Tracing Footsteps:

Ritual, Place-Making, and Negotiating Identity in Italian-Canadian Processional Landscapes

by
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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Italian patron-saint processions operate as spatial practices that shape community identity across geographic and cultural contexts. At its core, it asks how ritual movement transforms urban space into meaningful place, and how these practices are carried, adapted, and sustained through migration. Focusing on two case study processions from Calabrian towns – San Nicola da Crissa and Torre di Ruggiero – and their diasporic counterparts in Ontario, the research traces the continuity of these traditions as they move between homeland and diaspora.

The study employs a multi-layered methodology combining archival research, oral histories, photographic analysis, and architectural drawing. Through plan obliques and detailed vignettes, processional routes are mapped and analyzed revealing the relationships between bodies, ritual objects, and the built environment.

The findings show that processions do more than move through space, they transform it. Streets, piazzas, and neighbourhoods become temporarily redefined as sites of devotion, memory, and collective presence. At the same time, these rituals operate as place-making practices and transnational anchors, reproducing the logics of the hometown within new urban forms – where churches take on the role of piazzas, and statues become fixed markers of diasporic identity. In diasporic contexts, processions adapt to local conditions, reshaping their routes, soundscapes, and ceremonial rhythms while continuing to carry the traditions of their places of origin. In this way, they create what can be understood as "double towns," where past and present, here and elsewhere, are held together through movement.

The thesis concludes that architecture extends beyond static form, emerging instead through the relationships between people, movement, and place. Through procession, communities actively produce space as lived and meaningful, demonstrating how identity, memory, and belonging are not only preserved, but continually made and remade across landscapes and generations.



0.1

Photograph of the Processione della Madonna delle Grazie, Torre di Ruggiero, date unknown

Photograph from author's family archives.

I would firstly like to acknowledge the lands on which this work was developed. I am grateful to have lived and studied in Galt, where the University of Waterloo School of Architecture is situated in Block One of the Haldimand Tract on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples, and in Toronto, where much of this research took place on the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, Anishinaabe, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples.

This thesis traces ritual movement and diasporic processions across these places, and in doing so, I recognize that the lands, streets, and spaces that sustain these practices exist within longer histories of Indigenous presence, displacement, and resilience. While I refer to this place as "Canada" for clarity, I understand it as a colonial construct that continues to shape patterns of movement, belonging, and settlement which enable diasporic communities to gather but also place limits on whose mobility is recognized and whose remains constrained.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people I feel deeply indebted to for their generosity and support throughout this journey. I don't think there is a way to fully express how grateful I am, but thank you.

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Lastly, to my family – my parents, Natalie and Frank, and my brother Adam – my forever supporters. There are no words to express how lucky and grateful I am for everything you have given me. I love you endlessly.

DEDICATION

To my nonno's Agostino and Cesarino and my nonna's Francesca and Teresa, as well as the thousands who made the brave journey across the ocean, thank you.

In memory of my Zia "Unna" Anna,
I carry you with me in everything that I do.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Good Friday in Toronto

As a child some of the most vivid memories I have revolve around the celebration of family traditions. One of my family's many traditions involved attending the Processione di Cristo Morto (Procession of the Dead Christ) on Good Friday along College Street in downtown Toronto, which in our household was simply called the Good Friday procession.

Being raised Catholic, I understood that this was a religious procession depicting the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. I remember being captivated by all of the moving parts of the procession; the dramatic re-enactments of the stations of the cross, the brass bands playing traditional melodies so loud I could feel my chest vibrating, the religious statues being carried by men young and old, all the flags representing different Italian saints and parishes held high by their congregation members, and the older women and men who would recite traditional hymns and prayers in Italian as they were walking. Despite all this, the part I anticipated was seeing my Nonna walk in the procession. Finding my Nonna amongst all those who walked in the procession was the part that my brother and I looked forward to the most. Once finally spotting her in the crowd, we would wave to get her attention, and when she spotted us, her smile would beam from ear to ear, always waving back and blowing us kisses. Every year she walked, she wore a red cape representing her parish church, St. Francis of Assisi Church, the main Italian parish in the Little Italy area and the church from which the procession set out.

At the time, I did not understand the significance of what walking in the procession meant; I simply thought it was something my Nonna did because she liked going to church a lot. Walking in the procession, however, is an intrinsic part of the devotional ritual, a form of active participation in the solemn celebration of Good Friday.[1] It is only since I have gotten older and dove research into the research for this thesis that I have understood that the significance of walking in this procession is much more layered and complex than what I had once thought.

For my Nonna, and for many of the older Italian immigrants who participated, the Processione di Cristo Morto was an expression of religious devotion that extended beyond Toronto, reaching across thousands of kilometers back to Italy and to the many small towns from which they had emigrated. It functioned as a vehicle for religious devotion, rooted in traditional ritual practices and sustained by a deep and enduring faith, through which participants could publicly express their relationship with God, honour Christ's suffering, and reaffirm religious traditions carried with them across the Atlantic.

1 Vincenzo Pietropaolo, *Ritual: Good Friday in Toronto's Italian Immigrant Community 1969-2016* (Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2016), 18.

At the same time, the annual Good Friday procession also played an important social role within the immigrant community. By bringing participants together in shared ritual practice, it helped Italian immigrants establish a sense of belonging within the urban landscape of Toronto. Over time, the event also became a space in which first- and second-generation Italian immigrants could engage with one another, a that was defined by shared history and allowed them to continually reshape their identities as Italian-Canadians.

In recent decades, the Good Friday procession has continued to evolve, gradually taking on a more visible and theatrical character. Elements such as dramatic reenactments – which includes scenes depicting the Flagellation of Christ – as well as the procession's growing exposure through television, print media, and social media, have contributed to its increasing popularity and public profile, which at times can resemble a public parade as much as a devotional ritual.[2]

While these changes reflect the organizers efforts to broaden the procession's appeal and ensure its continuation, they also highlight the ways in which the event now exists at the intersection of the sacred and the secular. Yet for many of those who continue to participate, the procession remains deeply rooted in faith and memory. As Paul explains in Jordan Stanger-Ross' book, Staying Italian, "We don't put it on to … have a parade, to have a show. The people that participate … they really have that faith; they do it with faith, they do it with love."[3]



1.1

Nonna walking in the Good Friday Procession, Toronto, 2019

Photograph taken by author. My nonna Francesca partaking in the Good Friday Procession on College Street carrying Jesus' crown of thornes.

2 Pietropaolo, *Ritual: Good Friday in Toronto's Italian Immigrant Community 1969-2016,* 18.

3 Jordan Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia* (The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 77

A History of Procession



1.2

A scene from the Good Friday Procession, College Street, Toronto, 2015

Photograph taken by Vincenzo Pietropaolo. In this part of the procession, Veronica displays the veil which has been imprinted with Jesus's face to the crowd of Pious women as they fall to their knees. This photograph is part of a larger collection found in Pietropaolo's book *Ritual* (2016).

While the Processione di Cristo Morto may be one of the most well-known examples of religious procession in Toronto, it is by no means the only one. Religious processions occur across many cultures and regions of the world; however, this thesis focuses specifically on Italian patron-saint processions and the roles they play in shaping community life. In the small towns of Calabria, these processions function as important mechanisms for sustaining cultural continuity, reinforcing shared memory, and defining communal identity. This study examines how these ritual practices operate within their original context and how, once transplanted to Canada through migration, they take on new meanings within an urban environment. In doing so, the thesis explores how Italian patron-saint processions help immigrant communities negotiate their relationship with urban space while simultaneously fostering social, communal, and individual identities within the Italian diaspora in Ontario.

Religious festivals and processions have been prevalent in various cultures for many centuries. These processional events serve many purposes aside from the outright act of devotion they display; they are often markers of time, as they reflect the social, political, and religious fabrics of the societies in which they occur.[4] Space, like time, is also defined by these processions in different ways. As part of the ceremonial aspect, religious processions physically occur in the same location and often take participants through a set route which changes little over time.[5] The ritualized movement of a religious procession not only inscribes itself upon the spatial environment of the community but also imbues these spaces with meaning, fostering collective memory and reinforcing a shared sense of belonging rooted in ancestral traditions.[6] By retracing established routes and gestures, processions function as embodied links between past and present, reinforcing cultural continuity through performative practice.[7] Beyond reaffirming identity for those within the community, these events invite outsiders to witness and experience both the culture and religion, fostering understanding and building bonds that extend across social, cultural, and even generational boundaries. In this way, processions serve not only as acts of devotion but also as living expressions of heritage that bring people together and introduce a wider public to the richness of a community's history and values.

4 "Religious Processions," Vaia, https://www.vaia.com/en-us/explanations/religious-studies/rituals-and-ceremonies/religious-processions/.

5 Katherine Liu, "Ceremonial Festivals and Processions," Honors Program in Rome, University of Washington, 2005, https://depts.washington.edu/hrome/Authors/liu9700/CeremonialFestivalsandProcessions_1/pub_zbarticle_view_printable.html.

6 Giorgio Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel," Mythos 15, no. 15 (2021): 2,9, https://doi.org/10.4000/mythos.3300.

7 Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel," 2,9

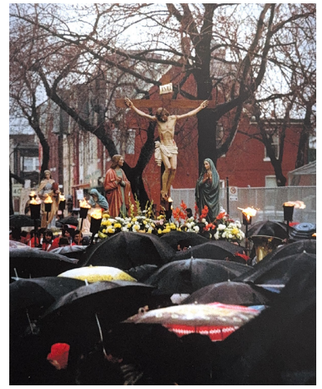
In many parts of Italy, religious festivals and processions remain an integral part of community life and identity, as they have for centuries. These popular devotional practices are not specific to one region, instead, they can be found all across the Italian peninsula, involving a range of different traditions Among the most prominent expressions of this devotion are celebrations dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Throughout Italy, numerous towns venerate Mary under different titles and visual representations; although each devotion may differ slightly in name, appearance, or dress, these images consistently convey the same comforting and maternal presence that resonates deeply with local communities.[8] Alongside Marian devotion, nearly every town also honoured its own patron saint, whose feast day was often marked by elaborate festivities and religious processions that moved through the streets of the town.

These events reinforced local identity while publicly expressing collective faith. Because the majority of Italian immigrants who settled in Toronto during the major waves of Italian migration came from Southern Italy, they carried these popular devotional traditions with them to Canada. Among the most valued of these practices were religious processions, which immigrants adapted to their new urban environment while maintaining the ritual forms and meanings that had long shaped communal life in their places of origin.[9] To better understand how these traditions functioned and why they remained so meaningful for immigrant communities, it is important to examine the role that patron-saint processions play within the small towns of Calabria, where many of these devotional practices originated.

To explore how religious processions function as mechanisms for sustaining community and negotiating identity across geographic contexts, this thesis examines two case studies drawn from towns in the Calabria region of Southern Italy. The first, focuses on the town of San Nicola da Crissa and the annual procession dedicated to the Most Holy Crucifix, tracing how this devotional practice has been maintained and adapted within the immigrant community in Midland, Ontario. The second, examines the town of Torre di Ruggiero and the procession devoted to Our Lady of Graces, exploring how this Marian devotion has been translated into the urban context of a neighbourhood in North York, Toronto. This thesis examines the origins, traditions, and contemporary expressions of religious processions through two case studies drawn from towns in the Calabria region of southern Italy. By documenting these processions in both their places of origin and their diasporic contexts, this study seeks to understand how ritual movement through space preserves, adapts, and imbues these cultural religious traditions with new meanings across geographic, urban, and cultural boundaries.

8 Michael Caputo, *The Coin From Calabria: Discovering the Historical Roots of My Calabrian People* (Michael Caputo, 2012), 25.

9 M. Vienna Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity" (PhD diss., York University, 2020), 1.



1.3

The Crucifixion, Mansfield Ave, Toronto, 1980

Photograph taken by Vincenzo Pietropaolo during the Good Friday Procession in 1980. This photograph is part of a larger collection of his photography which documents the Good Friday procession in Toronto since the 1970s. Found in his book *Ritual* (2016).

Methodology

This thesis employs a multi-layered methodological approach to investigate how Italian patron-saint processions temporarily transform neighbourhood spaces into sacred landscapes while simultaneously reinforcing community identity. As these processions move through urban streets, they momentarily claim public space, transforming it into a landscape of devotion and blurring the boundary between the sacred practices of the community and the secular environment of the city. To analyze these spatial transformations, the study employs a combination of archival research, architectural drawings, spatial analysis, and oral histories to make connections between sites and ritual which span across space and time.

Archival research forms the core of the thesis, piecing together scattered histories across centuries in order to understand the development and meaning of the processions examined in this study. The use of historical accounts, parish materials, and photography, allows for the origins, organization, routes, and evolution of the processions to be reconstructed within their original contexts. These materials help to provide insight into the institutional structures, social dynamics, and religious practices which helped shape the events and people in these towns. Archival sources also make it possible to trace how the processions were carried and transformed across geographic and cultural contexts through migration, serving as some of the only evidence other than personal interviews, which document these translations. Photographs are a visual form of archival analysis within this research, offering forms of evidence which extend beyond written documentation. They make visible the material culture of the processions, as well as the atmosphere and the spatial dynamics which can often be difficult to understand through text only.

Architectural drawings extend this approach, as archival sources reconstruct the historical development and organizational structures of the processions, and photographs provide visual documentation of their appearance and material elements, architectural drawings translate this information into spatial representations. Using mapping techniques such as plan obliques, processional routes across the four case study sites can be traced and analyzed in relation to their broader built environments, revealing how they connect religious sites, streets, and gathering spaces. By illustrating the surrounding landscape of each setting, these drawings highlight the contrast between the dense urban forms of Italian towns and the suburban contexts of their North American counterparts. Detailed vignettes focus on smaller moments within the procession, capturing interactions between bodies, ritual objects, and specific architectural settings. In this way, drawing operates not only as a representational tool but also as a form of research, making visible the spatial relationships and experiential qualities through which the processions occupy and transform the spaces they move through.

Personal accounts provide important insight into the origins and development of these processions within their respective communities. Oral histories and interviews conducted with participants and community members offer a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and personal meanings associated with these events. These narratives not only help document and preserve cultural traditions that are increasingly vulnerable to change, but also reveal how individuals remember, interpret, and sustain these rituals in both their places of origin and diasporic contexts. Rather than being treated as representative of the perspectives of all participants in these ritual practices, these testimonies are understood as highly situated reflections shaped by individual memory, perspective, and faith. As such, they provide valuable insight into personal intentionality, lived experience, and reflection – dimensions of the procession that are often difficult to access through archival materials, photographs, or spatial analysis alone.

The research adheres to established ethical guidelines, particularly in relation to its engagement with human participants and communities. The study has received approval from the *university's ethics board,* ensuring its compliance with institutional ethical standards. All interviews and photographic documentation were conducted with the informed consent of participants, respecting their dignity, privacy, and autonomy.

Together, the subsequent chapters of the thesis will layer these methods of research, helping to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the deep histories and presence of these sacred rites and their foundations in new realities.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB #47800). If you have questions for the Board, contact the Office of Research Ethics, toll-free at 1-833-643-2379 (Canada and USA), 1-519-888-4440, or reb@uwaterloo.ca

Filling the Gap

Much of the existing literature on North American Italian immigrants examines how newcomers navigated the challenges of life in unfamiliar urban environments. This study, however, does not frame its analysis in terms of assimilation or adaptation. Change is instead treated as a constant in immigrant life, to which individuals and communities responded in varied and ongoing ways.[10] Every aspect of daily life – including work, settlement, religious practice, and movement in the urban space – required continual adjustment and negotiation.[11] In this context, religious processions emerge as a particularly meaningful form of engagement: they allowed Italian immigrants to both navigate and reshape the urban spaces they inhabited while sustaining cultural traditions and reinforcing communal identity.

There has been relatively little scholarly attention paid to the Italian diaspora and its cultural life in Toronto since the late 1990s. While it is understandable that much of the foundational research on the diaspora was produced in the decades immediately following the peak of Italian immigration, this body of work largely reflects the community during its early stages of settlement. Research by John E. Zucchi and Roberto Perin demonstrates the central role that Catholicism, parish life, and voluntary associations played in shaping the social and cultural life of Italian immigrant communities in Canada. Their work highlights how religious practices and public rituals, like processions, functioned not only as devotional expressions but also as important way that Italian-Canadians established a cultural identity and contributed to community formation. Similarly, Bruno Ramirez, a pioneer in Italian-Canadian migration history, has written extensively on labour migration, transnationalism, and the experiences of Italian workers in Canada, often linking local immigrant experiences to broader patterns of migration.

The work of Franca Iacovetta examines the everyday lives of Italian immigrants, with particular attention to family life, gender roles, labour, and community formation. Her research highlights how Italian immigrant families – especially women – negotiated identity, belonging, and adaptation through daily social, domestic, and community practices within the broader context of Canadian society. Jordan Stanger-Ross examines how Italian immigrant communities maintained cultural identity and social networks while adapting to postwar urban change in North American cities, highlighting the significance of neighbourhood churches as sites of connection and ethnic expression for Italians postwar.

10 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 3.
11 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 3.

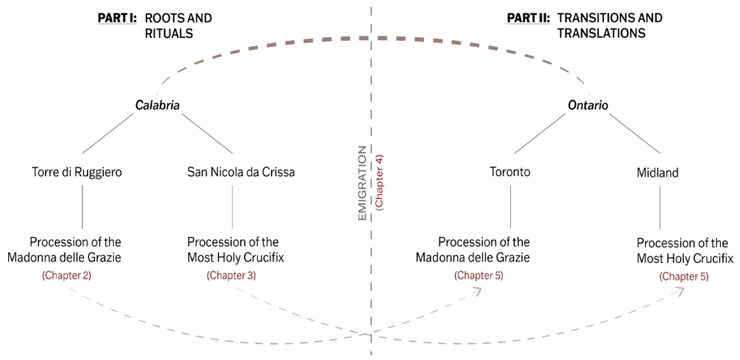
Additionally, multiple spatial theorists work provided the theoretical foundations for understanding relationships between urban space and processional activity throughout the thesis. Edward S. Casey's essay provides a framework for understanding how abstract space becomes meaningful place through lived experience, memory, and embodied practices. This perspective helps frame the thesis by explaining how processions transform ordinary streets and landscapes into places of cultural and religious significance through collective movement, ritual, and shared memory.

The work of Kim Knott, Ann David, and Lily Kong provides an important spatial framework for understanding how religious practices shape and redefine urban environments. Knott's work proposes methods for analyzing how religion is embedded in space through material practices, social relations, and everyday environments. Similarly, David and Kong examine how public rituals such as processions temporarily transform secular urban streets into sacred spaces while also asserting cultural presence and collective identity. Together, their work helps frame religious processions as spatial practices that both sacralise the city and express the social and cultural identities of the communities that perform them.

Vienna Paolantonio's dissertation examines how postwar Italian immigrants in Toronto used traditional religious practices to express belonging and negotiate identity within urban space, focusing on the Processione di Cristo Morto held in the Little Italy neighbourhood on College Street. Importantly, her research represents one of the few scholarly studies to examine Italian religious processions in the Canadian context, demonstrating how these rituals functioned as powerful vehicles for expressing cultural continuity and the evolving identity of Italian-Canadians.

While existing scholarship has examined religious processions either within Italy or within diasporic communities abroad, these contexts have largely been studied separately. Little research has followed the same religious procession across both its place of origin and its diasporic setting to examine how the ritual is translated, adapted, and sustained through migration. This thesis seeks to address that gap by documenting and comparing two Calabrian patron-saint processions and their adaptations in Ontario, demonstrating how ritual movement preserves cultural memory while reshaping social, spatial, and communal relationships in new urban contexts.

Thesis Structure



1.4

Thesis Structure Diagram

Diagram outlining the thesis journey across Chapters 2-5 divided into two parts. The sketch helps to visualize the connections between chapters through the translation of each procession.

This thesis is organized into two interconnected parts. The first examines the two case-study processions within their original Italian contexts, providing a detailed exploration of the historical, social, and religious environments in which they developed. It traces the origins of each procession while outlining their organizational structures, ritual hierarchies, and symbolic meanings within their respective towns. The second part follows these same processions as they are translated into the diaspora, examining how these processions were re-established and adapted in Ontario. It begins with an overview of Italian immigration to Canada and the patterns of settlement in Toronto, demonstrating how the process of establishing religious life within the city created the conditions for these devotional practices of religious processions to emerge and take root in new urban environments.

Chapter 2, *Torre di Ruggiero: The House of the Madonna delle Grazie,* examines the town of Torre di Ruggiero and the historical and cultural foundations of its devotion to the Madonna delle Grazie. It traces the origins of the town, situating its development within the broader political and religious transformations of Southern Italy, and explores how Marian devotion became central to local identity. The chapter documents the traditions surrounding the annual procession of Our Lady of Graces, highlighting the ritual practices, symbolism, and community participation that sustain this longstanding religious event. By examining the procession within its original Calabrian context, the chapter establishes the historical and cultural framework necessary for understanding how this tradition was later translated and adapted within the Italian diaspora in Toronto.

Chapter 3, *San Nicola da Crissa: The Tale of the Holy Crucifx,* examines the history and devotional traditions of San Nicola da Crissa, focusing on the town's longstanding veneration of the Most Holy Crucifix. Exploring the historical development of the town and the religious institutions that shaped its social and spiritual life, paying particular attention to the Confraternity that has organized and maintained the annual procession for hundreds of years. The chapter documents the rituals, symbolism, and communal participation involved in the procession of the Most Holy Crucifix, demonstrating how the event functions as both an act of collective devotion and a central expression of local identity. By situating the procession within its original Calabrian context, the chapter establishes an important foundation for understanding how this tradition was later carried across the Atlantic and reinterpreted within Italian immigrant communities in Ontario.

Chapter 4, *A Place to Belong: Re-finding Home through Religious Identity,* explores how Italian – particularly Calabrian – immigrants reshaped their sense of home and belonging through migration, community-building, and religious practice in Toronto. It traces the historical forces that drove mass migration from Southern Italy, the formation of Italian neighbourhoods through chain migration, and the tensions immigrants faced within Toronto's religious and social landscape. Drawing on the evolution of festas, patron saint processions, and especially the Good Friday Processione di Cristo Morto, the chapter shows how Italian immigrants used embodied ritual to claim space, assert identity, and recreate a sense of home and belonging across borders.

Chapter 5, *The Double: Transitions and Translations of Procession,* examines how Italian religious processions were carried, translated, and transformed as immigrant communities moved through Toronto's shifting urban landscape. It traces the northward migration of Italians from Little Italy into the suburbs, showing how churches became new piazzas and how festas and processions – especially those of the Madonna delle Grazie and the Most Holy Crucifix – were re-established in Toronto and Midland as acts of memory, identity, and spatial belonging. Through these rituals, Italian immigrants reshaped ordinary streets and open landscapes into sacred spaces, creating "double towns" that bridged Calabria and Canada while sustaining tradition and community across generations.

On Architecture

When people think about architecture, they often picture the design of buildings, plans, sections, and a carefully composed set of polished images – all very physical and tangible objects which represent architecture. While these artefacts are certainly a part of the discipline, they represent only a fraction of what architecture truly is. At its core, architecture is about the way space is organized, experienced, and shared. It emerges in the relationships between people, movement, and the places they inhabit. Bodies and the movement of bodies through space are ultimately what frames architecture.

Religious processions make these relationships between people and space particularly visible. As they move through the streets, neighbourhoods, paths, and public squares, they temporarily transform ordinary urban environments into places of ritual and collective meaning. Routes are established, pauses are observed, and certain buildings or landmarks take on special significance along the way.

Processions reveal how architecture is continually reinterpreted by the communities that inhabit it. Streets designed for circulation become ceremonial routes, church entrances become points of gathering and departure, balconies, sidewalks, and storefronts transform into stages from which the ritual is observed and participated in. This choreographed movement through streets align with architectural concerns of circulation, spatial order, and the relationship between bodies and the built environment. In this way, processions demonstrate how the meanings and uses of urban space extend beyond the intentions of planners or architects, emerging instead through lived experience, memory, and collective practice.

By documenting and analyzing these events through mapping, drawing, and spatial observation, this thesis examines how ritual movement produces temporary but powerful spatial conditions within the city. These processions can be understood as forms of architecture in motion – ephemeral spatial structures that organize bodies, objects, and buildings into meaningful relationships.

Following these rituals across both their places of origin in Calabria and their diasporic expressions in Ontario, reveals how architecture participates in processes of cultural continuity, place-making, and identity formation. Demonstrating that the built environment is shaped not only by physical forms, but also through the rituals and movements that animate it.

PART I
ROOTS AND RITUALS

Chapter 2

Torre di Ruggiero: The House of the Madonna delle Grazie

Historical Origins of Torre di Ruggiero

This chapter examines how the annual procession of the Madonna delle Grazie in Torre di Ruggiero functions as both a religious ritual and a spatial practice that transforms the town into a lived sacred landscape. Beginning with the town's historical and spiritual foundations, it traces the town's enduring devotion to the Madonna across time. Drawing on theories of place-making, embodiment, and ritual movement, the chapter explores how the procession sacralises ordinary space and reinforces collective memory and identity. Ultimately, it shows how ritual not only reflects belief but actively produces place through the repeated enactment of shared devotion.

The origins of Torre di Ruggiero can be traced back to the relocation of inhabitants from nearby towns who decided to settle close to the fields they farmed. Over time, this is said to have led to the formation of an early settlement around a "tower", often referred to as a "*casa colonica*", meaning farmhouse.[12] In antiquity, the middle and upper Ancinale Valley was known as Torre, this name was given to the area due to the number of farmhouses dotted throughout the territory.[13] It was at this time when Count Roger I was establishing his control over this region, his goal being to unite and reorganize these scattered farmsteads into centralized bases. He called this united settlement – located on a ridge of the Serre Calabresi mountains – Torre di Spadola, as most of its inhabitants were farmers from the nearby Spadola area.[14]

The original settlement of Torre di Spadola is first mentioned in a document dated April 13, 1071, titled *Dotatio et Privilrgium*, which records Roger I's donation of a small church he had built in the town to Basilio Scamardi, abbot of the Monastery of Saint Basil the Great, so that the monks might pray for him as he set out to fight the Saracens in Sicily.[15] While there is very little academic information to confirm these local histories, we can look at the intentions of Roger I and the Normans during their period of rule in Calabria to understand how this local foundation belief was aligns with known history.

The Normans first arrived in Southern Italy shortly after the beginning of the 11th century, entering into a fractured state, and "were [immediately] drawn into conflicts they had not started" between the Greek-Byzantines, the Lombards and the Saracens.[16]

12 "Torre Di Ruggiero," GAL Serre Calabresi, Literary Calabria, 2016, https://www.galserrecalabresi.it/i-comuni/torre-di-ruggiero/.

13 Literary Calabria, "Torre Di Ruggiero."

14 Pasquale Perronace et al., "Torre Di Ruggiero," Riviera e Borghi Degli Angeli, https://www.rivieradegliangeli.it/location/torre/.

15 Fr. Maurizio Aloise, "Santuario Diocesano 'Santa Maria delle Grazie' Torre di Ruggiero," July 1, 2019, https://web.consrc.it/AmministrazioneTrasparente/export/Allegati.aspx?TipoDoc=VantaggiE_All&Codice=11368.

