

SOCIETY OF SAINT RAPHAEL

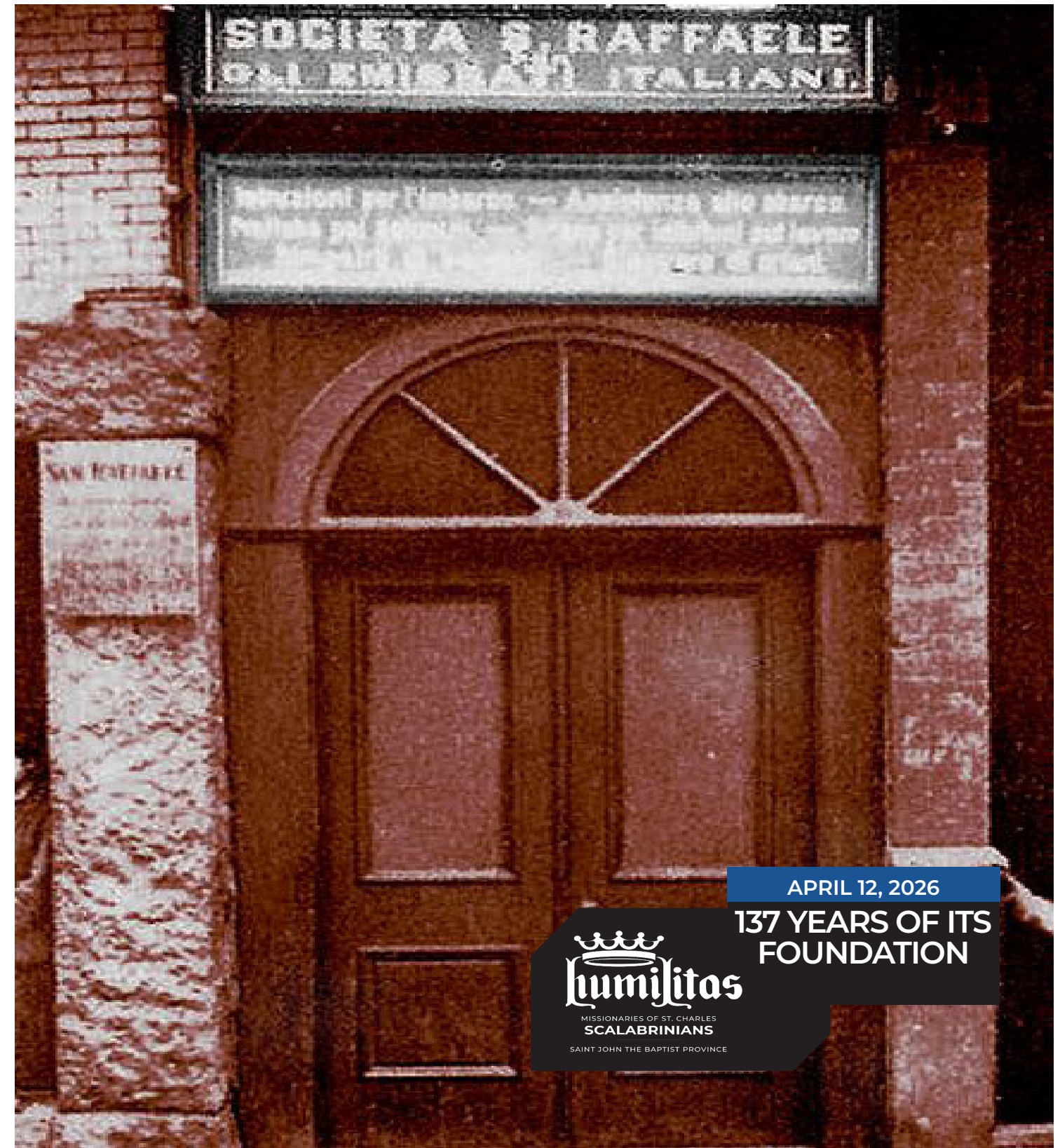


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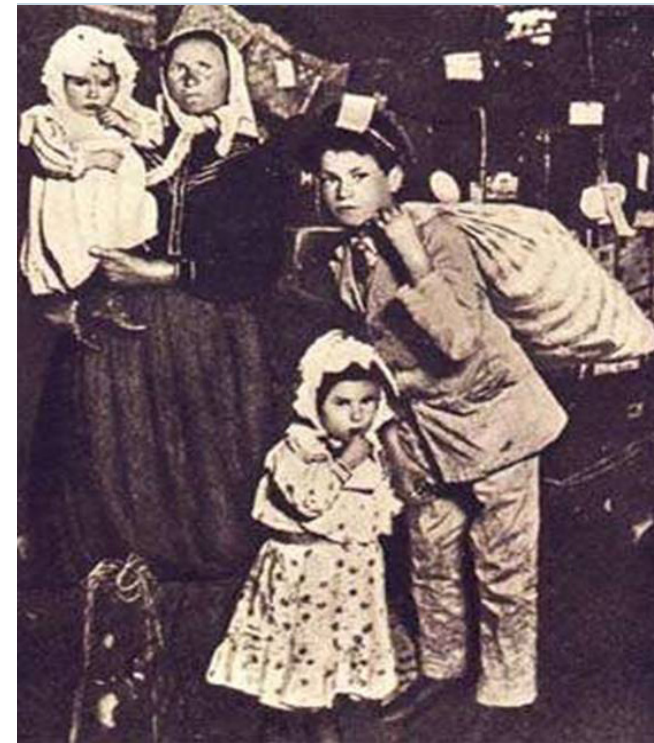


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The Plan of Saint John Baptist Scalabrini to address the material and spiritual needs of Italian emigrants



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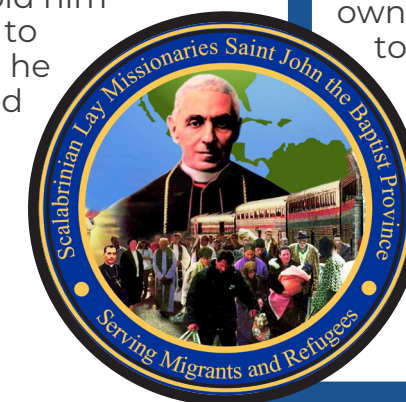
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On April 12, 2024, 135 years are commemorated since Saint John Baptist Scalabrini founded in Piacenza, Italy, the Central Committee of the "Patronage Association for Italian Emigrants," which two years later would become the **"Italian Saint Raphael Association"** This anniversary is an opportune occasion to recall the importance of the involvement of Catholic laypeople in addressing the human and spiritual needs of people in situations of human mobility.



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It was from a meeting between Saint John Baptist Scalabrini and a former student of his at the diocesan seminary of Como, Fr. Francesco Zaboglio, that Monsignor Scalabrini began to devise a plan to address the material and spiritual needs of Italian emigrants to the Americas (North and South America). During his visit, Fr. Zaboglio told him that his family had emigrated to North America and that when he visited them there, he witnessed the sufferings and difficulties experienced by Italian migrants without support from government authorities or the Church.



This encounter was fundamental for the beginning of Monsignor Scalabrini's work in favor of Italian emigrants and for his contributions to the Church's pastoral care for people in situations of human mobility.

Saint John Baptist Scalabrini was familiar with these sufferings; his own blood brothers had emigrated to South America.

During his first pastoral visit to his diocese of Piacenza, he was able to learn the stories of many people who had decided to leave their homeland in search of a life with fewer hardships.



