type of pastoral care:

a) to overcome the stereotypical awareness that we now have of Gypsies as delinquents, beggars, needy; b) to open convivial relations with them where pastoral workers and Gypsies are equal; c) to gather what the Spirit has already done among them; d) starting from this contemplation, to walk together for a church that has something to offer society and the church itself that sent us (1997: 12).

The search for ‘syntony’ with Roma and Sinti to be found ‘from the bottom’ became fundamental. Consequently, a theological search developed that surpassed the traditional figure of the missionary, the saviour of souls, that the three pioneer priests had held so dear. Reflections arose on a less efficient and more contextual theology linked to people’s rhythms, a theology of small things and fragility (Scaramuzzetti 2008), that favoured profoundness over extension (Simonelli 2012), posing the same distinction among those dimensions that Geertz (1971: 111–112) respectively called the force and scope of a religion.

This theology listened carefully to the voices of women, even those influenced by feminism, who reflected after having experienced sharing and contemplating with Sinti and Roma, not before (Simonelli 1995). All this explains don Cipriani’s proposal (2004) of ‘living the Gospel with the feet’ and sharing life in order ‘to listen to the religiousness that Roma live, to valorise their language and their vision of the world, knowing that it is not necessary to stop being Roma to be Christians’. While some anthropologists developed an approach for an aesthetic contemplation of ‘Gypsies’ (‘Tsiganes’) (e.g. Szczuczynski and Williams 2006), this network of religious workers advocated a kind of spiritual contemplation of ‘Gypsies’, criticising the very metaphor of ‘pastoral’
action and the evangeliser as the ‘shepherd’. As don Cipriani asked himself, ‘who are the sheep supposed to be? The brothers and sisters to whom we are reciprocally entrusted?’ (2003). Following don Cipriani’s line of thought, don Agostino Rota Martir commented (2014: 60): ‘If those brothers and sisters are “sheep”, then we must see ourselves as a “Church that smells of sheep”’. 

In that thirty-year period, the management of OASNI, later UNPReS, abandoned the stale criticism of ‘Gypsy culture’ and developed careful and informed accusations against Italian society’s rising anti-Gypsyism. Immersed in the daily experience of violent acts that the Sinti and Roma were subject to, those priests and laymen drafted numerous press releases denouncing what was happening in anonymous suburbs and often with the national press’ complicity of silence. Once more, it was from the sharing of life that the need to construct an authentic critical theology arose, one that would incorporate conflict as its place of existence, one that would assume the anti-Gypsyism that the Roma and Sinti were facing every day as the heart of the problem. Anti-Gypsyism, Simonelli (2012: 126) wrote, is able to ‘distort any communication’ and the fact that ‘this trait is not seen as such by the majority of the ecclesial community, who, indeed, often agree with the contemptuous behaviour towards them, is part of the problem’.

Of course, these methods and positions were minoritarian within the Church, and bishops and superiors did not always understand the desire to go and live with the ‘Gypsies’ instead of carrying out their services merely by making periodical visits.6 Moreover, there were often conflicts with the local Church and parish priests or parishioners who enacted racist behaviour towards the ‘Gypsies’. The question that was progressively forming was whether to prioritise Catholic conversion work among Sinti and Roma or the fight against the anti-Gypsyism of Christian but racist priests and parishioners. While Pope Paul VI’s sermon in 1965 had publicly placed ‘Gypsies’ ‘at the heart’ of the Church, the parishioners were still keeping them on the edges of their parishes, or even beyond ...

**From nomades to migrantes**

The categories that the Catholic Church adopted in relation to the Roma and Sinti population and which refer to mobility deserve a few final words. The Christian exaltation of nomadism proposed by Paul VI was taken particularly to heart by the religious figures and laymen who chose to share life as a privileged path to evangelisation. They always defended the ‘Gypsies’ right

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6. Don Riboldi himself had to wait several years to get permission from his bishop.
to nomadism in Italy and some of them continued to declare themselves as ‘Nomads’, even when their caravan wheels ran aground in the sand of a suburban space and no longer turned, together with those of the Roma and Sinti, forced into sedentarisation.

The fact that the more active representatives of the Catholic pastoral institutionalisation of ‘Gypsies’ were priests operating in France and northern Italy, areas where Roma and Sinti nomadism, both voluntary and forced, was, and still is, practiced, profoundly influenced the taxonomic placement of their own pastoral care. Although still bureaucratically included in the field of migrantes et itinerantes care, the powerful classificatory feature of ‘mobility’ has interacted ambiguously with that of ‘ethnicity’. Don Torreggiani’s original distinction between ‘Nomads for work’ and ‘Nomads as people’ overlooked the fact that, in Italy, many Sinti were circus and fairground workers or that many circus and fairground workers were of Sinti origin (Trevisan 2011). Therefore, in pastoral worker documents, the Italian term ‘Nomadi’ was often used in reference either to the ‘Nomads’ ‘by profession and as people’ or to ‘Gypsies’ only. However, at the beginning, this ‘mix-up’ reflected a complex reality. The bureaucratic separation of pastoral care that was gradually occurring, due to distributing the ‘Nomads’ among religious members from different congregations or typologies, attributing the care of travelling entertainers to the Church Servants and that of ‘Gypsies’ to the ‘Gypsy priests’, actually contributed in creating different types of evangelisation where there had been historical and cultural continuity. Catechism for circus entertainers was, to some extent, different to that for ‘Gypsies’ and it contributed to strengthening the idea that ‘Gypsies’ and circus entertainers were different Christian humanities. The process of taxonomic schismogenesis among what we might call ethnic ‘Nomads’ and ‘Nomads by profession’ was officially confirmed in 1987, when the Spiritual Assistance Work for Nomads in Italy disappeared and the two Offices inside the Fondazione Migrantes were founded – one for the circus and fairground workers and one for ‘Roma and Sinti’. It was at this moment that the supporters of sharing began to lead the process of ‘Gypsy’ evangelisation. In their rhetoric, sharing life proclaims the immersion of missionaries among Roma and Sinti. At the same time, the emphasis on nomadism decreased and more attention was given to the reasons behind their identity, to the respect for their cultural difference and to anti-Gypsyism.