16 Donald Matthew, "Southern Italy and the Normans before the Creation of the Monarchy," in The Norman Kingdom of Sicily (Cambridge University Press, 1992), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139167741.004.

The Normans leveraged the political instability of the South by disrupting the already established political powers; successfully dismantling the remaining Greek-Byzantine administration and greatly weakening the Lombard principalities in the region.[17] Count Roger I played a significant role in the Norman conquest of Calabria and Sicily. The incremental consolidation of Calabria under Roger I created opportunities in which settlements could be deliberately reshaped to best meet the military and administrative needs of the Normans.[18] Their strength was in knowing how to use their military power to gain and maintain political control. They did this by building "better fortresses than their predecessors", allowing them to reduce and retain towns concentrating their inhabitants in a defensible core, using architectural elements like towers or castles to do so.[19]



2.1

Map of Calabria, multiple authors, 1714

This map depicts Calabria during the time of Norman rule. With the close-up above showing Torre accounted for. This map, titled *"Provincia di Calabria Vltra,"* was created in 1714 and is attributed to several prominent cartographers and engravers of the time.

17 Matthew, "Southern Italy and the Normans before the Creation of the Monarchy."

18 G. A. Loud, "The Conquest of the Mainland," in The Age of Robert Guiscard: Southern Italy and the Norman Conquest, The Medieval World (Longman, 2000).

19 Matthew, "Southern Italy and the Normans before the Creation of the Monarchy."



2.2

Key plan of Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, Italy

Drawing by author. The blue dot represents the location of Torre di Ruggiero within the Calabria region.

Since Calabria at this time was a mixed region shaped by the coexistence of Greek-speaking communities in addition to the gradual Latinization of the area through the creation of new monasteries and dioceses, people tended to settle together around these fortified sites that were tied to these new institutions.[20] These patterns make it historically plausible that the local histories which have been passed on for centuries regarding the conception of small Calabrian communities like Torre di Ruggiero are based in truth. Originating sometime in the 11th century through the unification of scattered farmsteads around a defensive "tower", which aligns with Norman strategic tactics used to secure the interior lands of the region.

Given the positive relationship between Roger I and the Basilian monks residing in the area at this time, it appears that Torre di Spadola remained under Basilian administration until the onset of the Aragonese rule. During the Aragonese period, Torre di Spadola developed as a small locality under the County of Vallelonga, and over the following centuries the area passed through several feudal owners under the Kingdom of Naples.[21] After the devastation of the catastrophic earthquakes which destroyed much of Calabria in 1783, Torre di Spadola was officially recognized as its own commune, and in May of 1811, it was declared its own municipality within the Chiaravalle district.[22] On May 8th 1864, the town acquired its current name, Torre di Ruggiero, in memory of its Norman founder Roger I.[23]



2.3

Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, Italy, 2023

Satellite image showing the extent of the town of Torre di Ruggiero and its surrounding landscape. The image highlights the dense and winding sprawl of the town's historic core in comparison to the expanded parts of the settlement which follow a more structured and spread out development.

Google Earth. "Torre di Ruggiero, (38°39'15.84'' N, 16°22'24.96'' E)." Retrieved March 15, 2026. Screenshot taken by author. Google LLC. https://earth.google.com/.

20 G. A. Loud, "The Church and the Norman Conquest," in The Latin Church in Norman Italy (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

21 Literary Calabria, "Torre Di Ruggiero."

22 "La Storia," Comune Di Torre Di Ruggiero, 2006, https://www.comunetorrediruggiero.it/storia.html.

23 Literary Calabria, "Torre Di Ruggiero."

Foundations of Faith

While the historical foundation of the Torre di Ruggiero can be attributed to Roger I, the foundation which matters most to the Torresi is that of its faith. The manifestation of faith in this town is one that leaps across centuries and is known throughout Calabria. The first moment that plays a key role in shaping this story of unwavering devotion can be traced back to an apparition of the Virgin Mary in Torre di Ruggiero on April 17, 1677.[24]

The story of the Marian apparitions known by all Torresi go as follows:

Two local shepherdesses, Isabella Cristello and Antonina De Luca had gone to pray in the area where the Marian sanctuary now stands, it was during their prayers when Isabella was suddenly healed of a long-standing illness she had been suffering from.[25] At the same time, she witnessed a celestial apparition of the Virgin Mary – similar to the one Saint Bernadette Sourbirous experienced two centuries later at the grotto in Lourdes – who expressed her desire "to be revered in that place by many peoples, both near and far" with a promise to distribute many graces to the faithful.[26]

News of the apparition and the healing spread rapidly, and was initally met with caution by local clergy but soon embraced by the wider population. As described by the historian Father Giovanni Fiore da Cropani, it was as if "many peoples appeared there in procession; thus, as its fame spread far and wide, both Calabrias were seen in that church. And the Most Holy Virgin restored sight to the blind, straightened the crippled."[27]

In a short time the sanctuary dedicated to La Madonna delle Grazie (Our Lady of Grace) was built. For many years, the Sanctuary became a powerful center of Marian devotion, but silence suddenly fell on the Sanctuary on February 5th, 1783, when Calabria experienced one of the most devastating earthquakes in its history. The earthquake completely destroyed the small church, and the sacred statue of the Madonna was buried beneath the rubble. Seventy-four years later, the Madonna returned to reawaken the centuries-old devotion of the Torresi people.

According to tradition, the Virgin Mary appeared in a dream to a local peasant woman, Pascale Luna, seated upon a splendid throne and urging her to encourage the reconstruction of the sanctuary to the townspeople and clergy.[28]

24 "Il Santuario," Santuario Maria Delle Grazie, 2024, https://www.santuariomariadellegrazie.it/santuario.html

25 Comune Torre Ruggiero, "La Madonna."

26 "La Madonna," Comune di Torre di Ruggiero, 2006, https://www.comunetorrediruggiero.it/madonna.html.

27 Aloise, "Santuario Diocesano 'Santa Maria delle Grazie' Torre di Ruggiero."

28 Comune Torre Ruggiero, "La Madonna."

Though her message stirred renewed interest, lack of financial means put a halt to any thoughts of reconstruction, and the promise made to the Madonna slowly faded from the memory of the Torresi people. However, shortly after Easter, on April 10th, 1858, a very definitive sign occurred.

While working the land near the ruins of the old Sanctuary, a local farmer, Francesco Arone, was inspired to dig at a spot where, according to memory, a spring had once flowed.[29] Suddenly, clear water gushed forth. He drank from it and washed his aching limbs, and when he got up, he no longer felt any pain in his knees which were afflicted by rheumatism, he was immediately healed.[30] Overcome with emotion, he ran to the village to announce the miracle. The entire community soon gathered at the site, and the spring confirmed the truth of his account.

Moved by this event, the people of Torre di Ruggiero organized immediately with a burning desire to rebuild the Madonna's sanctuary. The work began at a feverish pace and thanks to the widespread donations and largely voluntary labor of the people, the church was completed in just a few months and consecrated on September 8, 1858, the feast day of the Madonna delle Grazie.[31]



2.4

"Fonte prodigiosa" (miraculous spring), Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2020

Photograph taken by Leonardo Capozzi, retrived from Google Maps on March 15, 2026. The miraculous spring revealed to Francesco Arone by the Virgin Mary. The spring still flows today and is located at the back of the Madonna's Sanctuary. A large number of pilgrims visit every year to drink from the miraculous spring and venerate the Madonna.

29 Aloise, "Santuario Diocesano 'Santa Maria delle Grazie' Torre di Ruggiero."

30 Aloise, "Santuario Diocesano 'Santa Maria delle Grazie' Torre di Ruggiero."

31 Comune Torre Ruggiero, "La Madonna."

A new wooden statue of the Madonna was commissioned from a Neapolitan workshop and donated to the Sanctuary by King Vittorio Emanuele II.[32] The Madonna was finally able to rest again in the house she had chosen as the place where she would spread her divine mercy. From that moment on, the Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie once again stood as the spiritual heart of Torre di Ruggiero, continuing a legacy of devotion that had first been revealed nearly two centuries earlier and putting the small hillside village on the pilgrimage map, becoming known as the "Little Lourdes" of Calabria.[33]

Since then, Torre has been able to spread its message diocesanally, regionally, and, to an extent, even globally, with thousands of Torresi emigrants around the world carrying on the religious identity of their small town through the establishment of associations and processions dedicated to the Madonna delle Grazie.



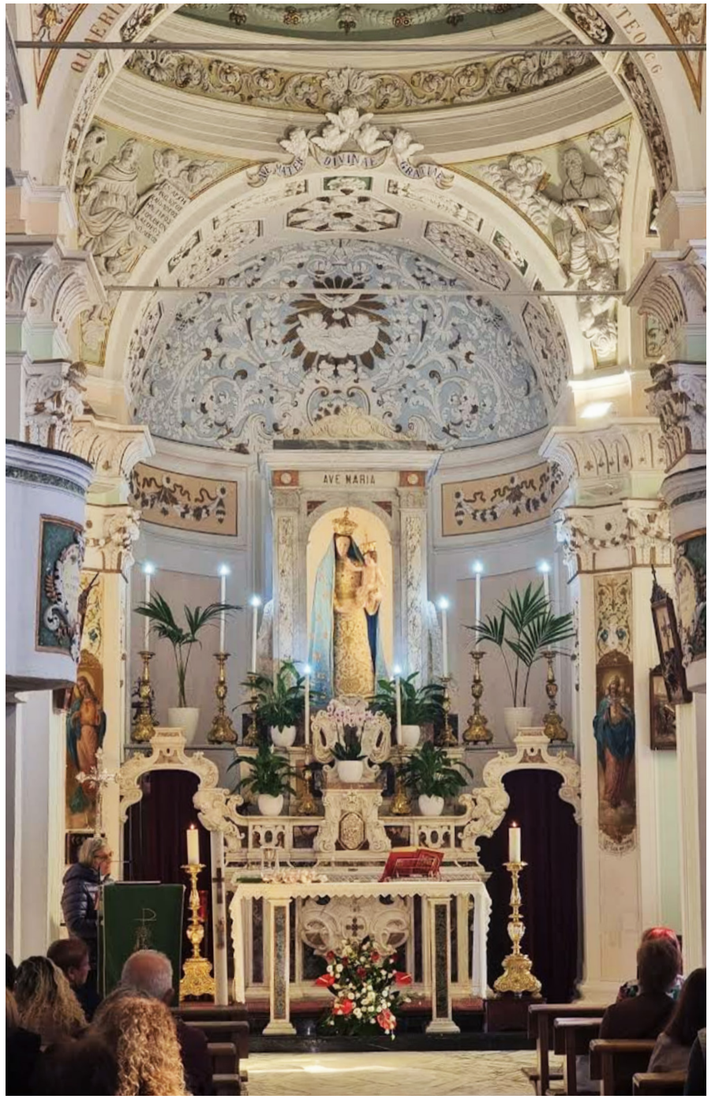
2.5

Statue of the Madonna delle Grazie, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2024

Photograph taken by Antonio Teti, retrieved from Google Maps on March 16, 2026. Close-up of the wooden statue of the Madonna delle Grazie in her re-built Sanctuary.

32 Francesco Soletti, "Torre Di Ruggiero - The Shrine of Our Lady of Grace," SharryLand, https://www.sharry.land/en/wonders/torre-di-ruggiero-il-santuario-della-madonna-delle-grazie.

33 Soletti, "Torre Di Ruggiero - The Shrine of Our Lady of Grace."



2.6

Interior shrine of the Madonna delle Grazie, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2023

Photograph taken by Isabella De Masi, retrieved from Google Maps on March 16, 2026. The statue of the Madonna located in the interior of the Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie. Since the Sanctuary is dedicated to the Madonna, the permanent placement of her statue is located above the altar, presiding over the entire Sanctuary and its visitors. In this context, the importance of the Madonna is made clear. Her image replaces the typical image of Jesus' cross above the alter. She is the primary figure of worship.

The Sanctuary



2.7

The Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, date unknown

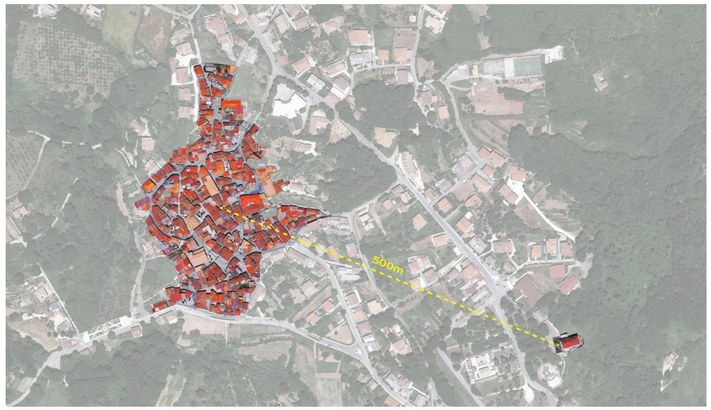
(above) Vintage postcard of the Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie by an unknown artist, capturing its neoclassical architecture, and noting that the façade was completed in concrete.

2.8

Location of the Sanctuary in reference to the town's core, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria

(right) Map highlighting the location of the Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie in reference to the "old town" core. The straight line distance between the Sanctuary and the center of the "old town" is approximately 500m. Drawing by author.

The Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie is viewed as one of the most important places of worship in Calabria. Its neoclassical form sits atop a green hill at the edge of town and is located approximately 500m away from the center of the "old town" core of Torre di Ruggiero.[34] Today, the Sanctuary remains an important religious site for many, attracting regional pilgrims for Ascension Day, when the diocesan pilgrimage – presided over by the archbishop – is celebrated, and for the feast of the Madonna delle Grazie.[35] Faithful gather from all over Calabria – and from out of the country – for the masses, the prayers of devotion, and the processions which center around the Sanctuary and the shrine of the Madonna delle Grazie.



These communal rituals reinforce the social bonds and spiritual heritage of the Torresi people, and the Sanctuary serves as the place that facilitates this deep religious connection, where participants in these acts of ritual movement may experience "the closeness, tenderness, and joy of God, of whom the Virgin Mary is the face and servant."[36] As stated by The Rector of the Sanctuary, Father Maurizio Aloise:

> *"[The Shrine's] mission is to ensure that all who come to the Shrine are touched, before the image of the Madonna delle Grazie, by the unconditional love of Jesus. Our prayer, our projects, our initiatives, our work must be aimed at this. This is the greatness of our responsibility: to place (…) at the service of the joy of the guests, following Mary's example, so that the Lord may accomplish his work of mercy in their hearts. Our Shrine must be a place where all who approach can understand how much they are loved by God."*[37]

34 Mimmo, "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero," Interview by author, October 27, 2025, Transcript.
35 Soletti, "Torre Di Ruggiero - The Shrine of Our Lady of Grace."
36 Aloise, "Santuario Diocesano 'Santa Maria delle Grazie' Torre di Ruggiero."
37 Aloise, "Santuario Diocesano 'Santa Maria delle Grazie' Torre di Ruggiero."

When looking at the Sanctuary through the lens of shrines and sacred architecture, it functions not only as a site of devotion but simultaneously as a spatial manifestation of the sacred. It is here that the sacred operates as a *hierophany*, creating a break in ordinary space, establishing a fixed center through which the sacred becomes visible and gives people a way to orient themselves within the world.[38] In regard to the Madonna delle Grazie, she does not simply mark a place, instead, for the faithful, it is through her sacredness that the world becomes ordered and meaningful. As part of a larger shrine complex, the Sanctuary can also be understood as a place of dwelling, serving as the home of the Madonna, giving physical form to the devotion she inspires.

A hierophany is a term used by Mircea Eliade to describe the manifestation of the sacred in the ordinary world. It can be defined as any moment, object, or place where the divine reveals itself, making a specific thing or location different from the surrounding, everyday (profane) space.

The annual procession held in her honour affirms her central role in the life of the town and activates the place through ritual movement. This movement from ordinary space to sacred place, and back again, reflects Turner's theory of pilgrimage as a liminoid phenomenon. Since participating in the procession is a voluntary practice that exists alongside the structure of the religious institution that is the Catholic church, rather than a required social rite it defines as *liminoid* rather than *liminal*.[39]

Turner argues that processions and pilgrimages should be considered liminoid rather than liminal because they are not classic liminal rites, like rites of passage, in which participation is obligated and often permanently restructures identity. Instead, they should be considered liminoid as participation is voluntary and offers a temporary experience of transformation.

The mobility experienced in procession offers a temporary but powerful experience of unity, meaning, and transformation; as the faithful move collectively with the Madonna through the landscape, a sense of *communitas* emerges through the act of sacralising the space that has long shaped their collective identity.[40] Using this framework, the procession becomes both a spatial and social act.

Communitas is a concept developed by Victor Turner which often occurs during rituals, pilgimages, or processions, where usual social roles and hirearchies are set aside and individuals relate to each other as equals. Creating a strong feeling of togetherness, connection and shared purpose.

The faithful of the Madonna come to Torre not just to visit the physical place of the Sanctuary, but to encounter the Madonna delle Grazie as a living presence: she herself is a sanctuary, a refuge, a source of remedies. For a community marked by historical hardship, loss, and renewal, devotion to Mother Mary offers continuity, protection, and hope.[41] Through prayer, pilgrimage, and the ritual movement of procession, the Sanctuary becomes both a destination and a threshold of liminality; where Mary is welcomed into the town's life, and where the faithful seek protection, comfort, healing, and grace under her care.

38 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Harcourt, Brace, 1959).
39 Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 34–35.
40 Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture,* 250–251.
41 Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture,* 199.

Ritual Movement as Place-Making Practice

To understand how place-making is enacted through ritual movement, we must look closer at the importance that the body has on place. Rather than the body being understood merely as a physical object, the lived body, is the medium through which place is created.[42] Through movement and "corporeal intentionality," the lived body integrates with its immediate environment, creating an active and reciprocal relationship between body and place.[43] Therefore, 'place' does not emerge as just a symbolic layer imposed upon ordinary and neutral 'space,' place becomes meaningful through sustained bodily engagement with the world.

Place is not just as an abstract concept, it is concretely experienced and is enacted through perception, movement, and repetition; bodies do not just simply occupy space, they are "essential to the process of emplacement," they actively bring places into being.[44]

Ritual practices like processions and pilgrimages make this especially visible. Through repeated, organized movement along set routes towards religiously meaningful destinations, ordinary stretches of space become places of shared experiences, histories, emotions, and social connections. Place also acts as a gatherer – gathering things, experiences, and histories – holding together routes, memories, movement, and embodied presence over time. [45]

Additionally, since the lived body is shaped by culture, our experience of place is always cultural.[46] Even our simplest ways of seeing and moving are influenced by learned meanings, practices, and values.

In this way, ritual movement functions as a way of place-making whereby routes, thresholds, and sites become meaningful through continued ritual use, and spaces are re-defined into places by engaging the body, emotions and collective experience. This process not only imbues profound meaning into places but also reinforces the cultural and spiritual identity of those who are participating.

42 Edward Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena," *Senses of Place*, 1996.

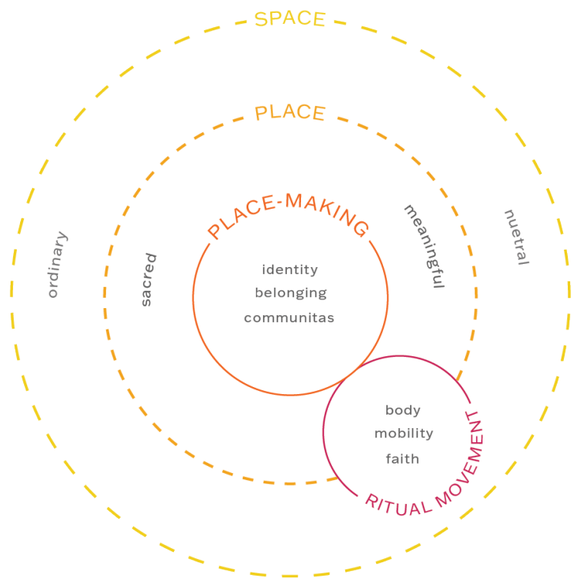
43 Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena."

44 Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena."

45 Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena."

46 Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena."

Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between 'space' and 'place,' as they represent two fundamentally different ways of understanding reality. 'Space' can be viewed as "all encompassing," it is a broad setting in which things exist and are located, but 'place' goes beyond this, it is created through the close relationship between people and their surroundings, with each shaping the other.[47] 'Place' is shaped by both people and culture. It is a fundamental part of human experience and action, created through how we interact with and relate to the world around us.[48]



2.9

Diagram of the intersection between Ritual Movement and Place-making

Diagram by author. Visual translation of the concepts presented in Edward Casey's *How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena.*

47 Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel."

48 Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel."

The Feast of the Madonna delle Grazie

Tradition has it that every year, the solemn celebrations in honour of the Madonna delle Grazie takes place in Torre di Ruggiero. This religious celebration stands as the town's largest event and is organized by the Sanctuary's congregation.[49] Leading up to the feast day, there are multiple events which take place, the first being the praying of a *novena*, which concludes on the first Sunday of September with the procession. A town fair is held during the immediate days leading up to procession, allowing vendors to come into town and sell their goods locally. Music and a firework display follow the conclusion of the procession in celebration of the Madonna.[50]

A novena is a Catholic devotional practice consising of nine consecutive days of prayer. Typically, a novena is prayed with a specific intention in mind. Often, they are dedicated to particular saints and are prayed for the nine days leading up to a saint's feast day.

This celebration represents, a moment of deep prayer and spirituality for the devout Torresi, but it is also an occasion of connection. As the procession draws near, the town begins to stir and swell. Hundreds – perhaps thousands – arrive from the surrounding villages, pilgrims among them, and most notably the returning emigrants, especially those coming back from Montreal and Toronto. Streets thicken with bodies and voices; the town fills and fills until it is overflowing, its pulse quickening and reaching its height in the moment of the procession itself.

In Torre di Ruggiero, *La Festa della Madonna delle Grazie* refers to the entire weekend of events that revolves around the celebration of the Mother Mary which is always celebrated from September 6th-9th. Although, in terms of religious celebrations, the two most important events occur on the 8th and 9th for the Torresi people.

On September 8th, the *Festa della Natività di Maria* begins with the statue of the Madonna delle Grazie emerging from the Sanctuary into the warm summer morning atop the shoulders of devotees.[51] As she exists through the century's old thick wooden doors, the bells begin to toll, and she is met with thousands of devoted onlookers eager to get a glimpse of her. The religious delegation – made up of priests, bishops, and cardinals – lead the way across the square as the first hymn is sung amongst those in attendance, filling the air with solemn song.

During the short procession to the churchyard, "Ave Maria" is chanted out, the coordinated rhythm urging her along the route and as she descends the steps of the amphitheater. Upon her grand entrance, the crowd begins to sing out *Evviva Maria,* welcoming her blessed presence in jubilation.[52]

"Evviva Maria" is a traditional Italian hymn and popular thanksgiving devotional cry in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

49 "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero."

50 "About Us," TDR Social, Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, https://www.tdrsocial.ca/about-us/.

51 "Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero Si Prepara as Accogliere Migliaia Di Pellegrini," PreSerre e Dintorni, PreSerre e Dintorni, 2024, https://www.preserreedintorni.it/madonna-delle-grazie-torre-di-ruggiero-si-prepara-ad-accogliere-migliaia-di-pellegrini/.

52 "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero."

The religious and political delegations take their seats in the center of the amphitheater with the crowd filling in around them. This is a morning charged not only with religious significance with great social significance as well. The political delegation consists of provincial, regional, and governmental representation including many mayors from the nearby towns, all wearing the tricolour sash and banner representing their municipality of origin.[53]

The Solemn Mass is presided over by the Metropolitan Archbishop of Catanzaro-Squillace and the Rector of the Sanctuary. During the Archbishop's homily, he emphasizes that our daily lives are often crowded with noise and distraction, yet it is in silence that "we discover the most beautiful echo."[54] In Mary's example, silence is revealed not as emptiness, but instead it creates the space needed to truly listen, not just to God but to the needs and suffering of others too. When looking at the Madonna, "our faith rediscovers its center of gravity," she keeps people grounded, united, and focused on living life with justice and compassion.[55] Once the mass concludes, the Madonna is processed back through the doors of the Sanctuary where she will rest until the next day of celebrations begins.



2.10

The Amphitheater, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2018

Photograph taken by Rosaria Pace, retrieved from Google Maps on March 18, 2026. The amphitheater is part of a large area owned by the Sanctuary and functions as both an outdoor liturgical area and a place of quiet meditation which is open to the public.



2.11

The Solemn Mass during the Festa della Natività di Maria, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria

Photograph taken by an unknown author. Both the religious and political delegations are seated in the center of the amphitheater with the crowd filling in the sides. At the front, the Archbishop stands on the elevated platform (pictured above) and performs mass with the statue of the Madonna located just below, watching over the attendees.

53 "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero."

54 "Catanzaro. A Torre Di Ruggiero Celebrata La Madonna Delle Grazie," Parola Di Vita, Parola di Vita, 2025, https://www.paroladivita.org/catanzaro-a-torre-di-ruggiero-celebrata-la-madonna-delle-grazie/.

55 Parola di Vita, "Catanzaro. A Torre Di Ruggiero Celebrata La Madonna Delle Grazie."

On the morning of September 9th, the celebration of Holy Mass takes place in the Sanctuary, marking the start of the last day of celebrations known as the *Festa dei paesani*.[56] It is on this last day of celebrations that the large procession, which winds through the streets of Torre di Ruggiero takes place.

At the end of the Holy Mass, the procession opens with the banners of the Parish (the town's Mother Church – Santa Domenica), and the Catholic Church which are carried in turn by devotees and pilgrims.[57] Behind them follow the banner of the Town Hall, and the Sanctuary; the Italian flag is also carried alongside the flags of the returning emigrants' countries (Canada and Argentina).[58] These elements are followed by men and women, of all ages, from Catholic Action. Next comes the holy cross, flanked by clergry and the Parish Pastoral Council, arranged in double rows.[59] The Mayor trails closely behind with the City Council – all civil, political, and military authorities are dressed in full uniform – and the representatives of the Board of Directors of the Sanctuary.[60]

The Madonna is then lead out of the Sanctuary on the shoulders of the devoted volunteers, the golden crown which adorns her head glimmers brightly in the sunlight as the sound of the tolling bell reverberates through the air and following alongside are the Parish Priest and the Rector of the Shrine. Lastly, immediately following the Madonna is the musical band and the rest of the faithful, those from Torre, those from other towns and of course the returning emigrants from far and wide all converging in this small Southern Italian town for a ritual which runs deep and is the origin point of a tradition which can be found far and wide.

56 "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero."
57 "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero."
58 "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero."
59 "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero."
60 "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero."



2.12

Procession moving through the streets of Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2014

Photograph taken by Giuseppe Pascale. In this photograph the arrangement of the processional order is clear. The clergy and parish pastoral council are arranged in two rows, with a clergy member carrying the holy cross, leading the way. Directly behind them are the mayor (wearing the red and green sash) with other delegation from city council, and police authorities in full uniform. Then comes the Madonna carried by selected faithful volunteers.



2.13

The Madonna leaving the Sanctuary, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, date unknown

Photograph from author's family archives. The Madonna exiting the Sanctuary and beginning her journey towards the "old town" core of Torre di Ruggiero.

