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Catholic Parishes and Immigrants in Italy: Insights from the Congregations Study in Three Italian Cities

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Abstract: As shown by sociological studies, the Catholic Church in Italy is very active in conducting advocacy and providing political representation to immigrants. It is also highly effective in carrying out services for immigrants, as well as fairly receptive to sharing places of worship with them. However, these sociological observations have been mainly conducted at the national level rather than by exploring the life of parishes through an empirical lens. This article aims, by applying the congregations study methodology, to fill this gap by detecting faith communities as the basic social units of religious life at the city/country level. In doing that, we discuss quantitative data collected in 377 Catholic parishes in the cities of Bologna, Milan, and Brescia. The findings suggest that Catholic parishes: (i) illustrate a low proportion of immigrants in their communities; (ii) show high activity in providing services for immigrants; (iii) are not politically engaged in advocacy for foreign persons at the local level; and (iv) similarly position themselves as politically conservative and liberal while expressing commitments to immigrants. This study confirms the sociological argument regarding the solidarity approach of the Catholic Church in Italy toward immigrants, while highlighting some ambivalent aspects related to cultural diversity and grass-roots political engagement within parishes' life.

Keywords: Catholic parishes; congregations study; cultural diversity; immigrants; Italy; political engagement



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1. Introduction

According to sociological studies [1], the Catholic Church in Europe is largely engaged with immigrants, mobilizing itself for material assistance and addressing the main challenges through various networks and organizations. In this scenario, the Catholic Church in Italy is very active in conducting advocacy and providing political representation to immigrants. It is also highly effective in carrying out services to foreign persons, as well as fairly receptive to granting them spaces in their own places of worship. However, these sociological observations have been shaped in the literature [2–5] mainly through the elaboration of a national level of study and a theoretic angle rather than by exploring empirical evidence at the parish level. The National Congregations Study (NCS) approach provides the opportunity to fill this gap, since it is designed to analyze faith communities as the basic social units of religious life [6]. On the other hand, by detecting religious communities as formal organizational entities through the administration of a questionnaire [7], the NCS revealed some critical issues—as we will discuss in the article. It actually captures practices and stances within the life of parishes or congregations, but it neglects the activities of diocesan offices, goal-oriented religious institutions, and informal/formal associations related to parishes.

The congregations study presented in the article examines empirical data collected in 2020–2021 in 377 Catholic parishes in the cities of Bologna, Milan, and Brescia as well as their surrounding municipalities; however, the entire survey addressed more than 500 congregations belonging to different religious traditions. This article starts with the outline of

a sociological perspective on religion and immigration (Section 2) highlighting how the former provides a privileged angle for understanding the dynamics of the latter, especially due to religion's key role in immigrants' settlement and cultural reproduction. Section 3 traces an overview of the actions of the Catholic Church in Italy toward immigrants also from a historical perspective [5].

Section 4 describes the research methodology of the congregations study, which was sharpened with the analysis at the urban level and designed as City Congregations Study (CCS) in the Italian context [8]. We explain the case study selection—i.e., the choice of three Italian cities—and methods of data collection for this research. Section 5 discusses the findings of the congregations study, showing that Catholic parishes display several characteristics: (i) notably low presence of immigrants among their members; (ii) significant activity in carrying out services for immigrants; (iii) refrain from politically engaging in advocacy for foreign persons at the local level; and (iv) similar positioning themselves as politically conservative and liberal while expressing commitments to immigrants. To conclude, by detecting the activities of Catholic parishes in three Italian cities, this research appears to confirm the main sociological arguments about the solidarity approach of the Catholic Church in Italy toward immigrants, while emphasizing some ambivalent aspects linked to cultural diversity and political engagement within the life of parishes. The latter are discussed in the last section (Section 6) and shed fresh light on the current transformations and challenges that are reshaping the societal activities of Catholic parishes in Italy.

2. The Linkages between Religion and Immigration: A Sociological Perspective

In the early 2000s, some scholars [9] pointed out that migration studies had so far neglected the role of religion in migration processes, as well as research on religion had poorly considered the effects of migration on broader society. Almost two decades later, sociological studies on migration appear to largely examine religious factors, especially being focused on the North American context [10,11]. In fact, such studies have widely recognized the importance of immigrants' spiritual and religious resources in transnational mobility, as well as the relevance of religion for immigrants while settling into the receiving context. Against this backdrop, much sociological research has illustrated the main bonds between migration and various dimensions of religion.