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Moved by his conversation with Fr. Zaboglio, Monsignor Scalabrini wrote to Cardinal Simeoni, Prefect of Propaganda Fide, expressing his concern about the abuses and neglect suffered by Italian emigrants in the Americas, presenting proposals to address their moral and material needs.

Later, Monsignor Scalabrini wrote his first text on migration: "Italian Emigration to America. Observations." It was published in June 1887 in the weekly newspaper of the Diocese of Piacenza, "L'Amico del Popolo."

In this text, Saint John Baptist Scalabrini describes the difficulties and the state of abandonment experienced by Italian emigrants, supporting his analysis with

statistical data. He also presents what governments and organizations in European countries had done for their emigrants. Finally, he proposes a series of actions that the Church and the government could take to address the needs of their emigrant compatriots.

At the beginning of Chapter IX, titled "How to Provide?", Scalabrini states: "As we have already seen, the needs that cause suffering to our emigrants can be divided into two classes: moral and material, and I would like there to arise in Italy a patronage association (an assistance association) that would be both religious and lay, so that it could fully respond to this need."¹



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REFERENCE

¹ Scalabrini, John Baptist. "Italian Emigration to America. Observations." In: Congregation of the Missionaries of Saint Charles – Scalabrinians. Scalabrini and Modern Migrations: Writings and Letters. Bogotá, Colombia, August 2005. p. 29.



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The Holy See considered it more appropriate to send priests to places of emigration, setting aside the participation of laypeople in the project presented by Monsignor Scalabrini.

The Prefect of Propaganda Fide, with the approval of Pope Leo XIII, invited Monsignor Scalabrini to collaborate in the implementation of a project to assist Italian emigrants. His original proposal was to establish a committee composed of priests and laypeople who would care for the religious and material well-being of emigrants in their places of origin, at ports of departure and arrival, and in the places where they settled.