The Procession

The moment the doors of the Sanctuary open, the anticipation which had been building all week reaches its peak. A sharp crack of firecrackers splits the air, followed by another and another, ricocheting off the surrounding hills. Bells answer from above, the band swells into motion, and applause ripples through the crowd like a physical force. Handkerchiefs rise and fall in white flashes, and the voices of the faithful lift together in a chant of "Viva Maria!"

Then she appears.

The statue of the Madonna delle Grazie emerges slowly, deliberately, supported on the shoulders of the faithful, her weight both physical and symbolic. This moment – repeated year after year – marks not simply a departure, but a transformation. Through ritual movement, the street outside is no longer just a route of circulation; it becomes the first segment of a lived ritual space, activated by the collective body, emotion, and memory of the community.[61] In this way, undifferentiated space begins to acquire meaning, redefined as place through embodied practice and shared experience.

The procession assembles in its predetermined order, setting off toward the old town, following one of the two established routes approved each year. This repeated act reinforces continuity, discipline, and cultural identity across generations, reminding participants that the ritual's power lies in repetition and collective observance. As the Madonna is lifted and the procession moves toward the old town, ritual movement itself becomes a form of place-making: ordinary routes, thresholds, and sites gain meaning through continued use, through the rhythmic engagement of bodies, voices, and emotion.[62]

Movement remains continuous, interrupted only by the silent exchange of bearers, hands gripping wood, shoulders shifting beneath the weight of the statue. Prayers are spoken and sung in Italian and dialect, songs dedicated to Maria rise from the crowd, local melodies which have been learned by heart. The petitions alternate with solemn and triumphant pieces performed by the band, whose music spills forward and back through the line of bodies like a guiding thread. Immersed in sound, motion, and proximity, the ritual transforms both space and time.[63]

61 Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel."

62 Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel."

63 Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena"; Cynthia Anyadi, "Sacred Mobilities, Movement, and Embodiment in the Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century English Christian Funeral Procession," *Geography of World Pilgrimages*, ahead of print, 2023, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.1007/978-3-031-32209-9_8





2.14

Moments in the Procession of the Madonna delle Grazie I, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2012, 2014

Photographs by Giuseppe Pascale. The first photograph captures the procession as it exits the Sanctuary grounds and moves toward the historic core of the "old town." The density of the crowd highlights the collective nature of the ritual. The presence of vendor tents in close proximity to the route reveals the entanglement of sacred ritual and everyday activity, situating the procession within the lived environment of the town.

In the second photograph, the internal structure of the procession becomes more legible. Members of Catholic Action lead, followed by the clergy and the Parish Pastoral Council, the hierarchical and symbolic ordering of the ritual. The Holy Cross stands as a marker within the narrow stone streets, momentarily reconfiguring the urban fabric into a sacred framework. Through this alignment of bodies, symbols, and movement, the procession inscribes religious meaning onto the material landscape.

2.15

Plan Oblique Drawing of the Processional Route, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, Italy

Drawing by author. Plan oblique of the processional route taken through the town of Torre di Ruggiero during the Feast of the Madonna delle Grazie. The route unfolds as a structured flow, where pauses, turns, and shifts contribute to the collective experience and establish a shared rhythm of movement. The procession operates as an ephemeral spatial practice, defined as much by movement as by the spaces it occupies. As the faithful move together through the Calabrian landscape – shifting from the dense fabric of the historic core to the openness of the Sanctuary – with the Madonna, a sense of community and collective identity emerges. Through this repetitive ritual movement, space is sacralised and transformed into a lived ritual landscape.



Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie

Parish Church of Santa Domenica

1



2.16

Flags and banners, Torre di Ruggiero

Sketch by author. This vignette captures the banners that lead the procession, pictured here are those of the Town Hall and the Sanctuary. They pass beneath one of the illuminated decorative arches that line the path to the Sanctuary, set within the trees and greenery of the Sanctuary grounds.

2



2.17

Holy cross, Torre di Ruggiero

Sketch by author. The Holy Cross functions as a leading marker within the procession, guiding its movement while actively transforming the surrounding space from secular to sacred.

3



2.18

Statue of the Madonna delle Grazie, Torre di Ruggiero

Sketch by author. The final ritual object carried in the procession is the statue of the Madonna delle Grazie. As the central figure of devotion for the Torresi people, she is believed to watch over them, protect them, and answer their prayers. Through her movement, the ritual culminates in a moment of reciprocal exchange, as she blesses both the people and the town.

2.19

Moments in the Procession of the Madonna delle Grazie II, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2018, 2012

Photographs by Giuseppe Pascale. The first photograph captures the procession in its totality, situating it within a layered spatial context: the mountain in the background, as it moves past the Mother Church in the main piazza, and balconies adorned with blue and white flags, where observers engage from above. Together, these layered elements highlight the procession's integration within both the built and natural environment.

In the second photograph, the influence of urban form becomes more pronounced. As the procession moves through narrower streets, participants adapt to the spatial constraints of the historic core, compressing in response to the morphology of the town.





As the procession enters the historic core of the town, the streets narrow and bend. Stone houses lean inward, their facades weathered by centuries of sun and rain, their balconies dressed for the occasion, draped in fabrics and the most beautiful chenille blankets families own – deep blues, faded golds, and floral patterns passed down through generations. Candles flicker along doorways; overhead, arches of light-blue and white flags, ribbons, flowers, and bows soften the hard geometry of the stone walls. These decorations are not just a way to adorn the town; they become a link between domestic space and the ritual itself, dissolving the boundary between the private realm of the home and the public realm of procession where thresholds, balconies, and facades are momentarily transformed into sites of collective devotion.

Some alleys are barely wide enough for four or five people to walk side by side. Here, the compression of bodies is distinct. The sheer number of people seems almost impossible for such narrow passages, and yet the procession advances, transforming the narrow streets into a flowing artery, continuously fed by those passing through it. Among the crowd, women dressed in traditional Torrese costume stand out, their presence anchoring the ritual in local history and embodied memory. Little girls, dressed like the Madonna herself, move carefully beside their parents, their participation signaling the transmission of cultural and spiritual identity across generations.

The weight of the statue becomes especially evident as the route tilts upward. The old town is not gentle: steep inclines, uneven stone, sudden descents. As the Madonna is carried through these tight, sloping corridors, attention sharpens, the effort required to lift and stabilize it becomes a visible act of devotion. In moments like these, especially when the descent feels precarious, the ritual's meaning is not abstract but visceral. It is through this embodied effort, through strain, balance, and coordination, that the landscape is sacralised and experienced as meaningful.

Contemporary understandings of sacred landscapes emphasize that spaces become sacred not only through formal designation, but through affect, emotion, and personal transformation. Any site may be understood as sacred when it is lived and perceived as such through ritual practice. In Torre, the procession exemplifies this principle: streets, alleys, and squares are transformed into sacred territory through movement, repetition, and collective participation, even as they remain materially unchanged.[64]

64 Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel."



2.20

Moments in the Procession of the Madonna delle Grazie III, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2025

Photograph by Giuseppe Pascale. As the procession moves through the steep, uneven streets of the town, participants carry the Madonna through shifting elevations, demonstrating both physical endurance and deep devotion. Above, a chenille blanket draped over the balcony signals participation from the domestic realm, extending the ritual into the built fabric of the street.

When the procession opens into Piazza del Popolo, the spatial compression of the old town opens into the town's central square. The Mother Church stands illuminated and decorated, its doors wide open, ready to welcome the Madonna. The statue enters the church and is placed upon a prepared pedestal where litanies are sung and played, and the supplication is read, each word dedicated to the Madonna. Here, ritual movement momentarily yields to ritual stillness, reinforcing the square and the church as nodal points within a wider sacred landscape.

When the rites conclude, the procession reforms without confusion and continues its journey through the remaining streets of the old town. The total route is approximately 1,300 meters and is the same each year, a ritualized circuit that inscribes the Madonna's presence onto every corner and threshold of the town. This repetition is crucial: places touched by the procession become marked by it, linked together through memory and movement. Over time, the town itself becomes a system of interconnected signs; streets, thresholds, and landmarks all bound together by ritual performance and collective religious memory.[65]

As the procession returns to the Sanctuary, fatigue is visible, but determination remains. Upon reaching the avenue in front of the church, the formation opens into two wings, lining the 40 meter long avenue and leaving a central aisle open down the middle. Near the entrance gate, the bearers turn the statue to face the people and stop. Firecrackers erupt, bells ring, applause swells, and the chant returns with renewed intensity: "Viva Maria! Viva Maria! Viva Maria!" In this final movement, the ritual both concludes and reaffirms itself, sealing the sacralisation of the landscape and the community's shared identity.

By now it is early afternoon, and the crowd slowly disperses, the celebration has brought joy and serenity; hearts feel full, and yet, a soft sadness settles in. Another year has passed; the festival has ended; everyday life resumes. Yet the emotional intensity of the ritual – felt by longtime residents, returning emigrants, and visitors alike – continues to shape the identity of Torre. Through repeated performance, the procession does not merely commemorate belief; it actively produces a lived ritual space embedded within a sacred landscape, one sustained by memory, movement, and the anticipation of its return.[66]

Ritual movements transform space into sacred places by imbuing them with religious significance, fostering collective memory, shaping community identity, and creating emotional connections that remain through time, even across changing social and cultural landscapes.[67]

65 Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel."

66 Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel."

67 Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena."

In the evening, a thanksgiving Mass brings the religious celebrations to a close. Thoughts already looking towards the next year. The places traced by the Madonna's passage remain charged with meaning, held within the collective memory of the community, awaiting the moment when ritual movement will once again animate them. Transforming space into place, and place into lived, sacred experience, even if only for a day.



2.21

Moments in the Procession of the Madonna delle Grazie IV, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2012

Still taken from a Youtube video posted by Michele Furfaro of the procession. This image captures the Madonna as she enters the Mother Church of Santa Domenica, where the procession pauses for a ritual blessing.



2.22

Moments in the Procession of the Madonna delle Grazie V, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2022

Photograph by Giuseppe Pascale. The Madonna exits the Mother Church, marking a transition from interior ritual space back into the public realm. The band follows closely behind as the processional order re-forms, re-establishing the rhythm and structure of movement.

Reflections from Mimmo

Mimmo is a current resident in Torre di Ruggiero and has been for his entire life. During the course of my research for this thesis, I had the opportunity to speak with him. He provided much of the information about the organizational structure and itinerary followed by the procession of the Madonna delle Grazie in Torre. His insights were invaluable to this work, and I am deeply grateful for the time and care he devoted into answering my many questions.

At the end of the document he prepared for me, Mimmo included his own personal reflections on the procession of the Madonna delle Grazie in Torre di Ruggiero. He speaks not only about what the procession means for the people of Torre, but also about the emotions it evokes in him personally. Although the following passages are translated from the original Italian, Mimmo's voice is not lost in translation. Instead, his thoughtfulness and poetic sensibility shines through, and I feel it best to let him speak in order to bring this chapter to a close.

> *In my opinion, confirmed by the historical memory of the people of Torre di Ruggiero, there has always been an unbreakable bond between the town and the Sanctuary; the people of Torre identify with the "Madonna delle Grazie" with a deep sense of belonging.*
>
> *I can say, without contradiction, that Torre di Ruggiero is a town known to the citizens of the area precisely because the Sanctuary dedicated to the Madonna delle Grazie stands in its territory.*
>
> *Thus, the celebration in honor of the "Madonna delle Grazie" will never end, and "Her Procession" will always continue; fortunately, because it is "an important part of the identity of the town and the community of Torre di Ruggiero," both as an emotional and religious bond, but also to bear witness to the historical and popular traditions of the place and pass them on to future generations. Indeed, a people, a community must – and increasingly over time – need to know its own origins in all their aspects in order to fully understand and appreciate the meaning of the life they are living.*

> *Ever since I was a child, and even more so as an adult and elderly person, the event that has had the strongest emotional impact on me is at the end of the "Procession" when the statue of the Madonna returns to the church. The moment is solemn.*
>
> *Staring at the statue as it crosses the threshold of the main door, amidst the explosions of firecrackers, the prolonged ringing of bells, the music of the band, applause, waving handkerchiefs, and cheering chants of "Viva Maria"... "Viva Maria"... "Viva Maria", it's moving; memories come flooding back and the emotion is strong, a lump forms in my throat... a tear comes to my eye.*[68]



2.23

The Madonna returning to the sanctuary, Torre di Ruggiero, Calabria, 2013

Photograph retrieved from the Sanctuary's Facebook page. The Madonna facing the crowd before re-entering the Sanctuary. Cheers and applause echo around as she gives her final blessing to the faithful who have gathered before her.

68 "'Mimmo' - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Torre Di Ruggiero."

Chapter 3

San Nicola da Crissa: The Tale of the Holy Crucifix

Rocca Angitola: The mother of many

This chapter traces the formation of a ritual landscape in San Nicola da Crissa, examining how devotion, community, and urban form become inseparable through the practice of procession. Beginning with the historical and geographical conditions that shaped the town's emergence, it follows the development of organized religious life through the founding of the Confraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix and the institutionalization of devotional practices. The chapter then moves to the evolution of procession as a central ritual practice in San Nicola, where these histories culminate in a lived ritual that unfolds through the streets of the town. In doing so, it argues that procession is not merely a religious event, functioning as a form of spatial production, through which religious meaning is inscribed onto the urban fabric, establishing a reciprocal relationship between ritual practice and the built environment.

To understand how this relationship between ritual and place takes shape, it is necessary to begin with the landscape itself. The Calabria region is a map of all the civilizations that have come before, dotted all across the land like constellations; they range from those of classical antiquity to those of the medieval era, up until the present day, always morphing from what they once were into new shapes and forms. Therefore, the starting point inevitably depends on the point at which you happen to be observing from.



3.1

Northwest view from the town's main piazza, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, Italy, 2024

Photograph taken by author. Looking out at the landscape from "the balcony of Calabria" in piazza Crissa.

Standing in the main piazza of San Nicola da Crissa, you are instantly drawn to the balcony which runs along one of its edges and overlooks the Calabrian landscape below. At 510 metres above sea level,[69] the view stretches towards the Tyrrhenian Sea, its horizon fragmented by the continuous rise and fall of hills and valleys. On a clear day, when looking northwest, the Gulf of Sant'Eufemia comes into view, along with the distant ruins of the Angitola Fortress on the slopes above Lake Angitola.

Known by various names throughout history – including Rocca Niceforo, in honour of the Byzantine leader Nicephorus Phocas, and later Rocca Angitola following the Norman conquest – the site functioned as the primary fortified centre of the Angitola Valley, which a network of villages, hamlets, and rural settlements developed around.[70] As its power declined due to demographic shifts, natural disasters, and changing political conditions, its inhabitants dispersed inland, contributing to the formation of surrounding settlements. For this reason, Rocca Angitola is often referred to as understood as the "the mother of all towns" in the area, including San Nicola da Crissa.[71]

Many of these settlements emerged between the 9th and 10th centuries during a period of instability marked by Saracen invasions into Calabria. As coastal areas became increasingly vulnerable, populations moved inland to more defensible mountainous terrain. Some communities formed around arable land, while others developed near existing Basilian monastic sites.[72] Although the fall of Rocca Angitola cannot be attributed solely to these invasions, they played a significant role in accelerating its decline and the redistribution of its population.



3.2

San Nicola da Crissa cascading down the side of Mount Cucco, Calabria, Italy, 1965

Panoramic view of the Southwest side of San Nicola da Crissa. Photograph by unknown author, found in *S. Nicola di Crissa e i suoi capolavori* by Nicola Mannacio.

69 Antonio Galloro, "Profilo storico di San Nicola da Crissa (VV) tra storia, cultura, economia e tradizioni," Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso, July 2005, https://www.sscrocifisso.vv.it/articoli2005/giornatemediche05/profilo_storico_di_san_nicola_da.htm.

70 Bruno De Caria, "Abitati Medievali nela valle dell'Angitola," La Barcunata, December 2009, 5–8.

71 Caputo, *The Coin From Calabria: Discovering the Historical Roots of My Calabrian People,* 78, 81.

72 Caputo, *The Coin From Calabria: Discovering the Historical Roots of My Calabrian People,* 74.



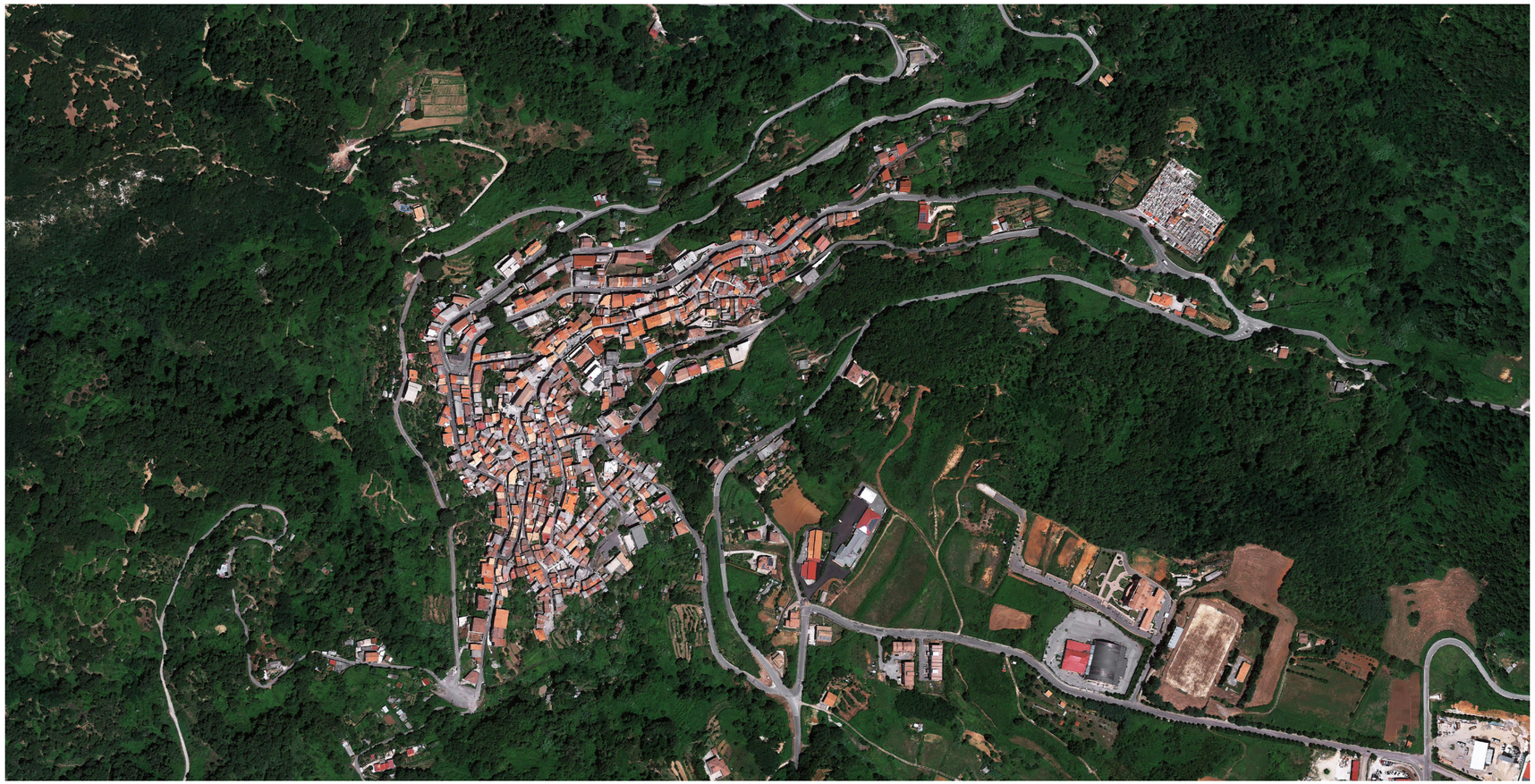
3.3

Key plan of Calabria, Italy

Drawing by author. The red dot represents the location of San Nicola da Crissa within the region.

San Nicola da Crissa lies further inland, along the southwestern foothills of the Serre Calabresi mountain range in the Vibo Valentia province. Positioned on a steep ridge along Monte Cucco, its origins date to the Byzantine period, likely emerging around a Basilian monastic settlement situated between two wooded valleys.[73] The exact origin date of the town remains unknown, but it is without doubt a town that has been around for a very, very long time. Its conception began during the Byzantine period of domination, led by Basilian monks who chose to settle on a terrace in the hills, bordered by two valleys of dense woods, flowery meadows, and green pastures.

What emerges from this history is not simply a story of movement and resettlement, but one in which the landscape itself becomes inseparable from the spiritual practices that shaped it. The presence of Basilian monks suggests that the town was not only founded in response to physical conditions, but also through acts of devotion that anchored belief to place. To understand the town's development, it is therefore necessary to consider the role of religion not just as a secondary layer, but as a formative one which points to the central role that faith would come to play in its formation.



3.4

San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, Italy, 2023

Satellite image showing the extent of the town of San Nicola da Crissa and its surrounding landscape. This aerial view helps to highlight the dense urban form of the town and its winding network of streets and pathways.

Google Earth. "San Nicola da Crissa," (38°39'53'' N, 16°17'9'' E)." Retrieved March 25, 2026. Screenshot taken by author. Google LLC. https://earth.google.com/.

73 Galloro, "Profilo storico di San Nicola da Crissa (VV) tra storia, cultura, economia e tradizioni."

Origins of Devotion

In the 17th century, San Nicola was marked by strong ecclesiastical tiesand intellectual vitality, producing bishops, lawyers, and authors of important religious works. Despite this, church authorities perceived a decline in moral and spiritual discipline, described by the Bishop of Mileto, as a "lethargy of sin."[74] In response, two missionary priests were sent to the town in 1669 to preach penance, moral reform, and salvation. Like evangelizing prophets, these missionaries sought to awaken the spiritual consciousness of communities that had endured long periods of hardship and were "immersed in the deep slumber of Sin."[75] Acting under papal authority, they offered absolution and renewal to a population shaped by hardship and instability.

Their visit provoked an intense collective response: large numbers of townspeople participated in acts of public penance, moving through the streets in devotional procession. Contemporary accounts describe how "eight hundred or more people(…)wearing penitential robes" gathered in acts of prayer, fasting, and contrition, while "even the children(…)marched along the pathways of the town, shouting out calls for mercy, and sobbing and beating their breast."[76] This moment reveals a community-wide performance of repentance, in which movement through the town became both a spiritual and spatial practice. The urban fabric itself was transformed into a sacred landscape, marking the earliest documented instance of procession in San Nicola.

Following this surge of devotion, Father Orazio formally established the *Confraternita del Santissimo Crocifisso* (Confraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix) on June 1, 1669, organizing the structure and initial set of rules to help guide the Confraternity's members.[77] Over the following decades, these guidelines were expanded into a substantial manuscript known as the Statues.[78]

The Statues of the Confraternity are contained in a well-preserved manuscript of approximately 600 pages, which consists of 24 chapters of rules plus a preface of 41 cards.[79] The manuscript remains to this day in the archives of the town's mother church where the confraternity continues to gather. The institutionalization of these practices ensured the continuity of collective devotion, embedding the act of ritual into the social and spatial life of the community. In this way, a moment of collective repentance evolved into a lasting framework of religious identity, belonging, and spiritual reassurance.

74 Tommaso Mannacio, "Saluto Del Segretario Della Confraternita Del SS. Crocifisso," in *Le Confraternite Religiose in Calabria e Nel Mezzogiorno*, vol. 1 (Mapograf, 1992).

75 Vito Teti, *Stones into Bread*, 1st ed. (Guernica Editions, 2018), 114.

76 Teti, *Stones into Bread,* 114–15.

77 Teti, *Stones into Bread,* 108.

78 Domenico Teti, "La Storia - Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso," Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso, https://www.sscrocifisso.vv.it/la-storia.html.

79 Domenico Teti, "Statuto Storico," Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso, https://www.sscrocifisso.vv.it/fileindice/Statuti/statutostorico.htm.

The confraternity's identity was further defined through its dedication to *Cristo Morto* (Christ Crucified), a figure embodying suffering, humility, and redemption. In aligning themselves with this image, and placing themselves under Christ's patronage, the members of the confraternity believed Christ to be a mediating figure between their actions and divine judgment. This dedication established both the spiritual foundation of the confraternity and its enduring role within the town's religious life, paving the way for their processional rituals which honour their enduring faith and give thanks to Christ as their protector and mediator.

Throughout the 18th century, the confraternity expanded its devotional practices and became a central presence in both the religious and civic life of San Nicola, functioning at times as what Vito Teti describes as "a sort of total social institution" which influenced "people's daily, working, social, and festive lives."[80] This growing devotion found its most powerful expression in the late 18th century with the installation of a carved wooden statue of the Cristo Morto above the high altar of the mother church.[81]

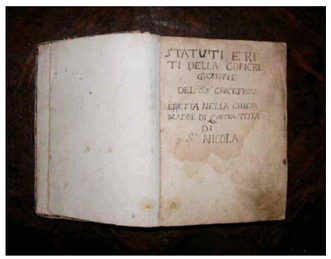
Carved in Naples by an unknown artist, the wooden figure departs from traditional crucifixion imagery: Christ is depicted alive, supported by angels, bearing the marks of sacrifice while directing attention to the blood flowing from his side.[82] Suspended above an angel waiting with a chalice, this blood signifies not death, but the perpetual offering of salvation.[83] In this way, the statue foregrounds Eucharistic meaning, emphasizing divine generosity and redemption.



3.5

Statue of the Holy Crucifix, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, 2025

Photograph retrieved from the Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso Facebook page. Close-up of the wooden statue of the Holy Crucifix in its shrine in the town's Mother Church (Chiesa Parrocchiale Maria SS. Anunziata).





3.6

Photographs of the preserved manuscript, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria

Photographs taken by and unknown author. Photographs of the physical bound manuscript of the Statues of the Confraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix. The document is about 350 years old.

80 Vito Teti, "La Confraternita Della Memoria e La Memoria Della Confraternita," in *La Confraternita Del Crocofisso* (Mapograf, 1993).

81 Teti, "La Storia - Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso."

82 Teti, "La Storia - Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso."

83 Teti, "La Storia - Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso."

Ritual in Motion

As both image and object, the statue became the symbolic and ritual centre of the confraternity's practices. In procession, it operates as a mobile extension of the altar, carrying Christ's presence beyond the church and into the streets of the town. Through this movement, the confraternity makes visible its devotion within the urban landscape, reinforcing the deep connection between ritual practice, sacred imagery, and the spatial experience of the community.