Despite the ethnicisation process, the majority of UNPREs workers had undoubtedly built their own pastoral identity on the peculiarity factor of nomadism and on going to live in a caravan (the ‘nomad Church’). Now, in the first fifteen years of the 2000s, the collective demonisation of the ‘Nomads’, which began in the previous decades, has reached its climax in Italy. The institutionalisation and consequent construction of ‘nomad camps’, which the
Nomad Work and local administrations (municipal and regional) had been promoting for decades – both for nomadic and non-nomadic Roma – contributed to concentrating Roma and Sinti families in peripheral and often degraded areas of the cities, simultaneously increasing the visibility of their state of separate-ness. The arrival of tens of thousands of Roma refugees during the Yugoslavian wars in the 1990s, and thousands of Roma beggars from Romania after 2000, radically amplified their visibility, triggering two contradictory effects. On the one hand, visibility furthered alarm against the ‘Nomads’ in the public opinion where the term had become a linguistic label synonymous with ‘Gypsy’; on the other, it increased Roma and non-Roma activists’ and third sector operators’ allergy to the openly racist meaning that the term ‘Nomad’ had acquired. In this atmosphere some Roma and non-Roma activists started to declare that there is no such thing as a ‘Nomad’ and that Roma had never been nomadic ‘by tradition’. They were forced to become so.7

In this period of ‘Nomad’ alert, which coincided with the increasingly large-scale arrival of immigrants and refugees from Africa and Asia, the Church began to review its pastoral organisation in regard to ‘mobility’. Following the introduction of prelates from the Italian Caritas to managerial positions at Fondazione Migrantes (in 2010), an administrative centralisation process has gradually removed the decisional power of ‘the Gypsies’ priests’. The specialised pastoral care for ‘Nomads’, on which post-council documents had so insisted and due to which a generation of workers ‘with feet’ had been created, is being dismantled in favour of a more general pastoral care for ‘migrants’.8 In this new perspective, supporters of the ‘Gospel with feet’ are openly marginalised, also due to a kind of self-liquidation.

In fact, the old network that had managed the UNPReS up until 2009, the group of sharing missionaries, paid the price of not having a fundamental generation change. Many of them had retired or passed away and young priests perhaps did not find the idea of going to live in today’s Roma refugee shantytowns as fascinating as the young priests of the 1970s did. Moreover, while ‘Gospel with feet’ workers had always been highly allergic to the industry of ‘social promotion’, nowadays the siren of national and international projects and financing for ‘inclusion’, which favour widespread rather than in-depth action, is incredibly loud. Ecclesiastic politics has also adapted. In recent years, the Fondazione Migrantes’ action towards Sinti and Roma seems to be retracing don Nicolini’s Nomad Work line of intervention rather than that of don

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7. See, for example, the interview with Santino Spinelli, an Italian Rom, in the blog ‘RomaIdentity’ (https://romaidentity.wordpress.com/2014/06/17/santino-spinelli-ai-giornalisti-i-rom-non-sono-nomadi/).
8. The Statute of the new Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (art. 1, §4) foresees the setting up of a specific section for ‘refugees and migrants’ managed, with an unusual procedure, by the Pope himself.
Gabella’s UNPReS and is more inclined towards big Catholic organisations, such as Caritas, than towards don Cipriani’s ‘Gospel with feet’. Even some of those from the old UNPReS network have become activists of NGOs that manage hundreds of thousands of euros a year. Today’s Church dialogues with the petitions of ‘illuminated fundamentalism’ (Fekete 2006) and with the industry of human rights, and organises highly publicised meetings with the Pope. Certainly sensitive to anti-Gypsyism, it has nonetheless returned to seeing Roma and Sinti as souls to be saved. Isn’t it perhaps the ‘Gypsies’ fault if the newspapers talk badly of them? This is what Pope Francis said on 26 October 2015 at a meeting that triggered the protests of many activists.9

‘Nomads’ in this Church, also under the influence of illuminated fundamentalism, have decidedly disappeared. That scant minority of pastoral workers who are still living with Roma and Sinti, loyal to the perhaps more radical teachings of the Second Vatican Council, that reticular Church, sprinkled and dispersed among the encampments, allergic to self-heroism and, in many ways, invisible even in the moment of the Church’s partial restoration to integration and great performance-making,10 represent a particular moment in the general history of Catholicism, whose counter-hegemonic action must be fully evaluated.

References


9. In this case, the term used was ‘Gitani’, an exotic Hispanicism that is not normally used in Italian to denote Roma and Sinti in general (See Pope Francis 2015).
10. Inversely, representatives of the Church of ‘projects’ for integration are receiving recognition and considerable visibility: in 2004, the process for the beatification of don Dino Torreggiani was officially opened (he would be the first Roma and Sinti pastoral worker to be made a saint); in 2008, the City of Rome presented don Bruno Nicolini with the Campidoglio Award for Solidarity; in 2017, monsignor Gian Carlo Perego, General Manager of the Fondazione Migrantes since 2009, was nominated Arch Bishop of the Ferrara-Comacchio Diocese (making him the first Roma and Sinti pastoral manager to receive the purple gown).


The Catholic Church and the Evangelisation of ‘Nomads’ in Italy


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