First of all, religions in the context of immigration are engaged in the reconstruction and reproduction of the cultural and national identity of the homeland [12]. Immigrant religious communities play a different role from their usual one at home, as they act as both religious and socio-cultural centers bringing together compatriots abroad and reaffirming their national, ethnic, and religious identities in new contexts. This task is articulated through the usage of the language of the country of origin, the performance of rituals and celebrations according to one's own tradition, as well as cultural practices ranging from the world of art to that of cuisine with the recurrence of secular holidays present in the motherland and host societies.

Therefore, it seems clear why most immigrants tend to take religion as an important point of reference abroad, and in current research, immigrants' places of worship emerge as multi-functional spaces linked to religious, cultural, and social activities. Moreover, immigrants look for places of worship—also to those belonging to other religious traditions—in order to find social resources important for addressing the challenges of migration. To meet their needs, it becomes essential for them to build social networks composed of compatriots or other immigrants, especially through the development of interpersonal bonds and sharing solutions [13,14].

Furthermore, (native and foreign) religious communities generally establish informal welfare structures and services for immigrants, which aim to meet their basic needs [15]. These activities may be more or less institutionalized and cover aids ranging from food distribution to free legal assistance, from offering medical checkups to temporary housing, from giving small amounts of money to organizing meetings to orient immigrants in the

new country. In such a scenario, both indigenous and immigrant religions seem to influence the integration of foreign persons by reshaping some of their attitudes toward the receiving society [16].

Finally, faith communities maintain a central role in the construction of transnational connections for immigrants; that is, the flows of people, goods, knowledge, and other resources that cross national borders [17]. One can observe on a global scale the widespread creation of both institutional forms of transnationalism among religious communities diffused in different countries, as well as of transnational forms of religious practice by immigrants at the individual level [18]. As shown by numerous research on Catholicism, such as that of Pasura and Erdal [1], a global network of religious connections seems to be “woven” in and between all continents.

As mentioned earlier, sociological studies on migration in the North American context have put more emphasis on the relevance of religion, particularly compared to relevant research on the European context. This fact can be explained by more recent experiences of a socially significant migration phenomenon in the European continent. For example, the major theory developed in the US on the reorganization of immigrant religious institutions has not been similarly tested in the European context. More specifically, we are referring to the concept of “de facto congregationalism” proposed by Warner [19], wherein immigrants’ religious communities adapt their organizational structure over time to resemble that of a typical congregation in the Protestant tradition¹.

In addition, research on European societies has scarcely addressed the processes of “selective acculturation” of immigrants into the culture and religion of the new country, which is spreading forms of syncretism [20–22]. In this respect, immigrants appear to be not only sustaining the religiosity of Western contexts but also substantially reshaping their religious landscapes. In other words, a mutual reshaping between immigrants’ and natives’ practices of religion emerges, as well as a broad re-signification of the local religious landscape through a growing religious diversity. With that regard, the study of so-called European Islam or “Euroislam” has elaborated many thoughts on this point and generated an extensive bibliography on the subject [23,24]. However, a broader study of religions entangled with immigrants—also for the case of Catholicism—still seems little developed in Europe.

3. The Catholic Church and Immigrants: A Focus on Italy

The Catholic Church has a long history of supporting transnational migration and settling ecclesial initiatives abroad. Throughout the twentieth century, many Italians, Poles, and Irish emigrated to North America; thus, Catholic dioceses in Europe developed links and activities on the other side of the Atlantic to follow the journey of their immigrant faithful. In fact, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, congregations dedicated to migrants were established in Italy, particularly those founded by Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini and Sister Francesca Cabrini [25]. As discussed in Section 2, Catholic communities abroad had a crucial part in enabling Italian immigrants to maintain and reproduce their cultural and national identity in a foreign context, as well as providing social assistance for them.

During the last 30 years, migration flows reversed and a multitude of immigrants from all countries reached predominantly Catholic countries in Europe such as Italy, Ireland, and Spain. Against this backdrop, Italy has become an attractive location for immigrants from diverse continents. According to recent data, around 5,030,700 foreign citizens, who account for 8.5% of the resident population in 2022², are present in the Italian peninsula. They come especially from Eastern European countries (such as Romania, Moldavia, and Ukraine) and the Balkans (Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia), Asian countries (China, India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines), African countries (Morocco, Nigeria, and Senegal), the Middle East (Egypt and Turkey), and from South America (Perú, Ecuador, and Brazil). Thus, the Catholic Church in Italy has elaborated important initiatives and assumed a

pivotal public role in the governance of the recent cultural and religious diversity that is reshaping the Italian societal landscape [26].