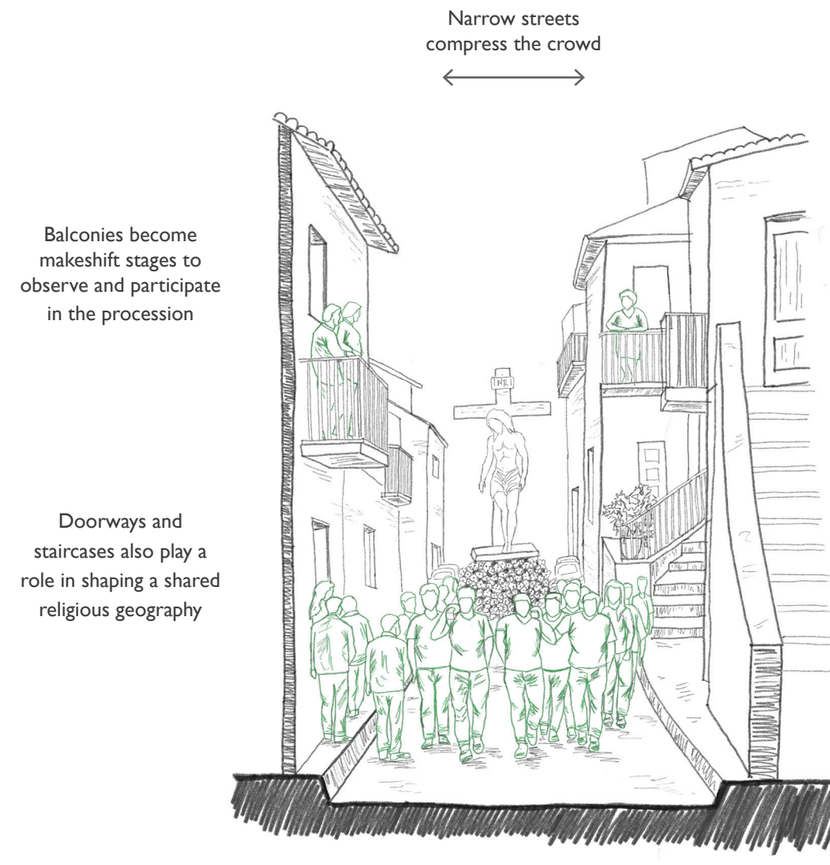
In the decades that followed, the procession evolved from an episodic act of collective repentance into a central and recurring form of devotional expression. No longer confined to moments of crisis or missionary intervention, it became a structured ritual through which the confraternity – and the broader community – could continually reaffirm their spiritual commitments. Through repeated enactment, these processions did more than traverse the town, they actively transformed it. Movement itself became a form of spatial practice, turning ordinary streets into what can be understood as lived ritual space, where meaning was produced through performance, memory, and collective participation.[84] The streets of San Nicola, once the setting for extraordinary displays of penance, became a habitual stage upon which faith was performed, remembered, and renewed.

At the centre of this transformation was not only movement, but the presence of sacred iconography carried through it. The statue of the *Cristo Morto,* carried through the streets, functioned as both object and agent: a visible manifestation of the divine that reoriented the spatial experience of the town. Procession thus became a highly sensory and symbolic act, engaging sight, sound, form and collective attention, and momentarily reconfiguring the urban environment into a stage full of religious meaning. Forming an intimate and reciprocal relationship between the religious act of procession, the participants, and the urban form of the town which it sacralises.

As such, these events made faith publicly visible, asserting its presence within shared civic space while reinforcing communal identity and belonging.[85] It is within this context that the procession must be understood not simply as an isolated religious act, but as the culmination of a long-standing tradition in which devotion, community, and urban space converge. Over time, this ritual practice became a part of the church calendar, reaching its most elaborate and highly anticipated form in the annual feast of the Most Holy Crucifix.

84 Ferri, "The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel." 2.

85 Lily Kong, "Religious Processions: Urban Politics and Poetics," in Religious Diversity in Singapore, Lectures, Workshops, and Proceedings of International Confrences (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2008), 306.



3.7

A section through the streets of San Nicola, Calabria, Italy

Drawing by author.
A conceptual cross-section of a narrow street along the processional route in San Nicola. Visualizing how the town becomes a direct participant in the ritual.

The Feast of the Santissimo Crocifisso

Each year, the devotional practices of the confraternity reach their fullest expression in the Feast of the Santissimo Crocifisso (Most Holy Crucifix), a period of celebration where the town's religious and social life converged. The procession originally took place on the fourth Sunday of September, as the timing aligned with the end of important agricultural work.[86] Holding this religious celebration at the completion of a major agricultural season provided a unique opportunity of commerce.

The Sannicolesi would trade and exchange livestock, goods, clothing, and agricultural products with each other and with people from other nearby towns who would flock to San Nicola ahead of the religious festivities for this very opportunity. It was only sometime after the period of mass migration that the dates of the celebration were changed to take place on the fourth Sunday of August, to accommodate the town's emigrants, who would flock back to San Nicola for this important religious celebration. In this way, returning emigrants became key figures in the celebrations, redefining the feast as an "emigrants' festival" centered on return, reunion, and shared identity.[87]

3.8

Photograph of a vendor during the festa weekend, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, 2017

Photograph retrieved from the Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso website. One of the many vendors who set up throughout the town during the festa weekend, selling local products, traditional sweets, and a variety of nuts.

As described by Vito Teti in his book *Stones into Bread*, he recalls his experience as a kid in San Nicola filled with anticipation and excitement leading up to the Feast of the Most Holy Crucifix. When the feast day drew near, all the kids in the town would begin gathering "information on the band, the singers, the fireworks (…) The truck with the lights, the arches and the stage usually arrived at the start of the holiday week. Strong men with foreign accents unloaded boards of all shapes and colours with holes and joints, poles, strings, wires and bulbs which they transformed with skill and patience, flying up the stairs and on the balconies or along the poles, into magical, beautiful constructions and fascinating scenery in which to perform shows and rituals."[88] By the time the final preparations were complete, anticipation had reached its peak, giving way to the day of the procession, when the town's streets would once again be set in motion.

86 Teti, "La Confraternita Della Memoria e La Memoria Della Confraternita."
87 Teti, "La Confraternita Della Memoria e La Memoria Della Confraternita."
88 Teti, *Stones into Bread,* 110.

On the day of the procession, the town itself becomes the stage for this important ritual to take place. The energy that had been building in the town throughout the prior weeks begins to unfold through the act of ritual movement. Following the mass which takes place inside the Mother Church, Maria SS. Annunziata, the bells begin to toll as the statue of the Holy Crucifix is lead out of the church on the shoulders of devoted brothers of the confraternity. As the statue descends the steps of the church into Piazza Crissa – the town's main square – its appearance is met with great cheer. Hundreds of people clapping and whistling in jubilation, song from the band begins, and fireworks are set off into the sky above. Directly behind the statue of the Cristo Morto follows a second statue, the statue of the *Madonna Addolorata* (Our Lady of Sorrows).

This statue of Mother Mary follows the statue of Christ in the procession because, in Catholic tradition, she is believed to have followed alongside her son as he bore the cross at the time of his Crucifixion.

As the procession begins, the formation takes place. Leading the way are two rows of brothers who are dressed in the traditional white gown, completed by a red *mozzetta* with white trim. At the very front of these two rows are the flag bearers, waving flags dedicated to the Confraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix and the Madonna Adolorata. Behind the two rows of brothers stands the Prior and the other leaders of the Confraternity, guiding the statues that closely follow. Behind the statue of the Holy Crucifix and the Madonna Adolorata the band closely follows, playing the traditional songs of the Confraternity throughout the procession. Finally, there is the rest of the congregation: loyal devotees of the crucifix, as well as other townspeople, and those who travel from across the region and the world to attend the celebrations, all following in the footsteps of those ahead.

A short, elbow-length cape worn in ecclesiastical dressing.

The procession winds its way through the town like a living thread, stitching together streets that twist, climb, and suddenly fall away. It moves along narrow lanes where balconies nearly touch overhead, then spills briefly into wider stretches of road before being compressed again between stone walls and shuttered facades. The asphalt gives way to worn paving stones; the ground tilts upward, then descends again, forcing bodies into a shared rhythm of effort and release. In some places the route opens just enough for the crowd to breathe, while in others it tightens so closely that shoulders brush walls and the sound of footsteps reverberate between buildings – movement becomes a physical negotiation with the town itself.



3.9

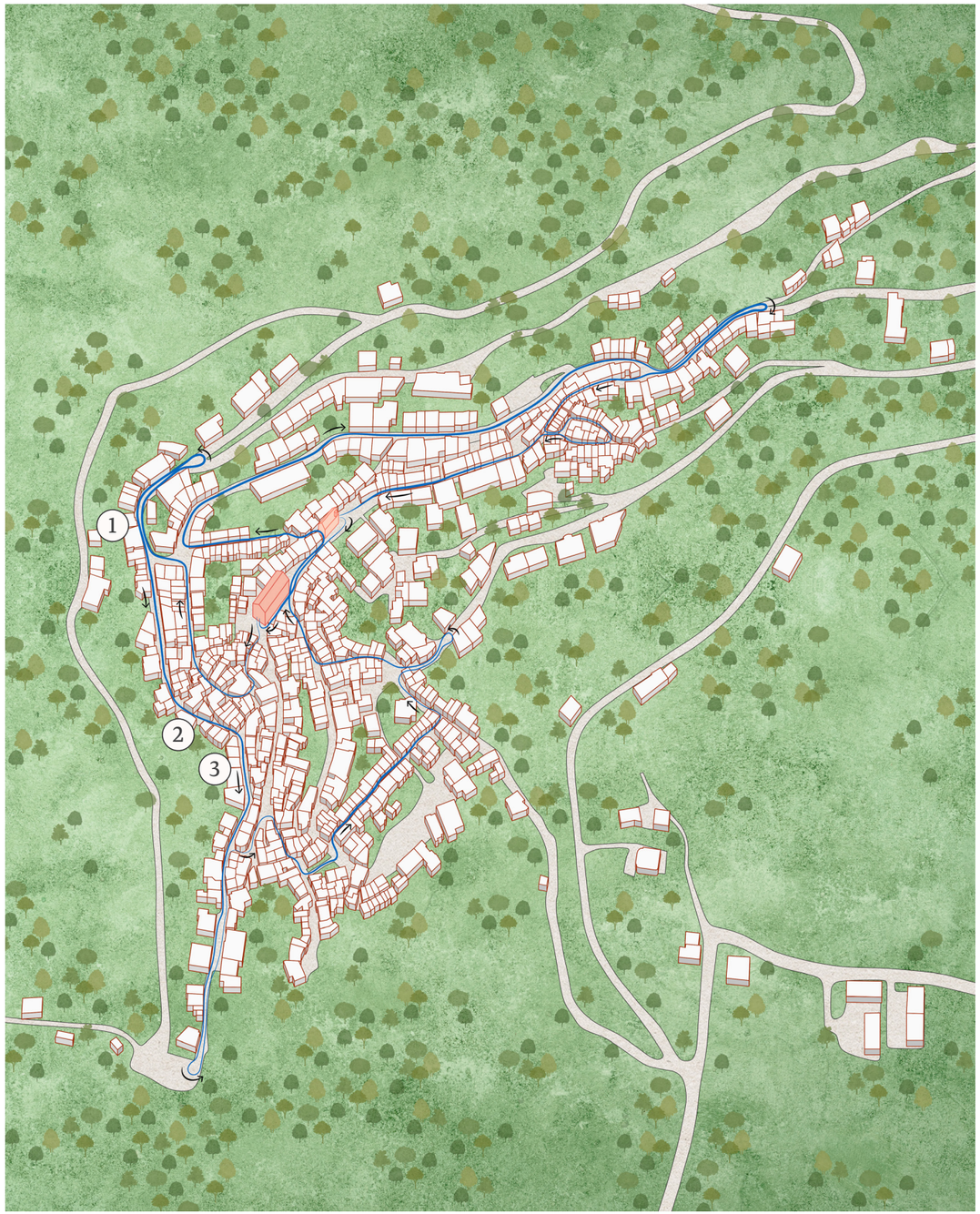
View from Piazza Marconi of the lit up archways, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, 2017

Photograph retrieved from the Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso website. Viewed from Piazza Marconi, just behind the Mother Church, the street is illuminated by festive archways. These grand displays are especially common in Southern Italy during religious processions, often erected as acts of thanksgiving to a saint for protection, healing, or grace received.

3.10

Plan Oblique Drawing of the Processional Route, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, Italy

Drawing by author. Plan oblique of the processional route taken through the town of San Nicola da Crissa during the Feast of the Most Holy Crucifix. This drawing highlights the relationship between the processional route and the surrounding landscape of the town. The route winds through the town's ebbing terrain, contracting within the dense fabric of town's narrow streets. In this setting, the experience of the procession is closely shaped by the town's physical form. A reciprocal relationship emerges, in which the built environment informs the route while the procession, in turn, activates and gives meaning to these spaces. In this sense, the town and the procession are deeply interconnected, with the sacralisation of space inextricably linked to the tradition of the procession.



Parish Church of Maria SS. Annunziata

Church of the Most Holy Rosary

1



3.11

Flags and banners, San Nicola da Crissa

Sketch by author. The flags and banners of the confraternity lead the procession. Embodying their identity and making visible this collective act of shared devotion, setting the sacred path throughout the town.

2

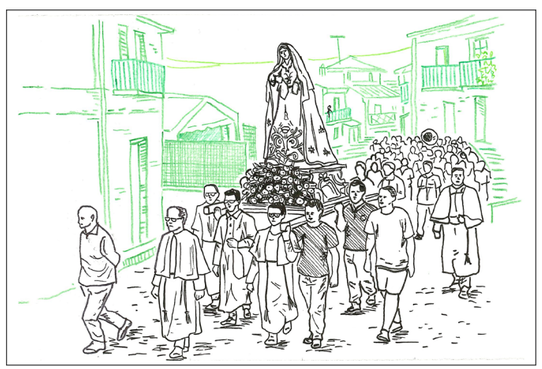


3.12

Statue of the SS. Crocifisso, San Nicola da Crissa

Sketch by author. At the heart of the procession, the statue of the Holy Crucifix gathers the prayers of the Sannicolesi, centering their faith on Christ as protector and guide.

3



3.13

Statue of the Madonna Addolorata, San Nicola da Crissa

Sketch by author. The last ritual object carried in the procession is the statue of the Madonna Addolorata. She follows her son, embodying a quiet devotion that completes the sacred narrative of the procession.







3.14

Moments in the Procession of the Most Holy Crucifix I, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, 2018

Photographs retrieved from La Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso's website. These photographs capture key moments in the procession. In the first image, the crowd gathers in anticipation as the Holy Crucifix emerges from the church on the shoulders of the faithful, marking the beginning of its sacred journey through the town.

The second image shows members of the confraternity, dressed in white gowns with coloured mozzette, carrying the flags and banners of both the Madonna Addolorata and the Holy Crucifix, making visible the collective identity of the procession.

In the third image, the procession moves across the town's shifting elevations, as the band in red and the gathered community follow closely behind, revealing how ritual movement engages the changing topography of the urban landscape.

The pace is never constant. The "young" advance first, setting the procession in motion, followed by the "old," who regulate its flow. Orders of *fermi* and *avanti* are shouted by older brothers gripping their staffs, halting the group abruptly or urging it forward into sudden sprints. These stops and starts are felt in the legs and lungs and fatigue is visible – on foreheads, in shoulders – but so is pride, especially as the statues pass in front of familiar houses, where windows fill with faces and balconies become quiet stages of observation.

Fermi means "stop"
Avanti means "forward"

The air is thick with competing sensations: the metallic sound of the band alternating between solemn marches and livelier melodies, the hiss of frying oil drifting from kitchens left momentarily unattended, the smell of sauces simmering as the procession passes beneath open windows. Between the band's pieces, the older members begin to sing the ancient songs of the confraternity, their voices unaccompanied yet steady, as if the music itself were carrying the procession forward when instruments fall silent. These songs do not entertain; they bind, pulling memory and devotion into the present moment.

As the statues advance, the town is gradually transformed. Streets once ordinary are momentarily sacralized by repetition, by presence, and by the encircling movement. The route bends back on itself, retracing familiar paths, ensuring that the procession passes through the neighborhoods where most of the confraternity's members live. The town itself becomes an actor in the ritual, an essential part of the performance – its doorways, balconies, staircases, streets, and piazzas all play a role in shaping a shared religious geography. In this way, the procession does not simply occur within the town, but enters into a reciprocal relationship with it: the town provides the stage, and the ritual, in turn, inscribes it with meaning, embedding devotion into the physical and cultural fabric of everyday life.

As the procession reaches the final stretch, moving beneath the soft blur of archway lights, it pauses briefly while the statues are brought into the Church of the Holy Rosary to receive a final blessing. Dusk has settled fully over the town and the pace has slowed. The statues then enter back into the Mother Church, returning to their places along either side of the altar, completing a circuit that could only end back at the place where it began.



3.15

Moments in the Procession of the Most Holy Crucifix II, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, 2018

Photograph retrieved from La Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso's website. Showing the Prior of the Confraternity leading the statues, alongside two policemen.



3.16

Moments in the Procession of the Most Holy Crucifix III, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, 2025

Photograph retrieved from La Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso's Facebook page. Many residents honour the Most Holy Crucifix by draping richly coloured fabrics and banners from their balconies, transforming the facades of their homes into visible expressions of devotion. In doing so, domestic space becomes part of the festive streetscape, allowing individual households to participate in the collective identity and ritual atmosphere of the town.

For those walking together, the experience is profoundly connective and deeply intimate. Moving together through the town, stopping and starting as one body, expressing a shared faith, the participants recognize themselves in one another. Community is not abstract here; it is felt in the synchronized steps, the shared fatigue, the collective voice rising between buildings. In this movement through space, people find one another again, recognize one another, and feel themselves bound – by faith, by memory, and by the streets that have carried the procession for generations.

With the return of the statues to the church, the town does not fall quiet; instead, it exhales and comes alive. Piazza Marconi fills rapidly, drawn together by the glow of stage lights and the swell of live music that spills outward into the surrounding streets, transforming the square into a dense, vibrating field of sound and bodies. Music fills the air, the voices, drums, and strings carrying far beyond the piazza and drawing people in from every direction. Faces long absent reappear, pulled back by the force of the feast, as generations intertwine; older men standing at the edges with folded arms, younger bodies swaying closer to the stage, children darting through the crowd, the air charged with excitement. The square, rarely so animated, becomes densely packed – neighbors, returnees, and visitors pressed shoulder to shoulder, talking, laughing, and moving together.

As the night deepens, fireworks erupt above the rooftops, filling the sky with color and sound. Light reflects off balconies and windows, momentarily illuminating the facades that only hours earlier framed the passage of the procession. What had been solemn and reflective now becomes celebratory and unrestrained. In this crowded square, devotion gives way to celebration without breaking continuity; both are held within the same ritual arc. The town recognizes itself again, fully animated, bound together by memory, music, and the shared experience of being there together.







3.17

Moments in the Procession of the Most Holy Crucifix IV, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, 2018

Photographs retrieved from La Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso's website. As the procession continues its journey, the first image shows the sacred figures moving through the town's narrow streets, accompanied by the faithful while residents observe from balconies above, reinforcing the intimate relationship between ritual movement and domestic space.

In the second image, the statue of the Most Holy Crucifix enters the Church of the Holy Rosary for a moment of blessing before returning to the Mother Church, extending the sacred route through multiple sites of devotion within the town.

The final image captures the live music celebration in Piazza Marconi after the procession's conclusion, where ritual gives way to festivity and the piazza becomes a space of collective identity, memory, and shared tradition

Tradition in Transition

In the past, confraternities played an essential role in local religious life especially during periods where there were no other forms of Catholic associations or movements, and in villages with no Franciscan or Dominican convents, confraternities became the primary expression of parish life. Although they were imperfect, and often shaped by internal limitations, they stood as centers of Christian life, sustained by distinctive spiritual traditions that members preserved with a deep faith and commitment and which have been passed on to future generations.

Now times have changed, and many newer, more modern Catholic movements and associations offer fresh forms of engagement within the church community; as a result, confraternities are no longer the only way to participate within church life. Nevertheless, confraternities can still remain relevant within the church and community if they stay true to their original spiritual identity by continuing their traditions while finding new space for religious intervention.

In addition to the changing role of confraternities in contemporary times, confraternities in towns like San Nicola have experienced another significant change due to the intense waves of migration that rippled through the town. Beginning in the 1950s, immigration opened up a chasm in the town of San Nicola. Over the next two decades, masses of people moved out of the town, permanently fragmenting the relationships and identity of the Sannicolesi people. Those who stayed and those who left remained forever linked, even if they never happen to meet again.

Despite the changing landscape of the confraternity's function in both parish and civic life, the procession has always remained. It is the link that connects the past and present, between space and time, across lands and oceans, this tradition which stems back to the foundation of the confraternity, is still carried out to this day. These key elements of Sannicolesi identity never disappeared, instead they were reinvented and redefined in Canada, helping to create a sense of belonging and place in their new home.



3.18

Moments in the Procession of the Most Holy Crucifix V, San Nicola da Crissa, Calabria, 2025

Photographs retrieved from La Confraternita del SS. Crocifisso's Facebook page. Seen from the balcony above, the procession threads through the constricted street as a unified body, revealing the relationship between collective movement and the spatial fabric of the town. In this moment, the street becomes more than circulation space, it is transformed into a lived landscape of shared identity and ritual belonging

PART II
TRANSITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

Chapter 4

A Place to Belong: Re-finding Home through Religious Identity

Those Who Stay and Those Who Go

This chapter traces the movement of Italian migrants from Southern Italy to Toronto and examines how religious practice became a central means through which immigrant communities established identity and belonging in a new urban context. After outlining the broader context of Italian emigration and settlement, it situates these communities within a city shaped by Protestant dominance and contested religious expression. The chapter then explores how, in response to marginalization within formal church structures, Italian immigrants sustained their faith through culturally familiar forms of devotion, particularly festas and religious processions. Drawing on spatial theory, the chapter ultimately argues that these processions transformed public city streets into sites of sacred and cultural meaning, enabling Italian immigrants to assert their presence and reshape the social and spatial fabric of the city.

After the initial political and social unrest caused by Italian unification in 1861, emigration emerged as a powerful and widespread phenomenon which affected nearly all regions of the country.[89] While the causes of emigration differed between towns, it was most often linked to limited opportunities and challenging living conditions.[90] At first the regions and towns which experienced massive losses to emigration were those located closest to the major centers of industrialization. This meant that the Northern regions were the ones most directly affected by this system of economic destabilization.[91] However, within a decade or two, an even stronger migration movement was spreading throughout the country's Southern regions, where the effects of industrial capitalism and heavy taxation on agricultural labour were enormously felt.[92]

By the end of the century, the epicentre of the emigration had officially shifted into these regions, resulting in the birth of the 'southern question,' a tense political and national issue.[93] By 1907 a national inquiry officially revealed without doubt that "the factors linking emigration to agricultural underdevelopment and economic stagnation were evident to all observers."[94] Thus, from this point onward, the 'southern question' and emigration were inseparably linked.

89 Bruno Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today* (Canadian Historical Association, 1989; Revised from an earlier edition, Soleil, 2016), 1.

90 John Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity*, 1875-1935 (McGill-Queens University Press, 1988), 13. Zucchi explores in greater depths the causes and various reasons as to why so many Southern Italians chose to leave their hometowns and emigrate elsewhere.

91 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 2.

92 Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity, 1875-1935*, 14.

93 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 4.

94 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today,* 4

While all Southern regions became major sources of immigration to Canada, Calabria produced some of the highest numbers of emigrants amongst the Southern Italian regional groups. For Calabrians, emigration has been a process that reshaped both people and places over time. As families and neighbours left, entire communities were dispersed and gradually re-formed abroad; these Calabrian towns moved, halved, and doubled elsewhere, existing in other places entirely.



4.1

Emigrants Postcard, date unknown

Retrieved from *Museo dell'Emigrazione Italiana*'s website. Postcard edited by the Forward for May Day.

The message on the postcard reads:

"They wander about; and they go, and they go, and they go.
A vast river; where? They don't even know!"

Capturing the experience of emigration for so many.

Italian Emigration to Canada

The first major wave of Italian immigration to Canada began at the end of the 19th century, emerging from the combination of growing labour needs and expanding recruitment networks. Italian employment agents known as padroni, were based in Montreal and Toronto, working alongside railway and steamship companies to facilitate the direct recruitment of workers from Italy.[95] This helped to establish the foundations of a sustained migration stream. These migrant workers were young sojourning males who were almost always single or unaccompanied, forming a mobile workforce willing to endure seasonal employment and physically demanding labour in sectors such as railway and canal construction and coal mining.[96]

During this initial phase of Italian migration, return migration played an important role in spreading the word about Canada and the opportunities available there, the creation of these informal networks of shared information streams made the country more familiar and attractive to other villagers considering emigration.[97] These early migration movements were soon strengthened by the development of migration chains that connected specific Italian towns in Italy with particular places in Canada. Many of these migration chains, rooted in family ties and relationships among fellow villagers, linked Toronto to dozens of Southern Italian towns.[98] They provided new individuals and families arriving to cities like Toronto, with a support network, and promoted the formation of more stable and cohesive communities.[99] When Italians began settling in Toronto at the end of the 19th century, the city itself was experiencing rapid expansion. As the provincial capital with strong transportation connections, Toronto emerged as a major centre of commerce, finance, and small-scale manufacturing.[100] During this period, more than half of Toronto's Italian immigrants originated from Sicily, Abruzzo, Puglia, and Calabria.[101]

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the first wave of Italian migration had produced a recognizable Italian community in Toronto, defined not only by the formation of distinct Italian neighbourhoods and village-based migration chains formed by *paesani*, but most importantly, by a strong and growing sense of collective identity. Although many emigrants arrived as paesani, the shared experience of life in a foreign country encouraged broader bonds rooted in common language, memory, and circumstance.

Paesani is a term used to refer to people who come from the same town or village. Among Italian immigrants, paesani relationships were especially important, as they helped maintain familiar social, cultural, and familial ties in a new country, particularly within immigrant communities.

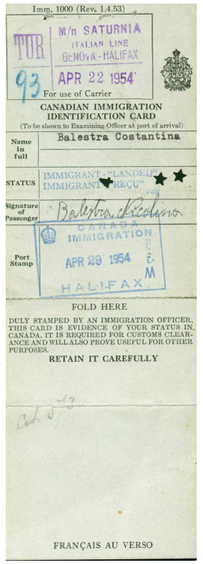
95 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 11.
96 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 11.
97 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 11.
98 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 12.
99 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 12.
100 Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity*, 1875-1935, 37.
101 Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity*, 1875-1935, 49.

Everyday encounters on streets, in workplaces, churches, and small businesses strengthened these ties, as shared experiences encouraged Italian immigrants to identify with one another, and rapid population growth made the creation of community institutions possible.[102] Earlier arrivals came to view themselves as pioneers, united by shared hardship and invested in shaping the social and cultural life of the community that followed. These early foundations would prove crucial in the decades to come, as they provided the social networks, institutions, and points of reference that would later support the far larger and more permanent wave of Italian migration to Canada after the Second World War.