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THE MISSION OF THE LAITY IN EMIGRATION

A year and a half after the beginning of the “institute of priests for emigration,” which would later become the Congregation of the Missionaries of Saint Charles, Saint John Baptist Scalabrini established in Piacenza the Central Committee of the “Patronage Association for Italian Emigrants.” Scalabrini created this lay association following the example of the German “Saint Raphael” association, which he had described in *“Italian Emigration to America. Observations.”*

For Scalabrini, the creation of lay committees was essential in order to address the material and moral needs of migrants. For this purpose, it was indispensable that religious and laypeople join forces. The committee in Piacenza was the first to be established; later, committees would be founded in Genoa, New York, and Boston. However, due to various circumstances, this institution promoted by Monsignor Scalabrini remained active for just over 30 years.



Photo: Cordon Press

The pastoral work of the laity in the field of migration was again promoted by the Scalabrinian missionaries during the 1950s and 1960s, linking it to lay groups of “Catholic Action.” After the Second Vatican Council, a theological reflection began on the commitment of the laity in evangelization and human promotion.

All Christians, through baptism, are called to become disciples of Jesus, each responding to this call according to their specific vocation. Since the General Chapter of 1992, Scalabrinians have committed themselves to accompany lay people in deepening their response to live their discipleship through belonging to the Scalabrinian Lay Movement (SLM) or by dedicating part of their lives as volunteers in one of the congregation’s ministries.



Ellis Island Archive Photograph

SOME ELEMENTS OF THE WORK OF THE SAINT RAPHAEL SOCIETY THAT CAN INSPIRE TODAY THE WORK OF THE LAITY IN THE FIELD OF MIGRATION



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1. PRESENCE AT CRUCIAL MOMENTS OF THE MIGRATION PROCESS

Saint Raphael was most effective when present at the moments when migrants were most vulnerable: at ports of departure and arrival. Sometimes, as on both shores of the Mediterranean, this need still exists, perhaps in even more dramatic forms given the prevalence of smugglers and human trafficking mafias.

Ships have become rafts, and even if crossing an ocean is no longer the case,

shipwrecks are even more frequent. Sometimes ports are called borders, and journeys take place through jungles or deserts.

Certainly, we will not solve a problem that international organizations and governments have not been able to resolve, but together with laypeople we can think of a presence that makes a difference for someone.



Scalabrinian Archive Photographs



Photograph: Volunteers Canada – Workers' Mass, July 2018

2. THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF INVOLVEMENT

Saint Raphael demonstrated its effectiveness in helping immigrants navigate bureaucratic procedures and obtain legal protection. In particular, it contributed decisively to improving Italian emigration law.

Scalabrini teaches us that social assistance to emigrants has a

political dimension. Laypeople have a specific role in dialogue with the political and associative world, and they are already fulfilling it, but there is room for a more structured and organized presence that maintains its identity while being open to collaboration.



Scalabrini Archive Photograph

3. ACCOMPANIMENT UNTIL INTEGRATION INTO SOCIETY

Many emigrants have benefited from the services of Saint Raphael, and much has been done in this field in the congregation over the past forty years, especially through migrant houses and reception centers.

In these places, migrants are not only welcomed but also helped to find a place in the workforce and in society. This is a space where laypeople can act with competence and autonomy.



Photograph: Volunteers Canada – Coast Cranberries Farm, Rosary



Scalabrini Archive Photographo

4. CULTURAL ACCOMPANIMENT



Scalabrini foresaw the direct involvement of Saint Raphael in schools for emigrants abroad. This is an area in which Saint Raphael was not very effective; however, Scalabrinians have carried out numerous initiatives related to culture throughout the history of

the congregation. Today, this is reflected in involvement in the world of communication and in study and research centers.

Scalabrinian Archive Photograph

5. THE ETHICAL-RELIGIOUS DIMENSION

This is an area in which laypeople have always been involved, although their specific contribution has not always been fully recognized.

In a time of transformation like the one we are living in, it is our responsibility to recognize and encourage the role of the laity in the mission, especially that of migrants themselves and those who have been migrants.

It is also our duty to have the broad vision of Scalabrini, who explicitly included in the statutes of Saint Raphael that the association was also open to non-Catholics.

Scalabrini was a practical man, more interested in solving problems and concretely helping people than in engaging in debates. Today, migration attracts many words and debates without offering solutions to those still driven by desperation.

To laypeople who have seen that desperation and are willing to share Scalabrini's vision, we offer the possibility of making a contribution— their own contribution— within the autonomy of their vocation and respecting their competencies.

Scalabrinian Archive Photograph



Photograph: Volunteers Canada – Rosary, Abbotsford, February 2020