Indeed, Italy holds a kind of relevance in the international debate on immigration policies, especially inside the European Union. On the one hand, from the socioeconomic point of view, it has integrated more than two million immigrants into its labor market, showing that it is a European country marked by a significant immigrant presence. On the other hand, from the political point of view, it revealed a remarkable social and political resistance to accept its new condition as a country marked by several minorities and the growing development of a multi-ethnic population [27]. Therefore, the role of the Catholic Church has become quite central in tackling migration issues in the Italian peninsula by mediating the interests of diverse economic and political actors and trying to avoid societal polarizations:

“The Italian Catholic Church has helped remarkably to remedy the shortcomings of public policies, and it has risen to the defence of immigrants when they have been targeted by restrictive or even discriminatory politics, as has occurred several times during the past fifteen years, especially under centre-right governments (. . .). As in the Spanish case, the Catholic Church and its various ramifications have worked to build a ‘register of hospitality’, filling the void left by secular institutions and political discourse [28]. Itçaina shows that the Catholic Church has not limited itself to providing concrete help or certain services; it has repeatedly engaged in political action toward governments, in alliance with secular actors, to change the laws or to protest against restrictions” [2] (p. 324).

To sum up, the Catholic Church has mobilized its-self in Italian political circles as the main social actor struggling for regularization measures for undocumented immigrants, particularly by protesting against anti-immigration policies and lobbying for the general reform of the citizenship law. In addition, the Italian Catholic Church has developed through thousands of volunteers in thousands of parishes services dedicated to immigrants—the focus of our article—such as Italian language courses and basic economic and health care assistance.

In this solidarity approach, “immigrants are regarded as victims of a situation of social and political inequality. To their image of ‘brethren in Christ’ is added that of ‘brothers in arms’. Here, the principle of solidarity prevails over subsidiarity. There is a new call for state intervention in social matters, no longer catered for by other social groups” [29] (p. 60). The above approach is entangled with the efforts of some institutions belonging to the Catholic Church, such as principally the Caritas and Migrantes Foundations, which have provided a leading contribution at the levels of both political action and material provision of services for immigrants. Moreover, there are also Catholic agencies or local associations absorbed in assisting refugees, such as the Centro Astalli. Therefore, the Catholic Church holds multiple “satellite” entities within its ranks tackling migration issues, whose entanglements embody the broad network and the general action of the Catholic Church on the subject—of which the activities of the parishes are only one albeit crucial component.

To figure out the above multifaceted and multi-level scenario, it is useful to also mention the parish activities of the Catholic Immigrant Pastoral Centers distributed throughout the Italian peninsula. Over the past 20 years, these structures have been founded bringing together foreign Catholics in their respective ethnic groups. They offer liturgies in the language of the country of origin through so-called “ethnic chaplains” and also engage in supporting one’s own culture and offering services for immigrants [4].

Currently, the most important issue related to immigration in Italy is the humanitarian emergency created by the uncontrolled arrivals by sea. From 2014 to 2016, Italy experienced the arrival of around 500,000 refugees, mostly from Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Gambia, and Syria (63,456 asylum seekers in 2014; 83,970 in 2015; and 123,000 in 2016). In this dramatic situation, the public engagement of the Catholic Church—along with its assistance activities—aimed to construct an “inclusive identity” for Italy. This effort has

recently conflicted with right-wing parties that instead support the rhetoric of and argue for an “exclusive Italian identity” [5].

Against this backdrop, Pope Francis has given several official statements on this issue during his papacy, which have been followed by those of a considerable number of Italian bishops. They have increasingly criticized the restrictive immigration policies and spoke openly in favor of asylum seekers. In this sense, Pope Francis engaged the topic of immigrants and refugees in several public discourses, religious rites, and symbolic actions making it a crucial feature of his papacy [30]. However, this effort has not been without criticism: While the identification of immigrants with the disadvantaged people is an important motivational resource for both donations and volunteer involvement, some political parties, mass media, and Catholic leaders have often accused the Church of favoring immigrants over Italian people in need and sometimes even accused the Church of assisting faithful of other religions instead of Catholic immigrants [3].

4. Research Approach, Methodology, and Case Selection

4.1. *The Approach of the Congregations Study*

The scholarship on congregations study [6,7,31] offers an innovative methodology assuming congregations as the cardinal observation point in the study of religious landscapes at urban and national levels. As mentioned in Section 1, our research has been based on the methodology of the NCS, one of the leading approaches in congregations study first conducted in the US [7,32–34]. For the research presented in the article, we adopted the following definition of congregation: a social institution in which individuals who are not all religious specialists gather in physical proximity to one another, frequently and at regularly scheduled intervals, for activities and events with explicitly religious content and purpose, and in which there is continuity over time in the individuals who gather, the location of the gathering, and the nature of the activities and events at each gathering [7] (pp. 1–2).