Italian immigration after World War II was largely driven by the same factors that fueled the earlier wave of immigration. Italy suffered massive devastation from the war, resulting in one of the most sad and enduring periods of sustained unemployment spread throughout the whole country. Knowing it would take many years before the Italian economy would even partially recover, this new generation of Italians saw emigration as the only solution to the uncertainty and poverty which plagued them.[103] The large-scale arrival of Italians in postwar Toronto reflected a broader global movement that saw about seven million Italians migrate, temporarily or permanently to destinations across Europe, the Americas, and beyond during the three decades following World War II.[104]

By the late 1950s, transatlantic migration from Italy had surpassed one million people.[105] Although the United States remained as one of the most popular destinations for overseas migrants, the country's restrictive national quota policies significantly limited the number of Italians allowed entry each year. In contrast, Canada did not enforce the same restrictive quotas on migrants from southern and central-eastern Europe, although Canadian authorities were initially reluctant to "re-open the door" to Italian immigration.[106] This hesitation was partly due to the public opinion Canadians held of Italians. It is important to note, that in 1946 Italy was still considered an "enemy state," so when a Gallup poll – which had been conducted that same year – showed that 61 per cent of Canadians were opposed to mass immigration from Europe, and a further 25 per cent were specifically against Italian immigration to Canada, it was not surprising that the public regarded Italians very poorly.[107]

102 Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity*, 1875-1935, 63.
103 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 15.
104 Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (McGill-Queens University Press, 1992), xix.
105 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, xxi.
106 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 15.
107 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 21–22.


Imm. 1000 (Rev. 1.4.53)
TOR
M/n SATURNIA
ITALIAN LINE
GENOVA-HALIFAX
APR 22 1954
For use of Carrier
CANADIAN IMMIGRATION IDENTIFICATION CARD
(To be shown to Examining Officer at port of arrival)
Name in full: Balestra Costantina
STATUS: IMMIGRANT LANDED / IMMIGRANT REÇU
Signature of Passenger: Balestra Costantina
Port Stamp: CANADA IMMIGRATION APR 29 1954 M HALIFAX
FOLD HERE
DULY STAMPED BY AN IMMIGRATION OFFICER, THIS CARD IS EVIDENCE OF YOUR STATUS IN CANADA. IT IS REQUIRED FOR CUSTOMS CLEARANCE AND WILL ALSO PROVE USEFUL FOR OTHER PURPOSES.
RETAIN IT CAREFULLY
FRANÇAIS AU VERSO

4.2

Canadian Immigration Identification Card, 1954

Retrieved from Pier21's digital artifacts. Example of historical Canadian Record of Landing. This document was issued to immigrants upon their arrival in Canada (prior to 2002) to prove their permanent resident status. Commonly referred to as "landing papers." The *Saturnia* was a renowned Italian transatlantic liner that, along with its sister ship *Vulcania*, transported roughly 265,000 immigrants, including many Italians, to North America between 1946 and 1965, with the majority arriving in either Halfax or New York.

This discrimination was especially directed towards Southern Italians, who were thought to be intellectually inadequate and frowned upon for their cultural practices, they were viewed as being incapable of conforming to Canadian values and social norms. Southern Italians also stood out amongst Canadians at the time, not just because of the foreign language they spoke but also because of their darker skin and hair colour when compared to their fellow Northern Italians.[108]

At the same time, the federal government faced mounting pressure from major employers who were struggling with labour shortages, so instead the government prioritized economic growth and expansion over cultural concerns leading Canada to become one of the primary destinations for Italian migrants for the next several decades. As a temporary measure, Canadian immigration officials introduced a contract-based employment system as a direct response to employer demands, this approach not only institutionalized the labour recruitment process but also expanded its reach within Italy.[109]



4.3

A journey to Canada

Drawing by author. This drawing maps Italian migration to Canada, tracing a typical Calabrese immigrant's journey across the Atlantic from the port in Naples to Pier 21 in Halifax, and then onward to Toronto – a primary destination of settlement for many Italians.

108 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity."
109 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 15.

It was within this broader framework that the category of "sponsored immigrant" was expanded to include family members in Canadian immigration policies.[110] This now meant that Italian-Canadians were permitted to sponsor relatives by taking financial responsibility for them during their initial settlement, and in turn, once these newcomers obtained landed immigrant status, they too could sponsor additional family members, furthering patterns of chain migration. Thus, between 1946 and 1967 more than 90 per cent of all Italians who entered Canada were sponsored by their Italian-Canadian relatives.[111]

110 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 16.
111 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today*, 16.

Italian Emigration to Toronto

While the earliest arrivals of this second wave of immigration began in the late 1940s, the first major influx of Italians arrived during the 1950s, with Toronto emerging as the primary Canadian destination for Italian immigrants. Between the decade of 1951 to 1961, more than 250,000 Italians came to Canada, with 60 percent of these immigrants hailing from the Southern regions of Italy.[112] Roughly 40 percent of the total number of Italians who came to Canada during this time chose to settle in Toronto because of family connections and to serve employment contracts.[113]

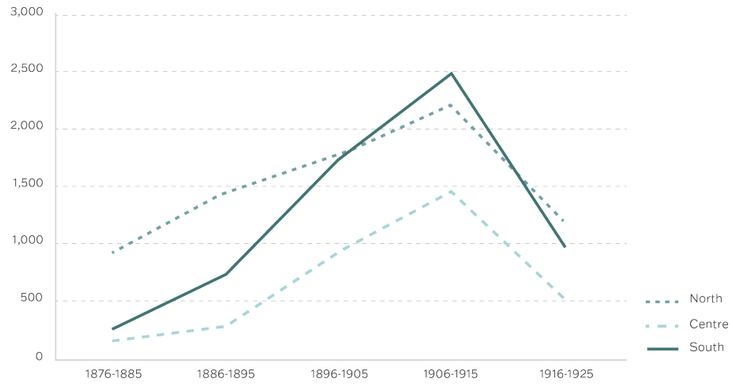
By 1961, Italians had become Toronto's largest non-British ethnic group, and the city had replaced Montreal as Canada's primary centre of Italian settlement.[114] This presence that was already strongly felt along College Street, in the area known as Little Italy, where more than 15,000 Italians lived.[115] By 1965, another 33,000 Italians had come to Toronto, and by 1971, 38,760 more.[116] In total, by 1971, there were 271,755 Italians living in *Metropolitan Toronto* which accounted for about 10 percent of the Metropolitan's total population.[117] Up until the change to immigration policies in 1967, Italians were the ones who took the greatest advantage of the sponsorship system with over 90 per cent of Italians who came to Canada being sponsored by relatives – this was an unprecedently high number when compared to the average for all other nationalities, where only 47 percent were sponsored by family.[118]

In 1971, Metropolitan Toronto ("Metro") was a federation of six municipalities in Ontario, Canada: the City of Toronto, the Borough of East York, and the boroughs (formerly townships) of Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, and York.

The massive influx of Italian immigrants into Canada had reached its peak when in 1967 the effects of the new immigration policies were introduced, being felt immediately across oceans. By restricting the sponsorship system and redefining the workforce needs, the new system sharply reduced Italian immigration. By 1972, Italians made up only 3.8 percent of all new immigrant arrivals to Canada.[119] Although it was officially framed as "non-discriminatory," the "points system" favoured applicants with higher levels of formal education and professional credentials.[120] As a result, many Italians – especially those from the Southern regions – whose backgrounds were rooted in agriculture, artisanal trades, and small scale commerce, were no longer eligible. In effect, the new policy brought large-scale Italian immigration to Canada to an end, closing a chapter shaped by working-class migration and family networks.

112 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, xxii.
113 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, xxi.
114 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia,* 30.
115 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 30.
116 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, xxi.
117 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, xxi, 210.
118 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 48.
119 Ramirez, *The Italians in Canada: Yesterday & Today,* 18.
120 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 53.

The introduction of these new immigration policies coincided with a sharp decline of immigration from Italy after 1969, this pattern was reflective of the broader changes that were taking place within Italy at the time. The mass exodus of millions in the earlier decades, combined with land reforms and the expansion of social and welfare programs, reduced the economic pressures which had driven such large swaths of people to leave.[121] As these conditions shifted, the Italian government moved away from encouraging emigration and instead focused on protecting the social rights and benefits of Italians living abroad.[122] In Canada, and particularly in Toronto, the scale of Italian immigration never again reached the levels it had achieved before the mid-1960s. By 1971, what had once been a steady and substantial stream of migration had diminished to only a small trickle, marking the end of an era of mass migration.



4.4

Graph depicting Emigration from Italy from 1876-1925

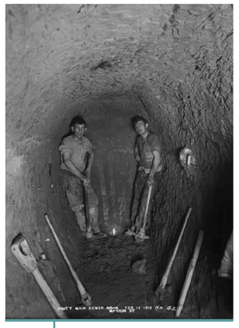
Graph by author. Adapted from Bruno Ramirez's in *The Italians in Canada*. This graph breaks down emigration from Italy by three geographical areas of departure; North, Central, and Southern Italy. Numbers are by the thousands. While this graph only provides data up until 1925, the same trends continued post 1925, with Southern Italians being the most prominent group of Italian immigrants to Canada.

121 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 51.
122 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 51.

4.5

A timeline graph of Italian Immigration

Drawing by author. Drawing on Statistics Canada records and data adapted from scholars such as Bruno Ramirez, this graph provides an overview of patterns and peaks in Italian immigration to Canada from the early 1900s to recent decades. It highlights key historical and political events that directly influenced these migration trends.



a. Italian Immigrant Sewer Workers



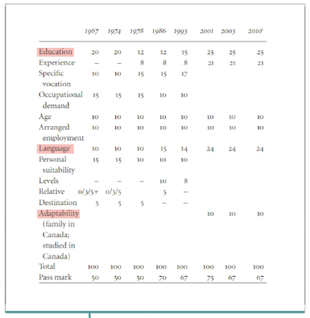
c. Wartime restrictions announced against those of German or Italian origin



b. Italian authorities enacted laws in 1924 to impede Italian emigration



d. College street in the 1960s



	1957	1974	1978	1986	1993	2001	2003	2010f
Education	20	20	12	12	15	25	25	25
Experience	–	–	8	8	8	21	21	21
Specific vocation	10	10	15	15	17			
Occupational demand	15	15	15	10	10			
Age	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Arranged employment	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Language	10	10	10	15	14	24	24	24
Personal suitability	15	15	10	10	10			
Levels	–	–	–	10	8			
Relative	0/3/5+	0/3/5		5	–			
Destination	5	5	5	–	–			
Adaptability (family in Canada; studied in Canada)						10	10	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Pass mark	50	50	50	70	67	75	67	67

e. The points system

a. Photograph of Italian Immigrants working on the expansion of Toronto's sewer system in 1912. Retrieved from City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 372, Sub Series 59, Item 42.

b. The Italian authorities enacted laws in 1924 and 1929 to impede Italian emigration. These legal changes and effects of the depression halted Italian immigration to Canada until after the Second World War. Retrieved from https://www.mhso.ca/ggp/Ethnic_groups/Italian/Ital_overview.html

c. *The Canada Gazette* was the official newspaper of the Government of Canada. This image shows a page from the 1940 edition, the article describes the Defence of Canada regulations made by the Order in Council towards enemy aliens, and the events surrounding Italy's declaration of war. Retrieved from Library and Archives Canada, 1867-1946 (Dominion of Canada), 15 June 1940.

d. An image of College Street in the 1960s. Pictured is the Pylon theatre playing Italian movies beside the CHIN radio station which delivered Italian music and news. Retrieved from https://soandco.ca/does-toronto-have-a-little-italy/

e. Canadian Immigration Act Policy restricted the sponsorship system and moved to a points-based system favoring skilled workers. Retrieved from http://gazette.gc.ca/rp-pr/p1/2010/2010-06-26/html/notice-avis-eng.html

Religious Contention in Toronto

The Italian immigrants who arrived in Toronto during this period were stepping into a city in the midst of defining its place in the modern era. This process of shaping a new identity involved the restructuring of neighbourhoods in response to shifting demographics and economic development. Alongside these changes, the religious makeup of the city was also evolving. At the turn of the 20th century, Catholics formed the largest religious minority in Toronto, a city still dominated culturally and politically by English-speaking Protestants. The Catholic population in the city was primarily composed of Irish and German communities, at the time when the initial groups of Italian immigrants began to settle.

Given their minority status and limited institutional support, Catholic clergy – particularly within Irish communities – often encouraged assimilation into the dominant Anglo-Protestant culture.[123] In a context shaped by deeply rooted anti-Catholic sentiment, public expressions of religious identity, such as street processions, were often discouraged in order to avoid hostility from the majority Protestant population.[124]

This tension can be traced back to the mid-19th century, when the arrival of Irish Catholic immigrants resulted in conflict with the Anglo-Protestant majority. As Catholics became more publicly visible – building churches, forming organizations, and advocating for Catholic education – Protestant groups, including the Orange Order, sought to maintain their dominance in civic life by limiting Catholic access to political, economic, and social institutions.[125]

These conflicts frequently played out in public space. Streets and sidewalks became areas of negotiation and contestation, where different groups asserted their values, identities, and claims to belonging. While Protestant parades, such as those organized by the Orange Order, were framed as expressions of cultural heritage and civic identity, Catholic processions were often perceived as disruptive and politically charged.[126] By bringing religious ritual into public space, Catholics challenged the prevailing Protestant belief that religion should remain within the private sphere.[127]

123 Roberto Perin, *Rome in Canada: The Vatican and Canadian Affairs in the Late Victorian Age* (University of Toronto Press, 1990), 20.

124 Perin, *Rome in Canada: The Vatican and Canadian Affairs in the Late Victorian Age*, 24.

125 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 8.

126 Tomasz Soroka, "The Canadian Orange Movement. The Concept of Political and Social Tradition," Place and Memory in Canada: Global Perspectives, 2005, 533–44

127 Ian Radforth, "Collective Rights, Liberal Discourse, and Public Order: The Clash over Catholic Processions in Mid-Victorian Toronto," *The Canadian Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (2014): 511–44.

As a result, Catholic processions were frequently met with hostility and, at times, violence, reflecting broader anxieties about religious difference and social order. Over time, however, as Irish Catholics gained greater acceptance within Canadian society, these overt public expressions of religious identity diminished, signaling a broader process of assimilation.[128] It was within this evolving urban and religious landscape that Italian immigrants began to establish themselves. Although initially a small community, they would continue to grow in number and, in doing so, reintroduce forms of public religious expression that once again transformed the streets into spaces of visible devotion.

128 Michael Cottrell, "St. Patrick's Day Parades in Nineteenth-Century Toronto: A Study of Immigrant Adjustment and Elite Control," in *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s-1960s* (University of Toronto Press, 1998).

Ritual in Toronto

During the first few decades of Italian immigration in the 20th century, Italians were aware of their marginal status in Toronto. Their residential segregation and harsh living conditions, the dialects they spoke and the language barriers they faced, the widespread poverty they experienced, and their distinctive religious practices all contributed to the negative perceptions held by clergy and English-speaking residents of the city. Italians generally had low rates of church attendance recorded at various national parishes during this time, but this did not mean that they were not interested in maintaining a meaningful religious life.[129]

Italians were shut out from formal church life in multiple ways. Efforts to convert older, predominantly Irish parishes into bilingual churches by introducing Italian masses helped to draw larger numbers of Italian parishioners, but in turn, created overcrowding issues in the limited number of churches that offered Italian services. At the same time, English-speaking parishioners strongly objected to the increase in Italian masses being offered, arguing that because Canada was an English-speaking country, Italians should adapt "to [this] way of life."[130] As a result, Italians were often relegated to holding services in church basements, which were often much smaller than the main sanctuary. There was also an unwillingness from the "predominantly English-speaking leadership to integrate Italians fully into their church."[131] Under such conditions, these circumstances did little to create a stronger sense of religious duty among Italians; instead, many felt as if they held "second-class status" even within the church.[132]

The marginalization Italians experienced within official parish structures helps explain part of why processions, and the festas which accompanied them, assumed such central importance in Italian religiosity: they provided accessible, culturally familiar, and publicly visible forms of devotion that were not tied to formal church structures which immigrants could assert religious belonging, communal solidarity, and spiritual agency.

Rather than abandoning religious practice altogether, Italians sustained their spiritual lives through familiar forms of devotion rooted in their hometown traditions. Each village had its own revered figures, Madonna's and saints alike were believed to influence daily life, with villagers making promises, giving praise, and even making symbolic offerings in hopes of receiving protection, favours and blessings. Local saints were viewed as familiar and approachable figures, treated as local protectors who could speak to God and act on the behalf of the faithful.[133]

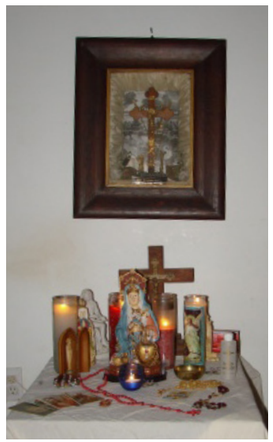
129 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 51.
130 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 135.
131 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 138.
132 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 134.
133 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 17.

While these beliefs and practices were customary back in Southern Italian hometowns, some of these long-standing devotional customs travelled with them to the new country. Maintaining personal devotion to specific saints remained central to Italian religious life and practices in Toronto. These immigrants were able to sustain these practices because they could bring with them – or receive from family members back home – physical devotional objects like rosaries and small statues of their town's patron saints, decorating their homes with these inexpensive religious images and figurines.[134]

In many immigrant households during the 1950's and 1960's, these small statues, of beloved saints, the Madonna, or Christ were often arranged and maintained in small household shrines which would appear in living rooms or entryways, the walls decorated by religious prints. These objects, along with the familiar prayers and rituals of the hometown became a part of family life and were taught to children to be carried forward.[135] Attending mass became more than just a sign of respectful worship, it was also understood as a way to strengthen ones standing with the saints and the Madonna's who they believed watched over their daily lives.

One of the clearest expressions of Italian immigrants' lasting connection to the religious and cultural traditions of their homeland was the celebration of the festa. The festa provided a setting where Italian immigrants could express their Catholic identity, an opportunity to showcase how they practiced and understood their faith.

Festas combined both private and public devotions, a mixing of religious ritual with social celebration.[136] They revealed a distinctive form of lived Christianity, which although may seem contradictory, was really a reflection of the integrated nature that Italians had with their faith and culture. Following in the structure of the festas back home, the main feature was a religious procession in which the men and women would dress in their Sunday best and eagerly approach the statue, adorning it with money and holy images.[137]



4.6

Example of an Italian home altar, 2009

Photograph taken by and credited to F.V. as part of their photography series on Sicilian Home Altars. This altar features an image of La Donna de Dolorosa ("Our Lady of Sorrows") alongside the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which symbolizes Christ's love, and is composed of devotional objects including a Guardian Angel candle, prayer cards, saint medals, prayer beads, a small brass incense burner, and a bottle of holy water. Many Italian home altars share similar features and setup.

134 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 34.
135 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 34.
136 Enrico Cumbo, "Salvation in Indifference: Gendered Expressions of Italian-Canadian Immigrant Catholicity, 1900-1940," in *Households of Faith: Family, Gender and Community in Canada, 1760-1969* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2002), 224.
137 Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*, 140.

The act of procession enabled the blending of personal religious acts with public ones, faith was no longer confined to just the church or the home, with procession it flowed between both. By expressing their faith in a public way, through processions, Italian immigrants were able to show that they were good Christians, not just to the local clergy but amongst other Catholics as well.

The festa was one of the most significant and lasting features of Italian immigrant life, illustrating how newcomers actively preserved and nurtured their cultural traditions, building a sense of community in their new environment. At a core level, as Robert Orsi suggests, the festa "shows itself to be the people's claiming of time [and space] for themselves (…) within which they could be themselves, affirming their deepest values" and celebrating in their shared identity as Christians.[138]

These celebrations illustrated how the networks of familial and hometown ties shaped these occasions; since festas were usually dedicated to specific saints and Madonnas of certain towns or regions, crowds were made up of not only local Italians but also of relatives and fellow villagers who would travel from beyond parish boundaries to celebrate their particular saint.

Additionally, for many Italians, participation in these celebrations meant entering into a realm where distance vanished in the shared worship, transporting them to a place and time that was neither here nor there. For this brief period of time, the struggles of daily life were temporarily forgotten in the jubilation and frenzy of festivities, which often culminated in an elaborate fireworks display.

The Italian immigrants who organized and participated in these festas were deliberately preserving these inherited rituals while reshaping them to fit their new urban environment. Processions helped make the Italian community in Toronto publicly visible, clearly solidifying their presence within the neighbourhoods they processed and making their identity known to both church and city officials.

138 Cumbo, "Salvation in Indifference: Gendered Expressions of Italian-Canadian Immigrant Catholicity, 1900-1940."

Spatial Practices and Religious Acts

Kim Knott in her paper on *Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion,* helps to summarize how spatial theory is intricately linked to religious processions through the fundamental role of the body and the concept of 'spatial practice,' which involves how space is perceived, conceived, and lived. Spatial theory emphasizes that the human experience of space is fundamentally grounded in the body, it is the body that we can recognize as the primary source of our experience and understanding of space.[139]

Spatial concepts arise from bodily orientation, movement, and relational awareness, meaning that our understanding of space – and by extension, religious spaces – is inherently embodied.[140] "Religion begins – and ends – with bodies," and fundamentally, it is through the body which we express our beliefs.[141] Through physical actions such as ritual movement, the body can both signal belonging to a collective identity and serve as a means of connecting individuals to a reality beyond themselves. These bodily practices take place in different kinds of settings – public or private, sacred or profane, and because religion is inherently social, it takes shape and expresses itself in and through physical space. The body is an essential part in the act of sacralising space, it shapes these settings by grounding them in spiritual experiences, emplacing meaning and identity onto space through physical acts of expression.[142]

The notion of 'spatial practice' describes how space is generated and perceived through everyday gestures, movements, and behaviours.[143] A process which becomes especially visible in religious processions, where bodily actions are ritualized and sacralised. Since any religious ideology requires a physical setting to enact and sustain its teachings, religious processions, by moving through and temporarily transforming spaces, are a way to reinforce religious values and presence.[144] Therefore, it can be understood that sacred places are not always inherently holy but instead, are made holy through embodied and repetitive ritual acts.

A central part to spatial theory is the way that individuals and communities occupy and engage with urban space, they demonstrate how public space can become an area in which minority groups can assert their presence, contest authority, and challenge cultural stereotypes which are imposed upon them. It is through religious processions that ordinary spaces, like urban streets, are temporarily transformed into sacred ones.

139 Kim Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion," *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 41, no. 2 (2005): 5, https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.4778.

140 Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion," 6.

141 Ann R. David, "Sacralising the City: Sound, Space and Performance in Hindu Ritual Practices in London," *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13, no. 4 (2012): 450.

142 David, "Sacralising the City: Sound, Space and Performance in Hindu Ritual Practices in London," 450.

143 Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion," 12.

144 Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion," 11.

Transnational religious communities establish themselves in their new settings by expressing their identity through movements and actions, whether through everyday activities or through religious rituals and performances.[145] The embodiment of procession through various acts of bodily expression – walking, singing, praying, carrying statues – combines both sound and mobility to sacralise the space in which it is moving through.[146]

These physical acts reinforce how processions function as a powerful medium through which immigrant communities can symbolically affirm and frame urban space whilst simultaneously publicly proclaiming and celebrating their ethno-religious identity.[147] In doing so, they also create new diasporic spaces, which are both real and imagined, existing physically and socially, and are shaped by this shared religious identity.[148] The crossing and blurring of these often invisible boundaries which dictate the function and use of public space are essential for minority groups as they seek to carve out spaces to exist within a broader society.

145 Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion," 8.

146 David, "Sacralising the City: Sound, Space and Performance in Hindu Ritual Practices in London," 449.

147 David, "Sacralising the City: Sound, Space and Performance in Hindu Ritual Practices in London," 449.

148 Knott, "Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion," 9.

Processions in the city



4.7

St. Agnes Catholic Church, 1962, author unknown

Photograph retrieved from Old Toronto Series's Facebook page. St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church, located at Dundas and Grace St, in the heart of Little Italy. St. Agnes was one of the first Italian-language parishes in the city, becoming an important institution for the immigrant community.

St. Anges church became a central institution to Italian immigrants during the interwar period in Toronto.[149] It not only functioned as a place of worship, offering religious services in Italian to the community, but it also acted as a support center for new immigrants, providing practical assistance to help them integrate into the community.[150] In addition to its religious purposes, during the 1950s, the parish was a centre for social gatherings and leisure activities, where both religious and non-religious Italian clubs and associations gathered.[151] These gatherings often extended into surrounding public areas, helping to foster among the Italians a growing sense of belonging and claim to local public neighbourhood space.

The high concentration of Italians in the College street area during this period would help to give the neighbourhoods surrounding St. Agnes (located at Dundas and Grace street) its well-known name of Toronto's Little Italy. By 1961, the area housed over 15,000 people who had Italian ancestry, 12,000 of whom were born in Italy.[152] As a result of its centrality to the Italian community, St. Agnes became an important place for Italians to engage in their religious practices and cultural beliefs, which were brought to life in the form of religious processions and festas. While St, Agnes was not the only church in the city which offered Italian masses and held patron saint processions, it was the largest hub for such festivities.

Until the beginning of the Processione di Cristo Morto (PCM) in Toronto during the 1970s, the St. Anthony procession was celebrated by the Italians at St. Agnes and became the largest procession in the city for a period of time.[153] The first feast of St. Anthony took place at St. Agnes back in 1937, but it is unknown whether this first instance of the feast included a procession.[154] This celebration was very popular among St. Agnes' Italian congregation, especially with those hailing from Calabria, so much so, that it even became well known amongst the larger Italian community, attracting Italians from beyond parish boundaries.[155]

149 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 62.
150 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 62.
151 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 62–64.
152 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 30.
153 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 85.
154 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 53.
155 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 85.

For the Italian immigrants in Toronto, Saint Anthony held a special place in their hearts. The tale of the saint's shipwrecked arrival on the shores of Sicily echoed the experiences of the thousands who journeyed from across the ocean, landing at Halifax's docks, and eventually settling in Toronto's Little Italy. Saint Anthony became a symbol to the Italians, reflecting the struggles and successes experienced in relocating to Canada.[156]

The procession drew large crowds, the faithful marched through the streets, moving in unison with the cars. On the sidewalks, hoards of onlookers, densely packed, looked attentively towards the statue of St. Anthony as it moved along the processional route. Within the crowd of spectators watching the procession go by, are those who are not Italian immigrants. Becoming observers not only to the unique form of Italian religious expression, but also to the way that these immigrants carved out a space for themselves within the larger urban and social landscape of the city, by using their own agency.

Space and place are created through the aural, visual, and performative elements of the procession, as the group continues to move through the urban space of the city, "the bodies, sounds of prayer, songs and friendly conversations in immigrant's dialects" create a sense of belonging amongst the group.[157] Thus, the procession can be understood as a crucial element in the transformation of urban spaces from secular to sacred, and in turn shift the way that neighbourhoods which were once viewed as immigrants spaces morph into Italian ones.

There are several ways in which the St. Anthony procession, along with other patron saint processions, contributed to the normalization of such public rituals in Toronto. Firstly, many of the patron saint processions which took place in the College street area were held on Sundays. This was because on Sundays most businesses were closed in the city, this resulted in less vehicular and streetcar traffic in the area, minimizing disruption to the general public. By organizing processions on Sundays, Italians strategically utilized a day which was culturally accepted in Toronto as appropriate for religious observance and family gatherings.[158]

156 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 79.
157 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 51.
158 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 88.

Traditionally, throughout history, days and times have been specifically set aside for religious practices, this is often referred to as "sacred time," which is where time for religious activity is set apart from secular time.[159] This is more commonly understood through the official appointment of public holidays relating to religious celebrations, but in this case, sacred time is time that has been set apart from daily routines like work or commerce. As Vienna Paolantonio points out in her dissertation, this is one way in which immigrant minority groups can make their religious practices "understandable and more palatable to the dominant group."[160]

Another way which helped to normalize and support Italian processional practices, was by having the visible support of police presence during these events. While this was not always the case, as the relationship between Toronto police and the Italian community had a rocky start, they eventually came to agreements, where through the help of the police, Italians were able to occupy public streets and sidewalks during processions. Since the state is ultimately the entity that has the authority to support or restrict public religious practices, it was an important statement to have police help mediate these processions as it likely encouraged Italian immigrants to "think of the roads and sidewalks along the processional route as places they belonged."[161] Although the state is the most influential force in shaping how specific spaces are produced and regulated, it is not the only entity to do so.

Processions become the point of intersection between the state, church, and individuals who all play a role in collectively shaping the way public space can be used and understood. Through these initial patron saint processions, Italians had effectively moved beyond a symbolic threshold, physically expressing their distinct identities by openly presenting their bodies, beliefs, and practices despite any judgement they received. Eventually, the Good Friday procession – which was conceived and takes place within the College street neighbourhood – became an opportunity for organizers to have active roles in these performances which shaped and presented the Italian immigrant identity through a religious lens.[162]

159 Kong, "Religious Processions: Urban Politics and Poetics," 312.
160 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 89.
161 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 71.
162 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 101.



SECTION 3—PAGES 25 TO 40 MONDAY, JUNE 14, 1965

—Star photo by Barry Philip

DOLLARS FOR ITALY

Dollar bills stream over statue of St. Anthony, shown being carried in a parade to commemorate the Annual Feast of St. Anthony. Thousands watched as procession wound through the parish of St. Agnes Roman Catholic Church, Dundas St. W., and ended in Bellwoods park. Money will be sent to poor in Italy.



4.8

Photos of the Saint Anthony Procession, Toronto, 1965

Newspaper clipping from the Toronto Star, June 14, 1965 (left), photograph of statue from the Globe and Mail (above), depicting the procession of St. Anthony, which began at St. Agnes Church and concluded at Trinity Bellwoods Park. In the photograph, money can be seen pinned to the statue. This was a common practice among first-generation Italian immigrants, as the collected funds were sent back to their hometowns and donated to their mother church to support those in need.

The Processione di Cristo Morto



4.9

Good Friday Procession, 2026

Photograph taken by author. Representatives of the Association of the Most Holy Crucifix continue to participate in the Good Friday procession, dressed in their traditional red mozzette and white gowns.

Good Friday is viewed as one of the most sacred days in Christianity; it is the day on which the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is commemorated, a day of atonement and reflection. The origin of the Good Friday procession (Processione di Cristo Morto) in Toronto can be traced back to an instance in 1962 at St. Agnes church. The small procession moved along Plymouth Avenue, a narrow laneway next to the church, so that traffic was not disrupted and drew about 500-600 parish members.[163] But from 1968 onwards, the procession switched over to St. Francis of Assisi which was about a block away.[164]

Unlike the patron saint processions and festas which had become a regular occurrence within the community, the Good Friday procession was strictly a call to worship amongst all of the faithful. Although many of the participants in the procession were Italians, this procession was not specific to any one area, instead, participants came from a wide range of regions and provinces across Italy.[165] A major turning point in the procession's expansion came in the 1980s when authorities began closing College Street entirely to vehicles and streetcars. Before the closure of College Street, the procession was restricted to traveling on the south side of the street while transit would continue on the north side, creating a chaotic atmosphere that nevertheless illustrated how informally – and almost organically – the procession had become woven into the city's fabric.[166] The procession drew immense crowds during the 1970s and 1980s, by 1986 it was estimated that the procession drew around 100,000 observers.[167]

After the growth the procession experienced during the 1980s, participation in the St. Anthony procession – which had moved to St. Francis – declined sharply. The Good Friday procession became the primary means through which Italians of all generations in Toronto could continue to leave claim and experience public space in the College neighbourhood as sites of shared religious and cultural meaning.[168] The success of the Good Friday procession was partly due to the willingness of its Calabrian founders to expand this devotional practice so that it connected Italians not only across urban space but also across national borders by promoting it as an event for all Italians from all regions.

163 Pietropaolo, *Ritual: Good Friday in Toronto's Italian Immigrant Community 1969-2016*, 17.

164 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 62. After 1968, St Agnes became a Portuguese national parish, so Italian parishioners switched over to St. Francis

165 Vincenzo Pietropaolo, "Ritual: The Making of a Book," in *Italian Canadiana* (2022), 32:134, https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v32i.38723.

166 Pietropaolo, *Ritual: Good Friday in Toronto's Italian Immigrant Community 1969-2016*, 18.

167 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 79.

168 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 188.

In this same context, organizers sought to establish the Good Friday procession as Toronto's most prominent, widely recognized, and publicly accepted religious procession, one that could serve as a powerful symbol of Italian-Canadian identity and help reshape how the community was perceived in a more positive light.[169] As Vincenzo Pietropaolo puts it, "walking in the procession is an intrinsic part of the devotional ritual, a form of active participations in the ritual of Good Friday."[170]

Over the years the procession has grown into a more elaborate and theatrical spectacle, gradually acquiring elements which are more commonly associated with secular parades, thus attracting more spectators than participants. In this sense, the procession has shifted from a humble event of shared prayer to an occasion which blends elements of sacred devotion with elements of public spectacle. This transformation is in part a result of the organizers' efforts to broaden its appeal to a larger and wider audience.

Dramatic additions like a staged reenactment of the Flagellation of Christ, and the inclusion of "thirty associations with thousands of members, eight floats, six horses, and two musical bands,"[171] as well as the wider visibility the procession had gained through television, radio, print, and social media, changed the procession and its meaning over time, reflecting the tastes, priorities, and shifts in public opinion over the decades. For some, the scale of the procession has diluted its religious significance, but for others, the procession is seen as being both a religiously profound experience as well as socially significant. Regardless, it is without a doubt that the procession brought many people together. Instead of parish boundaries being seen simply as lines on a map which separated neighborhoods, they were understood as symbols of a shared ethnic identity, and this shared identity helped bring hundreds of thousands of people together.



4.10

Good Friday Procession, 2026

Photograph taken by author. One of the dramatized scenes of the procession, depicting the Trial of Jesus as part of its narrative reenactment of the stations of the cross.

169 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 186.

170 Pietropaolo, *Ritual: Good Friday in Toronto's Italian Immigrant Community 1969-2016*, 18.

171 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 79.

Chapter 5

The Double: Transitions and Translations of Procession

Moving Outward

This chapter traces the movement of Italian religious traditions from Calabria to Toronto, examining how immigrant communities re-established ritual practices within a new urban and cultural context. Focusing on the processions of the Madonna delle Grazie and the Most Holy Crucifix, it explores how faith, memory, and collective identity are maintained and transformed through acts of devotion in diaspora. By analyzing the spatial, social, and architectural conditions in which these rituals unfold – from neighbourhood streets and suburban parishes to pilgrimage landscapes such as the Martyrs' Shrine – this chapter reveals how processions operate as dynamic practices that both reproduce and reinterpret sacred geographies across distance, linking homeland and diaspora through embodied experience.

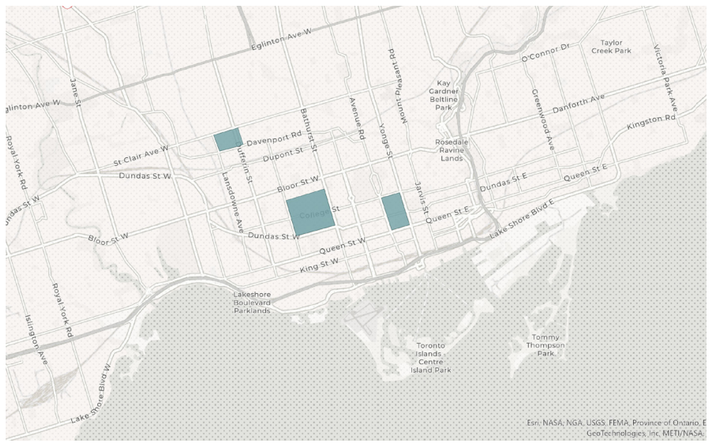
Prior to World War I, there were three zones within the city which were distinctly Italian settlements: The Ward (the area between University Avenue, Queen, Yonge, and College streets), Little Italy (the area bordered by Ossington Avenue, Bathurst, Dundas, and Harbord streets), and the last area – the Dufferin-Davenport District – located northwest and centered along St. Clair Avenue West, originally located between Westmount and Landsdowne Avenue before expanding out further around the Dufferin and Davenport area. All three of these neighbourhoods were home to Italians from regions and towns all across Italy. Each of these areas included a Catholic church, and by 1915 these neighbourhoods were so predominantly settled by Italians that they began providing Italian-language masses.[172]

5.1

Major Italian Settlement Areas, Toronto, 1900-1939

Drawing by author. Map of major Italian areas of settlement in the City of Toronto pre-WWI.

Base Map Source: Esri, NASA, NGA, USGS, FEMA, Province of Ontario, Esri Canada, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, SafeGraph, GeoTechnologies, Inc, METI/NASA, USFS, EPA, NPS, USDA, NRCan, Parks Canada



172 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 27.

Although Toronto's Italian community was made up of immigrants, it was not a temporary or transient population, as seen by the settlement patterns in these three distinct neighbourhoods. Nearly 90 percent of postwar Italian immigrants chose to remain permanently in Canada, their movement through Toronto and their use of urban space was reflective of their history of migration.[173] Even before the massive influx of Italian immigrants entering the city after World War II, the corridor northwest of Little Italy was becoming a heavily favoured spot amongst the Italian community.

By 1971, the heaviest concentration of Italians had gathered along St. Clair and Lawrence Avenue.[174] This meant that by 1975 along this northwest corridor, through the neighbourhoods of York and North York, many parishes began offering Italian masses.[175] In 1981, the Italian population in the city was not scattered all over, instead, around 35,000 Italians were living in close proximity to one another, in neighbourhoods where they made up the majority of the population.[176] These areas were grouped together geographically along the city's northwest corridor. As a result of this northward expansion, by 1991, the number of Italian residents in Little Italy had dropped to 20,000.[177] These patterns reflected a broader trend across Toronto: while immigrants were arriving and clustering together in certain areas, they were also simultaneously dispersing out into other parts of the city.

Residents of Little Italy were choosing to move northwards because they thought of housing in financial terms. The further north they went, the more affordable the houses were, which often were significantly larger in size, on a good-sized lot that had bigger front and backyards. While Italians took pride in their original homes and valued their neighbours, these immigrant families treated buying and selling property as part of a broader economic strategy, adopting this approach as a response to changes in the urban economy.[178] Ultimately, their choices in the housing market had significant effects on their religious and social lives.

173 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 30.

174 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 31.

175 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 156.

176 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 32.

177 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 32.

178 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 45, 57.

Even with the dispersal of Italians from the Little Italy area, it remained a significant gathering place for them as they continued to amass annually for the Good Friday procession by the hundreds of thousands along the College Street area.[179] Parish boundaries in Toronto's Little Italy did more than just define church jurisdictions, they helped to create a shared and recognizable Italian Canadian social and cultural space that belonged not only to local parishioners but also to Italians living throughout the city.

Historically, Catholic parishes in North American cities are organizations which are traditionally territorially grounded institutions. The official maps, drawn by Church authorities, show clear parish borders, dividing urban space into distinct sections and reinforcing the idea that each parish represented the specific area they served and that their parishioners lived within boundary areas.[180] Even national parishes which were organized around serving ethnic groups still had geographic limits, they were designed to be stable, place-based institutions that emphasized permanence and organizing urban life spatially.[181]

The Catholic Church stood at the center of postwar life in Toronto as ethnicity, social life, and religion were undoubtedly intertwined for the Italian community. "As key institutional nodes, churches drew people of Italian origins together" by serving as vital gathering sites through clubs, sports leagues, meetings and public celebrations; in doing so, these parishes united Italians from across the city and normalized the crossing of parish boundaries.[182] By offering a wide range of social, recreational, and community events, the church functioned as a central hub for people to meet, build relationships, and support one another in various ways, strengthening social ties within the community. In this way, the neighbourhood church was a cornerstone Italian-Canadian cultural life, extending far beyond its role as a place of worship.

As large numbers of Italian-Canadians moved to suburban neighbourhoods, they were determined to preserve their religious customs by bringing them with them. Religious traditions such as patron saint processions were not abandoned; instead, they were transferred to suburban churches and their surrounding neighbourhoods. These processions served multiple purposes, fulfilling a number of religious and social functions simultaneously.

179 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 5.

180 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 59,60.

181 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 60.

182 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 59,60.

On the surface, they were expressions of faith, allowing participants to publicly display devotion, but at its core, these events could both support existing authority structures and subtly challenge them, depending on how they were organized and who took part. By marching together through neighbourhood streets, participants reinforced community bonds and made their presence in the suburbs known.[183] This visibility enabled participants to symbolically claim public space and articulate shared forms of belonging and identity.

As scholars of both religion and spatial theory have argued, religious practice – such as processions – often enable migrant communities to re-center themselves and re-inscribe new environments with meaning, linking personal and local experience to their homeland and the wider Italian diaspora.[184] In this sense, processions can be understood as forms of "dwelling" that map, build, and inhabit space, transforming unfamiliar landscapes into lived environments shaped by collective memory and practice.[185]

183 Stanger-Ross, *Staying Italian: Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia*, 67.

184 Manuel A. Vásquez and Kim Knott, "Three Dimensions of Religious Place Making in Diaspora," *Global Networks (Oxford)* 14, no. 3 (2014): 331, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.1111/glob.12062.

185 Vásquez and Knott, "Three Dimensions of Religious Place Making in Diaspora," 335.

The Church and the Piazza

For Italians in Toronto, the church became the tangible place where community life was rooted physically, spiritually, and symbolically, an institutional anchor which grounded their presence in urban space. Historically, this experience was rooted in Italian cultural tradition in which the piazza was a space where civic, religious, and social life converged; this spatial understanding shaped how Italians built community in a new land. Piazza's, while sometimes were planned out in relation to new buildings being built, were more often formed by the existing communal spaces within the urban fabric of Italian cities and towns.[186]

A town's main piazza often served as a meeting place where townspeople would gather to engage in political discussions, share cultural experiences, and participate in social activities. Given the dynamics of such a space and its importance in shaping daily life within towns, it is unsurprising that churches were often located in the town's main piazza since religion also played a central role in shaping communal identity. Churches, traditionally seen as sacred spaces, often serve as central nodes in urban landscapes, symbolizing both spiritual and communal life. Piazzas, on the other hand, are public spaces that facilitate social interaction and community engagement. Together, they create a dynamic interplay between the sacred and the secular, shaping the cultural and social fabric of a community.

This spatial relationship between church and piazza was not merely architectural but deeply historical. Its significance can be traced to the early medieval period in Italy, when the church and ecclesiastical authorities played a central role in the shaping of people's beliefs.[187] Thus, the public space leading into the church became an important site for the performance and expression of ritual practice.[188]

As explored earlier in the thesis, through embodied religious ritual, space is experienced in a unique way. Through repetitive rituals and rites performed as a set of symbolic operations, ordinary space – like the piazza – becomes sacred place. Religious places are no longer understood only as enclosed physical sites; instead – in the case of the piazza, and by extension the procession – they are seen as dynamic settings where lived experience, symbolic expression, and cultural meaning intersect.[189] They act as key sites of social and cultural engagement, where tradition and change coexist and where religious cultural heritage is continually formed.[190] Given this, the piazza became the main place where the secular and religious intertwined.

The rituals which bridged the sacred and the profane in public urban space took shape in the form of festas, a traditional occasion which blended formal religious rites with social celebrations, drawing townspeople together in shared acts of faith and festivity. The religious portions of these festas were embodied through the patron-saint processions which circulated throughout these towns, commencing and concluding within the perimeter of the piazza.

This experience and understanding of public space was translated to Toronto when Italian immigrants arrived and established themselves within city neighbourhoods. The spatial and ritual patterns embedded in these festas did not remain confined to Italy. When Italian immigrants settled in Toronto, they brought with them not only their devotional practices but also a culturally specific understanding of how community life is organized around sacred-public space. Often, the churches which hold these festas are located in the middle of neighbourhoods which are predominately Italian, reinforcing their role as spatial and symbolic centers of community life.

In the North American urban landscape, which was shaped by grid planning, dispersed public space, and the absence of formally designed piazzas, the church and its surrounding grounds assumed the full social, cultural, and symbolic weight that the piazza had carried in Italy. Parish steps, sidewalks, basements, and parking lots became the de facto public square: the place where neighbours encountered one another, exchanged news, expressed religious devotion, negotiated belonging, and enacted communal identity. As a result, what had historically been distributed between two distinct yet interconnected spaces in Italy – the sacred church and the civic piazza – became consolidated into a single institutional and spatial focal point in Toronto.

186 Genevieve Warwick, "Ritual Form and Urban Space in Early Modern Rome," *Late Medieval and Early Modern Ritual*, 2013, 301, https://doi.org/10.1484/M.ES-EB.1.100777.

187 Eamonn Canniffe, *The Politics of the Piazza: The History and Meaning of the Italian Square* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 51.

188 Canniffe, *The Politics of the Piazza: The History and Meaning of the Italian Square*, 39.

189 Valeria Fabretti et al., "Religious Presences and Places in the City of Rome in the Contemporary Age," *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 16, no. 10 (2025): 4, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16101221.

190 Fabretti et al., "Religious Presences and Places in the City of Rome in the Contemporary Age," 4.

Religious processions began and ended at the church, the festivities radiatinng outward from its doors, and the rhythms of neighbourhood life were organized around its presence. In this way, Italian immigrant communities effectively reproduced a familiar spatial logic within an unfamiliar urban environment, demonstrating how inherited cultural understandings of space could be adapted to new geographic and architectural contexts while preserving the social rhythms and communal meanings associated with life in the old country. In this way, the church did not simply replace the piazza; it translated its meaning into a new urban context, becoming the primary site where sacred practice, social life, and collective identity converged in Toronto.

As is the case with St. Philip Neri Catholic Church in Toronto, this church was chosen as the resting place of the Madonna delle Grazie in Toronto for a few reasons. The first being its physical placement and proximity within the Torresi community in the city. Coinciding with the expansion of Italians outward from the downtown core of the city, during the 1970s, Italian immigrants from Little Italy initially moved northwards to Corso Italia on St. Clair Avenue West.[191] Later in the 1970s and 80s much of the Italian population had moved to North York settling in the neighbourhoods which are known today as Pelmo Park-Humberlea, Rustic, Maple Leaf, and Downsview-Roding CFB. This is reflected in census data taken in the following decades, as an average of about 40% of the population within these neighbourhoods identified as having Italian ethnicity.[192]

Driven by the desire for more space, homes in the neighbourhood were primarily semi-detached, fully detached, split level, or bungalows which were often accompanied by larger backyards which could host a vegetable garden.[193] By the late 1980s, with such a high concentration of Italians living in this area, it is no surprise that the community began asking for Italian-language masses to be held in local parishes. While some Italians would still travel outside of their communities to attend mass at already established Italian parishes, the establishment of a local Italian parish to serve as a religious institution as well as a central gathering place and community hub for this large Italian population became essential, and St. Philip Neri Catholic Church became just that.

191 "Italian Canadians in the Greater Toronto Area," Wikipedia, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_Canadians_in_the_Greater_Toronto_Area#:~:text=Italian%20immigration%20to%20Toronto%20started,Park%2DHumberlea%20and%20Humber%20Summit.

192 Wikipedia, "Italian Canadians in the Greater Toronto Area."

193 "Italians in Downsview," Downsview Park, Canada Lands Company Limited, https://downsviewpark.ca/news/italians-downsview.

When looking at the location of St. Philip Neri on a map, it becomes much clearer as to why this church was chosen by the Torre di Ruggerio community as their parish of choice. The church lies in a location which is central to the Italian population in the area – and more importantly to the Torresi population – which at the time had settled in the neighbourhoods previousely mentioned.

Additionally, whether intentional or not, the church – which in a North American setting often took on the characteristics of the piazza – was located as a main piazza would be in a Southern Italian town, it was the mid-point, the intersection of the community. In this case, it was the intersection point of the neighbourhoods it served.

Arguably, one of the most important factors behind this decision was that St. Philip Neri was the only church which agreed to house the Madonna at the time, all other churches in the area rejected the idea.[194] As a result of this acceptance, with the statue now being permanently housed at St. Philip Neri, many Torresi both near and far adopted the church as their home parish.[195]



5.2

St. Philip Neri Catholic Church location,

Drawing by author. This map overlays the neighbourhoods of Pelmo Park-Humberlea, Rustic, Maple Leaf, and Downsview-Roding CFB - historically predominantly Italian - with the locations of Catholic parishes in and around them. It reveals that St. Philip Neri is the most centrally situated parish among the four neighbourhoods.

194 Elaine De Giorgio, "Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto," Interview by author, March 4, 2026, Recording/Transcript.

195 De Giorgio, "Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto."

Torre in Toronto

When the people of Torre di Ruggiero left their hillside town for Toronto, they carried little in their suitcases during their voyage across the ocean, but much remained in their hearts. Amongst their physical possessions, they brought with them a deep devotion and enduring faith to the Madonna delle Grazie, whose September feast had long animated the rhythms of town life. Each August in Canada, as the familiar days of preparation would have begun back home for the feast, a quiet longing would resurface in the Torresi people. At every Torresi gathering the same question would arise; "Why do we not bring our Madonna to Toronto?"[196]

In 1987, the first mass in honour of the Madonna delle Grazie took place in Toronto at St. Jude Church on a late August afternoon.[197] The desire to commemorate the feast of the Madonna, which had been expressed by so many of the Torresi residents in Canada over the years, finally came to fruition when a couple of fellow countrymen came together and organized the first mass dedicated to the Madonna delle Grazie in Toronto. Following the liturgy, amid conversation and emotion, the community voiced their desires not only to commemorate the feast annually, but to commission a replica of the Madonna herself.[198]

Born from this was the Torre di Ruggiero Social and Cultural Association, where funds were gathered with humble generosity from all those who wanted to participate and could contribute towards bringing the Madonna to Toronto as "even though this marvellous land had offered them many wonders, their soul[s] [were] not at peace because all felt the void of not being able to commemorate Our Lady."[199]

Back in Italy, artisans were consulted, and a wood-carving expert on the Island of Gran Sasso was recruited for the job.[200] After initial disappointment – as the new statue did not resemble the original – a second attempt was made, and a faithful reproduction was finally achieved under the careful guidance of clergy in Torre di Ruggiero. Before beginning her journey to Canada, the statue was brought to Torre di Ruggiero to be blessed in her Sanctuary, before being carried onto an airplane bound for Toronto, where hundreds of faithful Torresi eagerly awaited her arrival.[201]

196 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."
197 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."
198 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."
199 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."
200 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."
201 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."

On August 10th, 1988, almost a year after the first mass dedicated to the Madonna was celebrated in Toronto, she was welcomed in Toronto and enthroned at St. Philip Neri Catholic Church.[202] It was as though a bridge had been drawn across the ocean, the Madonna delle Grazie became more than a statue: she was the living embodiment of memory, identity, and the enduring bond between homeland and diaspora.

For the Torresi people living in Toronto, September 4th, 1988, was more than just a date on the calendar, it was the fulfillment of a promise carried across the ocean.[203] In attendance were Torresi not only from Toronto, but from Montreal and cities across the United States. Even the mayor of Torre di Ruggiero at the time, Giuseppe Pitaro, travelled from Italy with a group of Torre residents for the celebrations, binding the old world to the new in through this jubilant gathering.[204]

Inside St. Philip Neri Catholic Church, the air was thick with incense and anticipation when Father Pino rose for his homily, he recounted the story of the Madonna delle Grazie and her centuries-long protection of Torre, the crowded church listened with glistening eyes. For the first time, the Madonna who had watched over their hillside village now resided before them in Toronto, reweaving the threads of a community stretched across the ocean. When Mass ended, the moment so many had imagined finally unfolded.

The statue was lifted onto the shoulders of Torresi men as white and blue flags waved above the crowd and hymns rose confidently into the city streets. The procession moved through Toronto not as spectacle, but as a testimony of faith made visible, memory made flesh. People sang as they walked; some wept openly. In that movement, these immigrants were actively choosing to maintain their traditional practices while adapting them to their new urban environment. It seemed as though the narrow streets of Calabria had stretched themselves across the Atlantic and settled, just for an afternoon, among brick houses and asphalt roads of Toronto.



5.3

Replicated statue of the Madonna delle Grazie, Toronto, 2025

Photograph taken by author. The statue which was commissioned by the Torresi community in Toronto in the 1980s was made to replicate as closely as possible the one back in Torre di Ruggiero. Every detail of the Madonna's appearance – from the physical carved wood-statue to her gold embroidered dress and golden crown, as well as the pedestal, banner, and other gold jewelery – had been offered by the devoted.

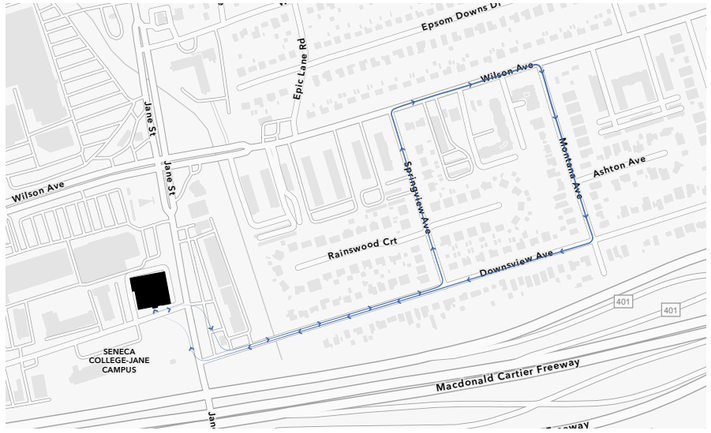
202 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."
203 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."
204 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."

The original route traced a wide loop through the surrounding neighbourhood: beginning by crossing Jane Street and heading down Downsview Avenue, continuing along Springview all the way to Wilson Avenue, then heading east for a block before turning onto Montana Avenue and linking back onto Downsview Avenue for the return to the church[205] – turning these ordinary urban streets into sacred pathways, recreating familiar religious traditions while expanding the meaning of public space in Toronto. During the first decade, when the procession was at its height, as many as five hundred faithful are estimated to have walked this route together, now, as the procession has shrunken in size, about two hundred walk the route.[206]

The celebration did not end when the statue returned to the church. In the parish hall, tables overflowed with food and wine, and stories flowed. Later, under the open sky in the schoolyard next door, paesani danced and sang late into the evening. It was a feast built not only on devotion, but on sacrifice and generosity. Every detail of the Madonna's appearance – from the physical carved wood-statue to her embroidered dress and golden crown, as well as the pedestal, banner, and other gold adornments – had been offered by devoted families and by the Association itself. Each gift bore a name; each name carried a story. Together, they clothed the Madonna in the love of her people.

That first feast and procession consecrated new ground in Toronto. The Torresi people were motivated by a desire to cultivate a religious life that would anchor their community in its new setting, preserving hometown ties and devotional customs – especially those celebrating their patron saints, in which the procession remained as the central expression of ritual devotion. The Madonna delle Grazie had not remained behind in Calabria. She had journeyed with them, and on that September day, she solidified her place into Italian-Canadian culture.