According to this definition, congregations are the basic social units of religious life in the Italian local contexts. Indeed, they are the main venues in which religious identities are shaped and reinforced through worship and mission. They are also where multiple practices are experienced through bonds between different religious communities and cultural settings. In addition, congregations are spaces for the development of practices grounded in sociability, social assistance, cultural awareness, and service—like in the case of our research.

Moreover, as Breskaya et al. [8] emphasized the NCS approach has been modeled according to the crucial features of the North American religious context, i.e., the historical Protestant majority. Therefore, this approach requires a kind of “translation” to fit into the Italian religious context, which consists of a different societal landscape founded on a historical Catholic majority. More precisely, congregations in the US are typically institutionalized as self-organized religious communities in which participation is based only on a voluntary nature [6]. In contrast, Catholic parishes are broadly institutionalized by the criteria of ascribed membership, in which belonging to the same territorial unit is considered belonging to the same religious group. However, in the last three decades, this historical pattern of organization within the local parishes in Italy, like that of other European countries, has been reshaped by the effects of powerful secularization processes. In other words, “this condition allows us to consider some elements of congregational life to be relevant to social and cultural dynamics in the Italian and European religious field. This regards the decline in religious participation in Italy [35,36], making worship attendance a matter of a voluntary choice rather than a social convention or family tradition” [8] (p. 3).

Against this backdrop, “congregation” and “parish” are used as interchangeable synonyms in the research of the article. Using the NCS approach, indeed, was essential for examining Catholic parishes in Italy as formal organizational components dealing with immigrants and facing migration issues. Nonetheless, in line with our sociological research, it is important to acknowledge differences in organizational features and historical

nuances [8] (p. 3). In this respect, the NCS approach struggles to grasp broad or diffused social activities on the margins of parish life or intersect with it through other religious entities. This trend appears less frequently in the congregational setting, which is generally based on more rigid social and confessional boundaries.

4.2. Methodology

The study employed two distinct tasks to gather data [8]. Firstly, we identified and mapped the various religious groups present in the urban areas of Bologna, Milan, and Brescia. Secondly, we conducted structured interviews using a questionnaire based on the NCS model. To map the Catholic parishes in the urban areas of Bologna, Milan, Brescia, and their surroundings, we relied on the detailed listings provided in the diocesan yearbooks. The majority of the interviews were conducted between November 2019 and September 2021 face-to-face, with some exceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, when interviews were held through telephone and video calls. The questionnaire consisted of 61 questions divided into nine sections, including, among others, questions about staff and governance, volunteers, worship, groups and activities, social composition, values, human rights, and interreligious dialogue.

4.3. Selection of the Case Studies

The three cities in the Northern part of Italy were selected for this study by applying the congregations study methodology. They were Bologna as a middle-sized Italian city (391,400 inhabitants), Milan as a metropolis (1,386,285 inhabitants), and Brescia as a relatively small city (196,569 inhabitants)³. The survey was conducted in these cities and their surrounding townships since we were interested in understanding dynamics concerning religious diversity and migration accounting for the urban dimension, like the interactions among immigrants and faith communities and their material spaces. These cities were chosen due to their similarity in the level of religious diversity and social welfare.

In 2021, by the time of the current study, the three cities showed a relatively high proportion of foreign residents resulting in 16% of the total population of Bologna, 20% of the total population in Milan, and 19% of the total population in Brescia⁴. Religious diversity has a particular configuration in these three urban contexts, where a great plurality of cultures and religions can be depicted. Thus, in Bologna, almost half of the foreigners were found to be Christians, the majority of which were represented by Orthodox Christians (almost 38,500) and Roman Catholics (about 23,000), while almost 42,000 among immigrants were Muslims. Instead, in Milan, the majority of foreigners were represented by almost 115,000 Muslims and 88,000 Orthodox Christians. Similarly, in Brescia, around half of the foreigners (48%) were Muslims, 36% were Christians with 19% Orthodox Christians and 17% Roman Catholics [8].

For the purposes of this research, only the data relating to Catholic congregations are taken into consideration, which are 377 out of 507 Catholic parishes mapped in this study.

5. Catholic Parishes and Immigrants in Three Italian Cities

In this section, we first discuss the data on parish membership, participation, and the proportion of the adult migrant population, with further analysis of the origin of priests and practices of multilingualism in parish contexts. We proceed with the analysis of social activities specifically focused on offering services for immigrants, sharing spaces of worship, and political initiatives on issues of migration along with the political orientation of Catholic parishes.