205 De Giorgio, "Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto."
206 De Giorgio, "Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto."



5.4

Map of the first processional route, Toronto, 1988

By author. Map showing the first route the procession of the Madonna delle Grazie took in the Jane and Wilson neighbourhood. Beginning and ending at the church of St. Philip Neri. The procession first crossed Jane Street before heading down Downsview Avenue, continuing along Springview Avenue all the way to Wilson Avenue, heading east for a block before turning onto Montana Avenue and linking back onto Downsview Avenue to head back to the church.



5.5

Jane and Wilson neighbourhood, Toronto, Canada, 2024

Sattelite view of the immediate surrounding neighbourhood around St. Philip Neri church where the procession takes place.

Google Earth. "St. Philip Neri Catholic Church, Toronto," (43°43'10" N, 79°30'31" W)." Retrieved November 25, 2025. Screenshot taken by author. Google LLC. https://earth.google.com/.

The Feast of the Madonna delle Grazie in Toronto



5.6

The Procession moving along Wilson Avenue, Toronto, date unknown

Photograph from author's family archives. This photograph, taken in the late 1980s during the procession's early years in Toronto, shows the procession moving south along Jane Street, where a lane of traffic has been closed by police, illustrating how the ritual negotiates and temporarily reclaims space within the regulated infrastructure of the modern city.

St. Philip Neri Catholic Church is an important site for the Torresi community for multiple reasons. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, St. Philip Neri was at the heart of this Italian community. Located centrally, a midpoint between multiple distinctly Italian neighbouthoods, it served as a community gathering place for both religious and social purposes. By offering Italian-language masses, the parish strengthened immigrant participation in church life. When familiar dialects echoed through the church, the distance between homeland and settlement seemed to narrow. Speaking and hearing the same shared language cultivated a powerful sense of belonging among immigrants.

This sense of belonging deepened even further when the Madonna finally arrived in Toronto. Seeing the statue of the Madonna delle Grazie enshrined in their parish church collapsed the distance between past and present, bridging time and space for the Torresi immigrants. The statue was more than a symbolic object; her physical presence served not only as a reminder of home but actively shaped how the Torresi expressed their faith and identity, deepening the community's shared devotion. Standing once more before the Madonna reignited the Torresi's enduring desire to celebrate her with the same solemn feast and procession that had defined their lives at home.

Every year since 1988, on the first Sunday of September, the streets of the Jane and Wilson neighbourhood have been transformed into a sacred landscape through the community's annual act of procession. Leading up to this weekend – as is customary in Torre – a novena is held in the nine consecutive days leading up to the feast day, each mass being dedicated to a specific intention. The novena helps to prepare the community spiritually for the feast day, through the repetition of the same prayers and rituals every year during the novena strengthens the connection between the local community and the patron saint.

On feast day, the solemn celebrations first begin with a Holy Mass held at St. Philip Neri. This mass differs from those held during the novena, as it is more solemn in tone and marked by numerous symbolic actions dedicated to the Madonna: monetary offerings and gifts are placed at her feet, a musical band opens and closes the ceremony, flags are processed down the aisle, and the clergy wear special robes.

At the end of the Holy Mass, the Madonna leads the faithful out of the church and into the late afternoon sun of a September day. Before embarking on her journey through the Toronto streets, the crowd gathers in front of the church, pausing on the narrow strip of asphalt which is normally an extension of the church parking lot. Assuming its function as a piazza, this ordinary space becomes one imbued with great religious significance. It is in this moment where the anticipation can be felt the most amongst all those in attendance, as the Madonna is lifted up onto the shoulders of the devoted volunteers, she is turned to face the church and the faithful who have erupted into cheers and applause. A symbolically significant action, in facing her followers the Madonna seems to be blessing both people and place.

Over the years, the processional route has changed for a variety of reasons. As participants grew older, the original route became increasingly difficult to complete. The procession also once travelled along major streets such as Jane Street and Wilson Avenue, which required the closure of a street lane and police presence to redirect traffic. Elaine De Giorgio, who is the Liturgical Committee Leader for the Torre di Ruggiero Social and Cultural Association of Toronto, explained that securing a police escort has become increasingly difficult.[207] In years when a police escort has not been available, the route has been significantly shortened, remaining primarily on the street where the church is located and avoiding major roads, as the Association felt that walking along these streets without police protection left participants "too exposed and too high of a risk."[208]

The current processional route follows one section of the original path. It begins by crossing Jane Street and proceeding along Downsview Avenue before turning onto Montana Avenue, where the procession loops around the cul-de-sac on Ashton Avenue and returns to the church by the same route. This route was chosen for several reasons: it preserves part of the original processional path, it is short enough to accommodate older participants while still allowing enough time for the rosary to be recited, and the cul-de-sac provides a practical space to maneuver the statue before returning to the church.[209]

207 De Giorgio, "Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto."
208 De Giorgio, "Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto."
209 De Giorgio, "Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto."



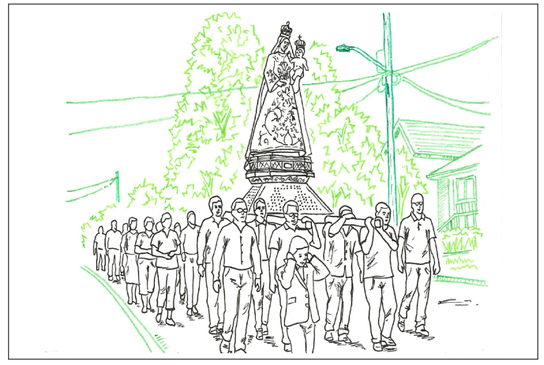
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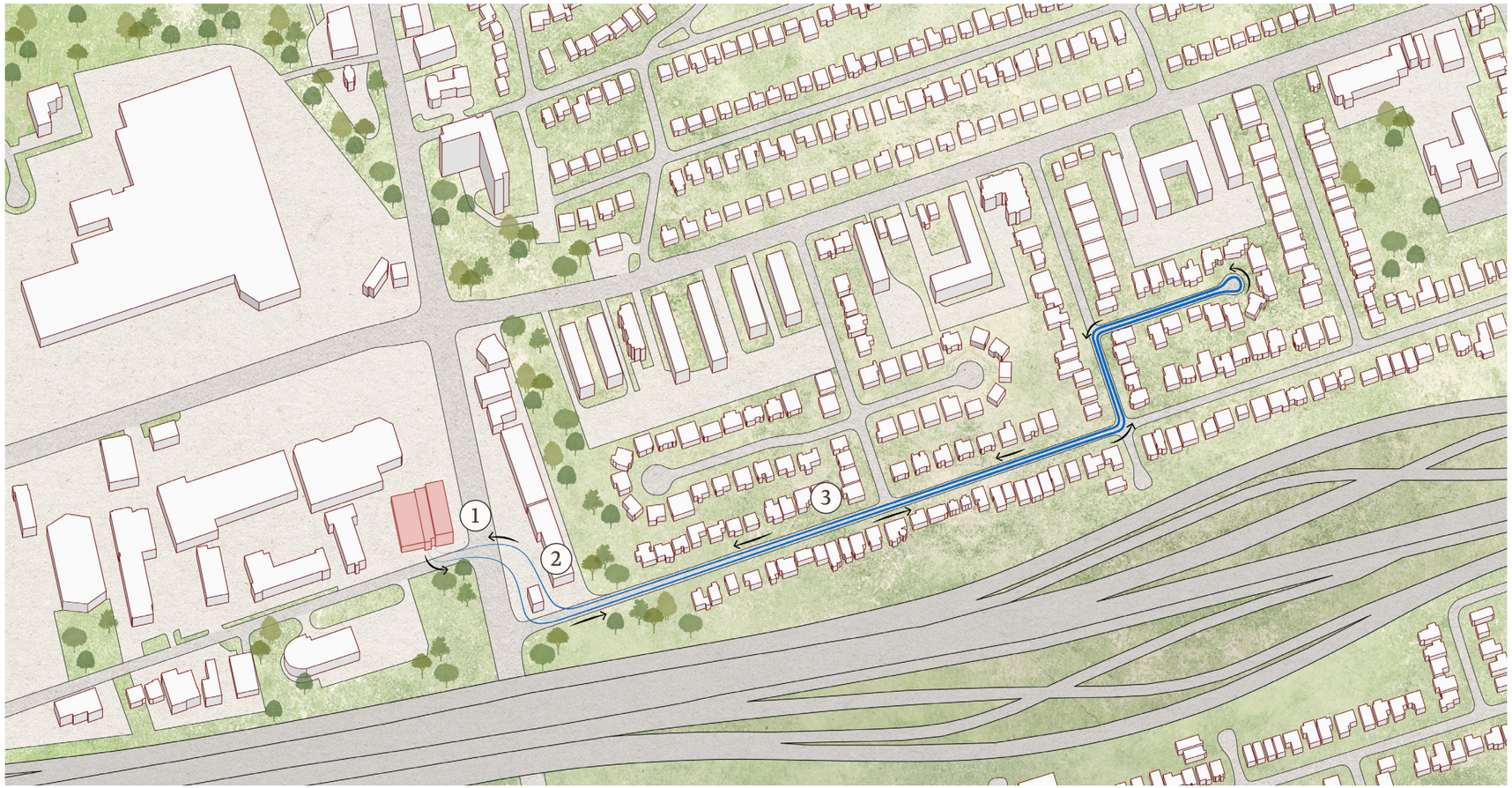
The band playing outside the church, Toronto, 2025

Photograph taken by author. The band performs traditional Torresi hymns in honour of the Madonna in front of the church, transforming a space typically used for parking into a temporary site of ritual gathering and collective expression.









5.8

Plan Oblique Drawing of the Processional Route, Toronto, Canada

Drawing by author. Plan oblique of the processional route taken through the streets of the Jane and Wilson neighbourhood in Toronto during the Feast of the Madonna delle Grazie. This drawing highlights the relationship between the processional route and the surrounding suburban landscape. It reveals how the procession adapts to the constraints of its environment, negotiating infrastructure, circulation patterns, and urban boundaries. Unlike the reciprocal relationship found in the Calabrian context, the route here is shaped primarily by external forces rather than the urban form itself, requiring ongoing adjustment and reinterpretation. Despite these conditions, the procession persists, reconfiguring space to sustain ritual practice within a changing environment.

St. Philip Neri Catholic Church

5.9

Holy cross, Toronto

Sketch by author. The Holy Cross leads the procession, marking the beginning of a collective act of devotion.

5.10

Various Flags, Toronto

Sketch by author. This vignette highlights the flags carried in the procession. In addition to those present in the Italian context (the Canadian, Italian, and Catholic Church flags) blue and white flags are also introduced, reflecting both continuity and adaptation within the ritual.

5.11

Statue of the Madonna delle Grazie, Toronto

Sketch by author. The final ritual object carried in the procession is the statue of the Madonna delle Grazie, through which space is sacralized within a new context. Though the Madonna is an exact replica of her counterpart back home, the surrounding landscape distinguishes this setting, revealing the translation of ritual across place.

Procession and Urban Form

The forty blue and white flags are representative of the number of pews in St. Philip Neri.

The organizational structure of the procession has evolved over time, reflecting changes in participation levels over the years, though its basic symbolic order remains recognizable. In its earlier years, when participation was at its peak, the procession opened with the cross which was typically followed by children of the parish dressed in communion outfits who carried *forty blue and white flags* under the supervision of designated volunteers.[210] Behind them followed volunteers carrying banners representing the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Santa Domenica, the patron saint of Torre di Ruggiero.[211] The clergy then walked ahead of the statue of the Madonna, which formed the focal point of the procession, while the faithful and the musical band followed behind.

The present-day procession follows a similar sequence, though in a simplified form. The cross still opens the procession, followed by a series of flags: which includes the flag of the Catholic Church, as well as the Canadian and Italian flags, alongside a smaller number of the traditional blue and white flags carried by first-, second-, and third-generation Torresi volunteers. The president of the Torre di Ruggiero Social and Cultural Association walks ahead of the statue, which continues to serve as the devotional center of the procession, while the band and the rest of the faithful follow behind. Although some elements – such as the participation of children in communion attire and the use of multiple banners – are no longer as prominent, the overall structure still reflects the processional traditions brought from Torre, allowing participants to symbolically reproduce familiar religious practices within the urban landscape of Toronto.

In urban environments, rituals play an important role in shaping how space is experienced and understood. By temporarily interrupting the normal flow of city life, ritual performances such as processions, selectively appropriate urban space and transform ordinary streets into meaningful places of communal and religious expression, creating a mobile sacred landscape in which communal identity, memory, and religious devotions are publicly expressed.[212]

As it moves through the urban streets of Toronto, the procession of the Madonna delle Grazie extends its religious practice beyond the walls of the church, enabling participants to publicly express their shared spiritual identity while reinforcing their collective beliefs, traditions, and values which bring the community together.[213]

210 De Giorgio, “Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto.”

211 De Giorgio, “Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto.”

212 Cynthia Anyadi, “Sacred Mobilities, Movement, and Embodiment in the Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century English Christian Funeral Procession,” Geography of World Pilgrimages, ahead of print, 2023, 155, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.1007/978-3-031-32209-9_8; Ferri, “The Place-Making Function of Ritual Movement at Rome: From the Salians to Our Lady of Mount Carmel,” 2.

213 Anyadi, “Sacred Mobilities, Movement, and Embodiment in the Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century English Christian Funeral Procession,” 160.





5.12

Moments in the Procession of the Madonna delle Grazie I, Toronto, 1980s

Photographs from authors family archives. These photographs highlight some of the differences between the early processions of the Madonna delle Grazie in Toronto and those held today. They reveal the large number of participants in the initial processions, including the active involvement of younger children –girls in their communion dresses and altar boys carrying the cross. In the background of the second image, banners can also be seen, which were once an integral part of the procession. Together, these elements point to a gradual transformation in both participation and ritual expression over time.



5.13

Moments in the Procession of the Madonna delle Grazie II, Toronto, 2025

Photograph taken by author. The procession moves collectively along Downsview Avenue in an act of sacralisation, revealing a simplified sequence of processional elements: the cross leading, followed by the Italian, Canadian, Catholic Action, and traditional blue-and-white flags.







5.14

Moments in the Procession of the Madonna delle Grazie III, Toronto, 2025

Photographs taken by author. These photographs reveal more of the processional order, with the President of the Torre di Ruggiero Social and Cultural Association walking ahead of the statue, followed closely by the band and the faithful. As the procession moves through suburban streets, it challenges conventional uses of public space, carving out a temporary sacred landscape within environments not typically associated with ritual. The images also highlight the procession's relationship to suburban form: buildings are set back significantly from the street, and in some cases further separated by elements such as hedges, as seen in the third image. With the presence of driveways, front yards, and sidewalks, participation becomes more intentional, as the connection between ritual and the built environment is less immediate and less spatially integrated. In contrast to the dense urban fabric of Calabrian towns – where narrow streets, balconies, and doorways bridge interactions with the procession – this suburban setting disperses both space and participation. As a result, the procession must actively define and sustain its presence, rather than being naturally framed and reinforced by the surrounding architecture.

In doing so, Italian immigrants re-purposed neighbourhood streets in ways that challenged their original intended uses as outlined by urban planners and civic officials.[214] By occupying and ritualizing these spaces, they not only recreated familiar religious environments but also challenged conventional assumptions about how public space in Toronto could be used.

Sound also plays a central role in linking the embodied and spatial dimensions of the procession. From the singing of hymns to the solemn music played by the band, and the repetitive chanting of "Ave Maria", these aural elements help to guide participants' physical movements and help maintain focus on the sacred purpose of the ritual; to spread the Madonna's word and presence. As explored by Ann David, beyond guiding individual participants, sound transforms ordinary urban streets into temporarily sacred space: processional music and chants mark out the route, ritualizing and sacralising the environment through a carefully constructed soundscape.[215]

Sacred space in these processions is therefore not only visual and material, but also aural and temporal, integrating sight, sound, emotion, and time to produce a holistic religious experience.[216] By making devotion both heard and felt, aural elements reinforce communal identity, help participants focus on the religious act, and publicly perform the sacred, demonstrating how embodiment an emplacement are inseparably linked in processional rituals. By asserting their presence within the physical, visual, and auditory landscape of the neighbourhood, Italians were able to mark and shape local space through processional practices.

While the procession moves through the suburban streets of the Jane and Wilson neighbourhood, it is obvious that the surrounding spatial context differs significantly from that of the procession's place of origin. Although the movement of bodies, the sounds of prayer and music, and the dimensions of religious devotion remain as familiar elements of ritualizing space, the physical form of the surrounding landscape alters how the procession interacts with the environment around it. In the suburban context of Toronto, the procession expands outward as it travels along wide streets bordered by detached houses, sidewalks, and open sky. Building setbacks, front yards, and increased distances between buildings create a clear separation between private dwellings and public streets, reducing opportunities for spontaneous engagement with the procession.

214 Paolantonio, "Good Friday on College Street: Urban Space and Changing Italian Identity," 112.

215 David, "Sacralising the City: Sound, Space and Performance in Hindu Ritual Practices in London," 463.

216 Kong, "Religious Processions: Urban Politics and Poetics," 309, 315–16.

Balconies are rare, and entrances are often recessed away from the street, diminishing the immediacy of visual and social connections. As a result, participation becomes more intentional and less embedded within everyday spatial conditions; individuals must leave their homes and enter the street to engage with the ritual. This dispersal reduces the spatial enclosure and collective immersion produced by dense urban forms. Here, the ritual continues, but within a space that offers less architectural cohesion, requiring participants to actively recreate the collective atmosphere that, in the context of Calabrian towns, emerges organically from the surrounding fabric.

In contrast, processions in Southern Italian towns are more embedded within the urban fabric. Narrow stone streets, steep inclines, and densely packed buildings compress the movement of the crowd, creating an intimate environment where balconies, doorways, and windows become extensions of the ritual space. These architectural elements collapse the distinction between private and public space, allowing residents to participate in the procession without fully entering the street. From above, spectators lean over railings, hang banners, or observe in quiet reflection, transforming the façade into an active participant in the ritual.

In this setting, the town itself appears to participate in the procession, engaging multiple layers of the built environment as it naturally frames and envelopes the ritual. In this condition, the boundary between observer and participant becomes blurred, as even those within domestic space contribute to the collective experience. The street, rather than functioning solely as a space of circulation, becomes a shared stage in which architecture and community are intimately intertwined. Therefore, while the devotional practices remain consistent across both contexts, the differing urban forms produce distinct spatial experiences: one expansive and open with the suburban grid of Toronto, and the other dense, immersive, and architecturally integrated within the historic streets of the Italian town.

This shift is further intensified in Toronto, where the constraints placed on the procession are shaped not only by dispersed urban form but also by the regulatory frameworks that govern the use of public space. Rather than being guided by the physical compression of narrow streets, the procession must conform to the operational logic of a modern city. Participants pause for traffic, compress their movement at designated crossings, or navigate between parked cars to maintain continuity along the route.

In this context, it is no longer solely architecture that frames and directs movement, but a series of invisible forces – municipal by-laws, traffic regulations, and the presence or absence of police – that structure the processional path. These systems impose a different kind of spatial order, one that prioritizes circulation and control over ritual continuity. As a result, the city is not an active participant in the procession; instead, the ritual must negotiate and adapt to a landscape governed by external regulations, revealing how contemporary urban conditions reshape the relationship between movement, space, and collective religious practice.





5.15

Moments in the Procession of the Madonna delle Grazie IV, Toronto, 2025

Photographs taken by author. The context of this procession differs significantly from that of its place of origin. Rather than being framed by narrow stone streets and dense urban fabric, the ritual unfolds within a landscape of asphalt parking lots and commercial storefronts. In this setting, traffic regulations and police presence impose a different kind of spatial order, directing movement and shaping the route. As a result, the relationship between ritual and space is no longer reciprocal; instead, the procession must continuously negotiate and adapt to an ever-changing urban environment. Participants must actively reconstruct a sense of sacred space, reproducing familiar religious practices within an environment that does not inherently support them.

Reflections from Elaine

While conducting research on the procession of the Madonna delle Grazie in Toronto, it is difficult not to come across the Torre di Ruggiero Social and Cultural Association of Toronto. Founded by first-generation Italian immigrants from Torre di Ruggiero, the Association is one of the few remaining Italian cultural clubs in the city that continues to operate today. Its goal is to "continue sharing its culture with the multiple generations of Torresi in the greater Toronto area" through the many events it organizes each year, which also serve to expand its cultural outreach to the wider community.[217]

In reaching out to the Association, I had the opportunity to speak to Elaine De Giorgio, the organization's Liturgical Committee Leader. During our conversation, Elaine provided invaluable insights that greatly enriched my understanding of the procession and its evolving meaning over time. Our discussion ranged from historical details about the procession and its organizational structure to more personal reflections on her own experiences of the event.

The procession of the Madonna delle Grazie in Toronto is one of the few Italian patron-saint processions that continues to be held annually in the city. Despite many of the Torresi immigrants who played foundational roles in bringing the procession to Toronto having passed on or moved away, the tradition remains. Nearly forty years after its inception, the procession continues to be an important event for the Torresi community. Given this longevity, I was curious to hear Elaine's perspective on why the procession continues to hold such significance for the Torresi people so many years after immigration:

> *The procession itself is an extremely important part of the feast day for various reasons. One is tradition-based because it was always done. They want to continue to do it here. But on a more faith-based answer, it's a way of spreading the faith. It's like that it has a symbolism behind it where you're bringing the statue, you're bringing the faith out to the people. And it also, it makes the feast day different than the masses during the novena. So, you have the feast day mass, which the music is more elaborate and it's more solemn based, and then after that you have this procession, which kind of, compliments the feast, and it's like a celebration. We're celebrating the Virgin Mary today. And we take her out and we show her and we spread her faith through the streets here of Toronto. So those are the two reasons why.*

I also asked Elaine whether she felt that the procession continued to play an important role in establishing and maintaining Torresi identity within the community:

> *In my opinion, it's the entire religious experience that has done that for them, not just the procession. When they first came here, a lot of these people that founded the association didn't really know each other from the town. They knew that they were all from the same town, but they didn't have that bond. Only a few of them knew each other. But then, you know, one day it was brought forth. Why don't we organize the novena feast day for the Virgin Mary, like we did in the town. But it was at that point where they started to work together, their bond formed even stronger because they were all working towards something. And so, what happened was, when they established the religious events, they started having social events that accompanied them. And people from all of these towns around the area, started coming to the social events, and then they started coming to the religious events, and then the procession, and it just got bigger and bigger and bigger. But it's not only the procession that established their identity here, it's the entire Association that did. And when you combine everything, it helped to create their community on both a religious and a social level.*

For anyone attending the feast of the Madonna delle Grazie, one notable feature of the crowd is the average age of the participants. While some second- and third-generation Torresi immigrants are in attendance, their numbers are relatively small compared to the first-generation immigrants who still make up the majority of those present. This demographic composition differs significantly from that of the procession in Torre di Ruggiero.

In the town, the procession remains a highly anticipated event that draws participants of all ages from both the town and surrounding areas. Attendance is strong, and the tradition continues to be maintained and carried on by younger generations. In Toronto, however, the visibly older demographic raises an important question about the future of the tradition; will the procession continue to hold significance for younger generations?

217 Torre di Ruggiero Social & Cultural Association of Toronto, "About Us."

I therefore asked Elaine whether she believed the tradition of the procession is important to carry on through future generations:

> *Yes, I do think it's important. You have my generation, who are the children of these first-generation immigrants, and we've kind of taken on this tradition, but, because we weren't born in the town, we don't have such a strong sense of that tradition in the same way that our parents did. Instead, for me, I think it's an important tradition to carry on because its main focus is to spread the faith. You see, when the Virgin Mary appeared in this town in the 1600s, she had a message, and the message was, 'make me be known close and far.' And so I feel that we have a responsibility to make her known, and the procession is what does that. But the reason why we need to make her known is to bring people closer to her son Jesus, because that is what the Virgin Mary wants and does. So, you know, if we start kind of streamlining things and taking the procession away, then, I feel personally that we are not doing as much as we could be doing to make her known. But, you know, there are some younger people that will do it in memory of their grandparents, or in memory of their parents. Everybody has their own reason. But for me, it's about, we're children of God, we're children of Mary. We walk, we follow her, she guides us, and we spread her around so people know her.*

For Elaine, although the procession maintains a connection to the town her family comes from, its significance lies less in preserving a cultural tradition than in sustaining and spreading the faith on which the procession is rooted. In her view, the procession serves as a public and embodied expression of that faith, not only for herself, but also for the wider community that witnesses it:

> *In this day and age, there's been a lot of changes, with all of the different religions that have come into the country, all over the world actually, not just Canada, all over the world, we sometimes have a fear of showing our faith. And so, the procession to me personally is a way to publicly express my faith. We shouldn't be afraid to show our faith and to want to spread our faith. And the Virgin Mary is a key part of our faith, so by bringing her out into the streets we're doing just that. The goal is to keep it going.*[218]

218 De Giorgio, "Elaine - La Madonna Delle Grazie, Toronto."



5.16

The Madonna re-entering the church, Toronto, 2025

Photograph taken by author. The Madonna faces the crowd before re-entering her North American "sanctuary." As she is returned to her place to the right of the altar, applause rises from the crowd and "Evviva Maria" is sung in celebration.

San Nicola in Toronto

By the late 1940s, the town of San Nicola da Crissa had grown rapidly, experiencing a boom in population, reaching nearly five thousand inhabitants.[219] While northern regions of Italy were beginning to show signs of postwar economic recovery, particularly in industrial sectors, in the South of Italy the story was much different. Employment opportunities in southern communities such as San Nicola remained scarce, with many residents facing widespread unemployment or being forced to rely on irregular and poorly paid work. This left little hope for economic stability and recovery in the region and as a result, emigration once again emerged as a necessity for many families. With Canada emerging as a labour-hungry market, its doors opened for these Italian labourers, becoming a primary destination for Calabrians.

Over the course of the following two decades, more than 2,500 workers left San Nicola da Crissa for Canada,[220] creating a migration stream that profoundly reshaped the town's social fabric and formed a new one in Toronto. For the people of San Nicola, the connection with Ontario represented a moment of profound transformation in the town's history. The departure of a few initial migrants soon gave way to a much larger movement, as the opportunities offered in Canada encouraged many others to follow suit. These journeys were marked both by hopes for a better future and by the deep sorrow experienced by those who left their homeland and the families who remained behind.[221]

Emigration from Calabria did more than simply reduce the population of many towns; as scholars have noted, large scale emigration effectively split these communities in half, between the homeland and the diaspora. Anthropologist Vito Teti describes this phenomenon as the emergence of a "double town," where the original community in Calabria existed alongside a second version of itself in the diaspora, reproducing social relationships, traditions, and forms of collective identity across geographic boundaries.[222] At the same time, this sense of "doubling" was not entirely new. Many Calabrian towns had long been characterized by internal divisions shaped by geographic, social, and religious factions. While it would be simplistic to generalize this pattern across all communities, confraternities frequently functioned as institutional spaces through which local rivalries and conflicts were expressed and negotiated.[223]

219 Tommaso Mannacio, *La Confraternita Del Crocofisso: Vita e Cultura Di Un Sodalizio Calabrese (San Nicola Da Crissa, Dal 1669 Ai Nostri Giorni)* (Mapograf, 1993).

220 Mannacio, *La Confraternita Del Crocofisso: Vita e Cultura Di Un Sodalizio Calabrese (San Nicola Da Crissa, Dal 1669 Ai Nostri Giorni).*

221 Mannacio, *La Confraternita Del Crocofisso: Vita e Cultura Di Un Sodalizio Calabrese (San Nicola Da Crissa, Dal 1669 Ai Nostri Giorni).*

222 Teti, "La Confraternita Della Memoria e La Memoria Della Confraternita."

223 Teti, "La Confraternita Della Memoria e La Memoria Della Confraternita."

San Nicola da Crissa itself represents a notable example of this dynamic, reflecting a broader regional pattern in which rival religious associations and their ritual practices played an important role in shaping community life.[224] When these traditions were transferred into new social and geographic contexts, they rarely remain unchanged; instead, they adapted to new circumstances, helping immigrants maintain ties to the homeland while encouraging social cohesion and a shared sense of identity.

For immigrants, faith, tradition, and religious practice became far more than spiritual observances; they served as anchors of memory and points of reference in an unfamiliar environment, offering a way to engage with a new reality rather than attempting to recreate a past that had been lost or transformed during years of absence.[225] Places of worship, such as the church of St. Agnes in Toronto's Little Italy, became central gathering points, sites imbued with symbolic meaning where emigrants could reaffirm their connections to one another and to the faith they brought from their homeland. These spaces functioned as both spiritual refuges and communal hubs, supporting the maintenance of shared traditions and the transmission of religious and cultural practices to subsequent generations.

Within this framework, Confraternities assumed a particularly important role, they were not just religious devotional groups. These groups emerged as organized representatives of Italian Catholics, encouraging religious practice, supporting charitable work and educational initiatives, while also connecting the Church to everyday social and civic life.[226] Through these institutions, faith became both a personal anchor and a communal lifeline, enabling immigrants to navigate the challenges of life in a new country while sustaining the cultural and spiritual fabric of their community. It is within this context of devotion, social cohesion, and ritual continuity that public religious practices – such as the Feast of the Most Holy Crucifix – acquired their enduring significance for the Sannicolesi diaspora in Toronto.

In 1955, the first mass in honour of the Holy Crucifix was celebrated in Toronto, coinciding with the festa back in San Nicola.[227] The mass was held at St. Agnes church as so many of the Sannicolesi immigrants lived in the College street area around the church. The turnout was impressive, so much so, that it encouraged the Sannicolesi to organize the following year's celebrations with even greater attentiveness.[228]

224 Teti, "La Confraternita Della Memoria e La Memoria Della Confraternita."

225 Vito Teti, "I percorsi dell'ombra. Immagini dei calabresi in Toronto," *VOCI Semestrale di Scienze Umane 1*, no. 2 (2004): 132.

226 Mannacio, *La Confraternita Del Crocofisso: Vita e Cultura Di Un Sodalizio Calabrese (San Nicola Da Crissa, Dal 1669 Ai Nostri Giorni).*

227 Teti, "La Confraternita Della Memoria e La Memoria Della Confraternita."

228 Teti, "La Confraternita Della Memoria e La Memoria Della Confraternita."

At St. Agnes, flowers and decorations adorned the altar and pews, and the inclusion of a large photograph of the statue of the Holy Crucifix, paired with the singing of traditional hymns, transported the Sannicolesi immigrants back to their hometown.[229] In addition to the mass, members of the Crocefisanti in Toronto also organized collections – fundraising efforts in which small monetary donations were gathered from community members – to be sent back to San Nicola as a contribution to the celebrations in honour of the Crucifix.

Over the next few decades, as the number of Sannicolesi immigrants in Toronto grew, so too did the desire to establish a branch of the confraternity in the city. Although the initiative was undertaken amid fear and uncertainty in a foreign land, it was their faith in the Most Holy Crucifix that ultimately gave them the courage to begin.[230] In 1975, at the initiative of several brothers, the Association of the Most Holy Crucifix was formally established, serving social and recreational purposes with its primary focus being on spiritual devotion.

Over time, however, many immigrants came to recognize that devotion to the Most Holy Crucifix could not remain tied solely to the celebrations in San Nicola. While collections and prayers maintained an important connection to the homeland, they also revealed the distance separating migrants from the rituals in which they once participated.

Gradually, the realization emerged that the feast should also be celebrated in the place where they now lived. In this way, faith, worship, and tradition became both a link to memories of the past and a means of integrating those traditions into their new lives in Canada. This desire ultimately led to the organization of the first Feast of the Most Holy Crucifix in Canada, held in Midland, Ontario in 1983.

229 Teti, "La Confraternita Della Memoria e La Memoria Della Confraternita."

230 Mannacio, *La Confraternita Del Crocofisso: Vita e Cultura Di Un Sodalizio Calabrese (San Nicola Da Crissa, Dal 1669 Ai Nostri Giorni).*



5.17

Holy Crucifix Square at Martyr's Shrine, Midland, date unknown

Postcard of Holy Crucifix Square, author unknown. The bronze statue of the Holy Crucifix sits at the centre of the altar, with the statue of the Madonna Addolorata positioned just to the left. The Square was designed and constructed through the dedicated efforts of Sannicolesi immigrants.

San Nicola and the Martyrs' Shrine



5.18

Replicated statue of the Most Holy Crucifix, Midland, 2025

Photograph retrieved from Vito Teti's Facebook page. The replicated statue serves as a permanent fixture of the Holy Crucifix and the Sannicolese Association within its Canadian context.

As the story is told by Rosario Iori, the desire to continue this passion was so strong within the brothers of the Confraternity that in 1982, himself, Pino Macri, Saverio Marchese, and Nicola Galati set out for the Martyr Shrine in Midland with the goal of continuing the long standing tradition of procession that marked the feast day.[231] They arrived at the Sanctuary to inquire with the Director of the Shrine about holding their beloved procession in honour of the Most Holy Crucifix on the Shrine's grounds. It is important to note that the Martyrs' Shrine is one of the most holy sites in North America, as it is "visited by people of all races and religions," and is the site of many holy pilgrimages.[232]

The Director agreed to the proposal for the Confraternity to develop a foundational place of worship for fellow Sannicolesi at the Shrine and to hold their annual procession and mass in honour of the Most Holy Crucifix there. The four men returned to Toronto with renewed faith and joy in their hearts and shared the good news with fellow Confraternity members. They immediately got to work and began planning out their project, which would serve as a permanent mark of San Nicola in Ontario's landscape.

By the early 1990s, the ambitious project set out by the members of the Confraternity finally came to fruition: the creation of a reproduction of the Holy Crucifix statue to be permanently placed in Midland. To accomplish this, the Domus Dei foundry in Albano Laziale, Italy, was selected to complete the work. Using photographs and detailed information about the original statue from San Nicola, the artist created a bronze replica that was larger than the wooden original.[233] At the same time, a bronze statue of Our Lady of Sorrows was also acquired, carefully chosen to resemble as closely as possible the statue venerated in San Nicola while also considering its placement at the Midland sanctuary. With the support of Father James J. Farrell, Director of the Martyrs' Shrine, the confraternity was granted a dedicated space where the statues could be housed.[234]

On July 3, 1994, the statues of the Holy Crucifix and Our Lady of Sorrows were formally blessed during a special ceremony that drew a large gathering of devotees.[235] Participants traveled not only from Toronto and other parts of Ontario, but also from Montreal, the United States, Argentina, and from Calabria, demonstrating the wide reach of this shared devotion among the Sannicolesi diaspora.

231 kalabria tv, Il Santissimo Crocifisso Festeggiato a Toronto, 2017, 14:59, https://youtu.be/miuiWSqb-qo?si=eBk5KsHVFQLzsARO.

232 Mannacio, *La Confraternita Del Crocofisso: Vita e Cultura Di Un Sodalizio Calabrese (San Nicola Da Crissa, Dal 1669 Ai Nostri Giorni)*.

233 Teti, "I percorsi dell'ombra. Immagini dei calabresi in Toronto," 135.

234 Teti, "I percorsi dell'ombra. Immagini dei calabresi in Toronto," 135.

235 Teti, "I percorsi dell'ombra. Immagini dei calabresi in Toronto," 135.

For many members of the Confraternity, the Martyrs' Shrine soon came to represent the place in Ontario where they felt the strongest connection to both their faith and their homeland. In this way, the shrine emerged as a new spiritual centre for the Sannicolesi community, a sacred space where centuries-old traditions could be renewed and reimagined in their adopted country. Holding the procession on the grounds of one of North America's most significant pilgrimage sites further deepened this sense of sacralising the landscape and establishing a new foundation for their devotional life in Canada. In this sense, the Martyrs' Shrine came to function as a kind of spiritual counterpart to San Nicola, allowing the Sannicolesi diaspora to root their centuries-old devotion to the Crucifix within the landscape of their new homeland.

The selection of the Martyrs' Shrine as the site for the Sannicolesi monument and annual procession may also reflect deeper historical connections linking their homeland to this sacred landscape. The shrine itself was built in the mid-1920s by Jesuit fathers from Toronto on the site of a seventeenth-century Jesuit mission originally founded by their French Jesuit counterparts in 1639 on the lands belonging to the Wendat peoples (referred to as the Hurons by the French).[236] During the violent conflicts between the Wendat and the Iroquois Confederacy between 1641 and 1650, nine missionaries were tortured and killed, the Wendat were left almost completely destroyed, and the mission was evacuated.[237] Strikingly, these same decades also witnessed the institutionalization of devotional life in the Sannicolesi homeland: in 1669 the Confraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix was founded in San Nicola da Crissa, formalized by the Statues in 1680.

Although separated by an ocean, both regions were shaped by parallel Jesuit missionaries on a similar mission which sought to evangelize populations that were perceived by these early modern missionaries as being "primitive and savage."[238] While these processes unfolded with very different consequences, their shared historical context may help explain why Midland emerged as a meaningful setting for the Sannicolesi diaspora to root their traditions. By situating the feast of the Most Holy Crucifix within this landscape of Jesuit and Wendat memory, the community symbolically linked their local devotional history in Calabria with a site in Canada already marked by narratives of martyrdom, mission, and Catholic endurance.

236 Teti, "I percorsi dell'ombra. Immagini dei calabresi in Toronto," 134.

237 Teti, "I percorsi dell'ombra. Immagini dei calabresi in Toronto," 134.

238 Teti, *Stones into Bread*, 109.



5.19

Martyrs' Shrine, Midland, Ontario, 2020

Satellite image showing the Martyrs' Shrine and shrine lands. This aerial view helps to highlight the very different surrounding site context of this processional setting, surrounded mainly by the natural landscape.

Google Earth. "Martyrs' Shrine," (44°44'12" N, 79°50'31" E)." Retrieved April 1, 2026. Screenshot taken by author. Google LLC. https://earth.google.com/.

The Feast of the Santissimo Crocifisso in Midland

On the day of the feast, as the faithful arrive at the Martyrs' Shrine, the grounds slowly fill with the quiet anticipation of pilgrimage. The devoted who have travelled from across Ontario and beyond, great each other with warmth and delight. In small groups beneath the tall pines, some begin to put on their traditional robes, carefully fastening capes and smoothing out white gowns that evoke the confraternal traditions of their hometown. As the warm July sun beams down, the distant sound of a brass band warming its instruments echoes across the open fields of the Shrine. Gradually, the scattered gathering unites around Holy Crucifix Square as a quiet order begins to take shape as the procession prepares to begin.

The procession sets out from Holy Crucifix Square, completing a loop around the Shrine grounds. Opening the processional order are the brothers and sisters representing the Madonna Adolorata, wearing their purple mozzette and white gowns and carrying a reproduction of the banner dedicated to the Madonna Adolorata.[239] The fabric shifts gently in the breeze as they walk in measured steps through the wooded grounds. Directly behind them come the brothers and sisters of the Confraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix, dressed in their red mozzettas over white gowns. At their head, one brother carries the cross high above the crowd, while another bears the confraternity's banner, its embroidered image catching the light as it sways with each step.

Following them are those responsible for the organization of the confraternity – the associations president, vice president, and other officials – as well as the two priests which preside over the processionm and Holy Mass, in some years even the mayor of San Nicola is present, marked by his tricolour sash.[240] Just before the band, a relic of the Holy Canadian Martyrs' are carried by a confraternity leader or one of two priests from the Sanctuary. Close behind trails the band, whose solemn melodies rise and fall through the trees as they play the traditional songs of the confraternity. Their instruments provide the rhythm that carries the procession forward. Behind them stretch the rest of the faithful: men and women, elderly devotees, and some younger generations walking side by side. Together they chant the litany and traditional hymns of the confraternity in both dialect and Latin, their voices moving between prayer and song in a cadence that echoes through the open landscape of the Shrine.[241]

239 Teti, "I percorsi dell'ombra. Immagini dei calabresi in Toronto," 134.
240 Teti, *Stones into Bread*, 113.
241 Teti, *Stones into Bread*, 113.







5.20

Moments in the Procession of the Holy Crucifix I, Midland, 2009, 2015

Photographs taken by Gregorio Riccio. The procession moves through the grounds of the Martyrs' Shrine, beginning at Holy Crucifix Square. As it unfolds, the procession quickly assumes its established structure, closely mirroring the order found in its place of origin. eading the procession are the brothers and sisters representing the Madonna Addolorata, dressed in purple mozzette and white gowns, carrying a banner dedicated to her. They are followed by members of the Confraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix, bearing their respective flags and banners. Set within this open landscape, the procession unfolds with a clarity and visibility distinct from its original context, yet continues to reinforce its hierarchical order and collective identity.



5.22

Flags and banners, Midland

Sketch by author. This vignette shows the flags and banners that lead the procession. Pictured here is the flag of the Confraternity, set against the open landscape of the Martyrs' Shrine.

5.21

Plan Oblique Drawing of the Processional Path, Midland, Canada

Drawing by author. Plan oblique of the processional route through the Martyr's Shrine in Midland, Ontario during the Feast of the Most Holy Crucifix. This drawing foregrounds the procession's relationship to the open and expansive landscape of rural Ontario, where the route moves through wooded paths and dispersed sacred sites rather than a continuous urban fabric. In this context, the ritual extends beyond the spatial limits of the town, becoming embedded within a broader landscape of pilgrimage and devotion. Through its movement, the procession operates as an act of place-making, inscribing layers of memory, identity, and belief onto the land and producing a sacred geography shaped by both migration and faith.





Holy Crucifix Square

5.23

Holy cross, Midland

Sketch by author. In this translation of the procession, a Holy Cross is carried just behind the banners of the Madonna Addolorata and the Most Holy Crucifix. In the absence of the physical statue, the cross functions as a symbolic substitute, sustaining the presence of the Crucifix within the ritual sequence. Its movement through the landscape allows the act of sacralisation to persist, demonstrating how ritual meaning is maintained through adaptation, even when material elements are altered.

5.24

Holy Martyr's relic, Midland

Sketch by author. The final ritual object carried in the procession is a relic from the Holy Martyrs' Shrine. Though small in scale, it carries significant spiritual weight, serving as a tangible connection to the sacred history of the site and extending its presence into the movement of the procession.







5.25

Moments in the Procession of the Holy Crucifix II, Midland, 2009, 2015

Photographs taken by Gregorio Riccio. The procession pauses along the Stations of the Cross, marking moments of reflection within its movement through the Shrine grounds. The band follows closely behind the holy relic, reinforcing the rhythm and structure of the procession. Set against the expansive grounds of the Shrine, its participants scattered across the landscape. In this context, the ritual is experienced not through compression, but through extension, reshaping the relationship between movement, space, and collective devotion.

As the procession leaves the shaded paths it passes the church, but before heading back toward Holy Crucifix Square it pauses along the way at each station of the cross for a prayer and blessing.[242] The ritual unfolds across the expansive grounds of the Shrine, transforming the surrounding Canadian landscape into a temporary stage of Southern Italian religious devotion. With banners raised, hymns echoing, and the cross carried at its centre, the procession becomes more than a commemorative walk. It is a collective act of memory and faith, through which the participants symbolically extend the sacred geography of their hometown into this new setting, momentarily sacralising the spaces of Midland and binding them to the devotional world they carried with them from across the ocean.

Upon returning to Holy Crucifix Square, the procession slowly comes to a halt beneath the open sky of the Martyrs' Shrine. There, the faithful are met by the bronze figures of the Holy Crucifix and Our Lady of Sorrows, whose solemn expressions gaze outward over the assembled crowd. The banners are lowered slightly, the music fades, and the murmur of prayer settles into a quiet expectancy as participants gather before the altar that stands at the heart of the square. What moments before had been a moving procession now becomes a gathered congregation. Holy Mass then begins, bringing the ritual journey to its liturgical culmination. The classic rite of the confraternity is observed, paying respects to the long-standing tradition established centuries earlier in San Nicola, the liturgy is performed in Latin, in accordance with what was written in the Statues in 1669.[243]

In this context, the gestures, songs, prayers, and speeches that structure the procession are borrowed from the devotional practices of San Nicola and take on renewed significance when performed in Midland. As Vito Teti observes, such rituals often acquire new meaning in migrant settings, where the repetition of familiar practices both recalls the past and acknowledges the distance from it.[244] Rather than simply reproducing a sense of belonging to the homeland, these acts can also mark the awareness that the place of origin now exists far away, increasingly preserved in memory, tradition, and imagination. The procession thus becomes a way of affirming presence in a new landscape while carrying forward elements of an older cultural and religious world. In this sense, devotional practices such as the procession of the Most Holy Crucifix are not only expressions of faith rooted in place, but also part of a broader network of transnational movement through which people, objects, traditions, memories, and even sacred figures themselves travel across borders and are re-established in new contexts.[245]

242 Teti, "I percorsi dell'ombra. Immagini dei calabresi in Toronto," 134.
243 kalabria tv, Il Santissimo Crocifisso Festeggiato a Toronto.
244 Teti, *Stones into Bread*, 135.
245 David, "Sacralising the City: Sound, Space and Performance in Hindu Ritual Practices in London," 463.



5.26

Moments in the Procession of the Holy Crucifix III, Midland, 2009

Photograph taken by unknown author. The Holy Mass taking place after the procession has concluded.

One of the most notable differences in this diasporic translation of the procession is that the statue of the Holy Crucifix is not physically carried by the faithful during the act of procession. Instead, it remains permanently installed at Holy Crucifix Square within the grounds of the Martyrs' Shrine. This departure from the traditional practice reflects a conscious decision by members of the confraternity to leave a lasting mark on the Ontario landscape. By establishing a fixed monument rather than a mobile processional statue, the community sought to create a permanent sacred point of reference for their religious life in Canada. The monument was intended to endure across generations, a site where children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren could return to reconnect with the traditions of their ancestors.[246]

For many migrants from San Nicola da Crissa, who could no longer travel back to their hometown each year to participate in the original feast, the installation of the statue offered a way to anchor a fragment of that sacred geography in their new homeland. In this sense, the monument does more than commemorate a devotion; it materially inscribes the presence of the Sannicolesi community within the Canadian landscape. The statue transforms Holy Crucifix Square into a diasporic extension of the religious world they carried with them from Calabria, allowing a tradition once rooted in the streets and piazzas of their hometown to be re-established in a new setting. Through this act of emplacement, the community not only preserves its devotional heritage but also participates in the ongoing sacralization of space, marking the shrine as a place where memory, migration, and faith converge.

In the Midland context, the meaning of the procession expands beyond its physical form. Unlike the narrow streets and tightly structured urban spaces of San Nicola da Crissa, where the original procession unfolds through the town's built environment, the ritual at the Martyrs' Shrine takes place within a vast and open landscape. Here the procession moves not through a dense network of houses and piazzas, but through wooded paths, open fields, and sacred spaces scattered across the Shrine grounds. The absence of a traditional townscape shifts the emphasis from the architecture of the community to the surrounding natural environment, creating a different spatial experience of the ritual.

246 kalabria tv, *Il Santissimo Crocifisso Festeggiato a Toronto.*

At the same time, the shrine itself is a place where multiple devotional traditions converge, drawing pilgrims from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. In this setting, the procession of the Most Holy Crucifix seems to extend beyond its immediate community, existing alongside other expressions of Catholic pilgrimage and devotion. The ritual thus expands not only spatially but also culturally, becoming part of a broader landscape of faith that characterizes the Shrine.

This transformation also gives the procession a more expansive spiritual dimension. Surrounded by forests, open sky, and the natural landscape, the ritual unfolds within what participants may perceive as the very world created by God rather than a space structured primarily by human design. In this sense, the experience of the procession becomes both physical and metaphysical. Moving through this environment, the faithful are not only retracing a devotional tradition brought from Calabria but also engaging with a sacred landscape that encourages reflection on creation, faith, and the enduring presence of the divine. Carried across the ocean by migrants from San Nicola da Crissa, the procession finds new expression within the wide natural landscape of the Martyrs' Shrine, where faith, memory, and migration converge to create a sacred geography that bridges homeland and diaspora.



5.27

Moments in the Procession of the Holy Crucifix IV, Midland, 2009

Photograph taken by unknown author. Following the procession and Mass, the celebration concludes with a shared meal among participants, extending the ritual into everyday life. In this setting, the procession continues to foster community, identity, and belonging, sustaining traditions across the diaspora.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Looking to the Future

This thesis set out to examine how Italian patron-saint processions operate as spatial practices that shape community identity across geographic and cultural contexts, asking how ritual movement transforms space into meaningful place and how these practices are sustained through migration. By following two Calabrian processions – the Madonna delle Grazie in Torre di Ruggiero and the Most Holy Crucifix in San Nicola da Crissa – alongside their diasporic counterparts in Ontario, this study has demonstrated that procession is not simply a religious event, but a dynamic spatial practice through which communities continuously produce, negotiate, and reinterpret place.

Across both the Italian and Canadian contexts, the findings reveal that processions function as powerful mechanisms of place-making. In Calabria, these rituals are deeply embedded within the physical and historical fabric of the towns themselves. Routes are shaped by centuries of repetition, and the built environment – piazzas, narrow streets, and even private homes – participate in the ritual as both stage and structure. Through embodied movement, sound, and collective participation, these spaces are transformed into lived sacred landscapes, where memory, devotion, and identity converge. In this context, procession reinforces a continuity between people and place, grounding communal identity within a shared spatial and spiritual framework.

When these same processions are translated into the diasporic context of Ontario, their relationship to space shifts, yet their core function endures. Removed from the dense, historically layered environments of Calabrian towns, these rituals must adapt to suburban and urban conditions defined by different spatial logics – parking lots, wide streets, commercial strips, and regulated public space. Here, processions no longer emerge organically from the urban fabric but must negotiate with it. Despite these differences, the rituals continue to produce meaningful places through movement. Churches become surrogate piazzas, streets are temporarily reclaimed as ceremonial routes, and familiar rhythms of sound, gesture, ritual objects, and participation reconstruct a sense of continuity with the homeland.

In this way, the thesis demonstrates that processions operate as a form of spatial translation. They carry with them not only symbolic meaning but also spatial logics – ways of organizing movement, gathering, and orientation – that are reinterpreted within new environments.

This translation is not a process of exact replication, but one of adaptation and negotiation. The resulting spaces are neither entirely Calabrian nor fully Canadian, but something in between: hybrid landscapes that hold together multiple geographies, temporalities, and identities. It is through this process that what this thesis and other scholars have described as 'double towns' emerge: places where here and elsewhere, past and present, are experienced simultaneously through ritual movement.

At the center of this process is the body. As this research has shown, it is through embodied participation – walking, carrying, singing, and gathering – that space becomes place. Processions make visible the ways in which architecture extends beyond static form, emerging instead through relationships between bodies, movement, and environment. Streets designed for circulation become sites of devotion; thresholds become points of encounter; and ordinary urban landscapes are reconfigured through collective action. In this sense, procession can be understood as a form of architecture in motion, an ephemeral yet recurring structure that organizes space through time and repetitive ritual acts.

This thesis also contributes to existing scholarship by bridging a gap between studies of religious practice in Italy and those focused on diasporic communities. Rather than examining these contexts in isolation, it follows the same rituals across geographic contexts, revealing how traditions are not only preserved but actively transformed through migration. By combining archival research, oral histories, and architectural drawing, this study has demonstrated the value of interdisciplinary approaches in capturing both the spatial and experiential dimensions of ritual practice.

At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on two specific case studies, which, while rich in detail, cannot fully represent the diversity of Italian diasporic experiences or religious practices more broadly. The reliance on oral histories and personal accounts, while invaluable for understanding lived experience, reflects subjective perspectives that may not capture the full range of interpretations within each community. Additionally, the research only offers a snapshot rather than a long-term ethnographic account of how these processions have and continue to evolve, over time across younger generations.

As I sit down to write this conclusion, I have just returned from the Good Friday procession on College Street, ending in the place where this thesis began. It feels only fitting to close this work by returning to the procession that first set it in motion. As the procession draws nearer, people begin to gather along the sidewalks, taking their places in the ritual about to unfold. In the distance, the sound of a brass band approaches, announcing what follows: a public act of ritual performance and embodied memory that temporarily transforms the surrounding streets in downtown Toronto into a sacred landscape of devotion and expression.

Watching the procession now, I cannot help but notice its differences from what I remember as a child. Many of the confraternities, participants, and dramatized scenes that once defined the event are no longer present. This absence serves as a poignant reminder that while tradition is continually evolving, it is also, in some ways, diminishing. In the case of Italian patron-saint processions such as those of the Madonna delle Grazie and the Most Holy Crucifix, this tension is even more pronounced. With each passing year, these rituals become further removed from the contexts in which they were first carried across the ocean by earlier generations. As communities age and participation declines, meanings shift, and the forms of these traditions inevitably change.

And yet, as this thesis has shown, these processions have never been static. Their persistence has always depended on their capacity to adapt – to new landscapes, new generations, and new conditions of life. The question, then, is not simply whether these processions will continue, but how. Who will carry them forward, and in what form will they endure? What new spatial and cultural translations will emerge as they move further from their origins?

Standing at the edge of the street, watching the procession pass, it becomes clear that even in its changed state, the ritual continues to do what it has always done: gather people, animate space, and produce a shared sense of place and identity through movement. Whether in Calabria or Toronto, whether in its fullness or in fragments, procession persists as a living practice, one that continues to bridge here and elsewhere through ritual movement. In this way, its future remains open, carried forward not as a fixed tradition, but as an evolving one, continually remade through those who choose to walk.



6.1

The Madonna delle Grazie, Toronto, 1980s

Photograph provided by Nino Arone. The Madonna delle Grazie framed beneath a blue and white balloon arch, marking her presence within a new cultural and spatial context. While the landscape has shifted, the ritual persists, carrying with it memory, identity, and devotion across across space while sustaining its sacred meaning.



6.2

The Most Holy Crucifix, Midland, 2015

Photograph taken by Gregorio Riccio. The permanent monument dedicated to the Holy Crucifix at the Martyrs' Shrine serves as a fixed point of devotion within the landscape. Here, what is carried in procession elsewhere becomes anchored in place, the sacred becomes embedded within the landscape, marking the enduring presence of faith within the diasporic context.

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