The section introduces the analysis of 377 interviews with religious leaders in Catholic parishes located in three Italian cities. Among them, 122 were interviewed in Bologna, 194 in Milan, and 61 in Brescia. Considering the general similarity of the three urban contexts, and the not very large number of interviews collected for each city, we will analyze the data from different Catholic dioceses by merging them.

5.1. Immigrants within the Catholic Parishes

Figure 1 presents the data referred to associated membership and weekly participation in parish activities. As regards the associate members, we asked the question: “How many persons would you say are associated in any way with the religious life of this congregation—counting both adults and children, counting both regular and irregular participants, counting both official or registered members and also participating nonmembers? What is the total number of persons associated with this congregation to any degree at all?”, and religious leaders provided absolute numbers answering it. Looking at the boxplot (Figure 1), it is interesting to note that 50% of the participants declare between 400 and 1500 associate members, reaching 75% between 20 and 1500 members of the parishes. The average number of associate members indicated by the parishes’ leaders (368 out of 377 who provided responses) is about 1057 people who in multiple ways and at various levels associate themselves with parish life.

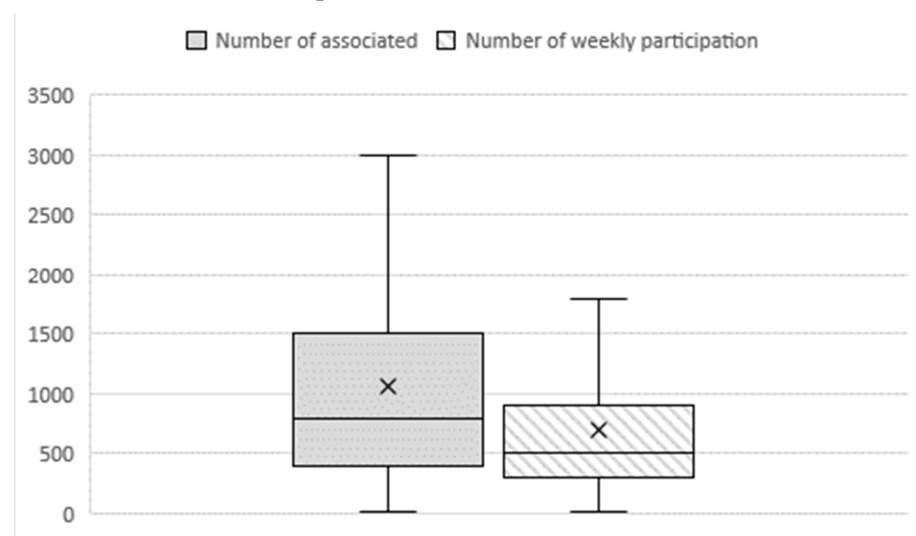


Figure 1. Questions: Number of associated (“How many persons would you say are associated. . .?”) and number of weekly participation (“How many persons would you say participate. . .?”). The “x” in the figure represents the mean value.

As regards the weekly participation (“How many persons—counting both adults and children—would you say participate weekly in services or other activities in the congregation?”), Catholic leaders who answered the question (372 out of 377) reported that the average number of people who participate weekly in various parish activities is about 703. This includes both participation in liturgies and social activities. Moreover, looking at the boxplot, it is interesting to note that 75% of the participants declare that between 20 and 900 people weekly attend various parish activities.

Regarding the participation of foreigners in parish activities in the last five years, the average percentage of adult foreigners who arrived in Italy recently is 3%. To measure this trend, we asked the question: “Of the number of regular adult participants in your congregation, what percent would you say have come to Italy within the past five years?”. It is important to note that 59 Catholic leaders did not answer the question (15.6%). Finally, the lowest percentage of foreign adults involved in parish life is 1% for 18 of the parishes studied. Instead, the highest proportion of foreigners is 100% for one parish—almost certainly a Catholic Immigrant Pastoral Center, see Section 3 [4]. To sum up, the percentage of immigrant adults in the Italian Catholic parishes of the research appears considerably low.

Table 1 considers the nationality of the priest leading the Catholic parishes analyzed. In accordance with the results, only 18 Catholic priests were born abroad (4.8%), while 359 are Italians (95.2%)⁵. These data seem again not elevated enough compared to the high rate of immigrants in Italy, as well as to the growing processes of cultural and ethnic diversification reshaping Italian society [26].

Table 1. Question: “In which country the senior cleric was born?”.

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
Italy	359	95.2
Abroad	18	4.8
Total	377	100.0

Table 2 addresses the issue of multilingualism within Catholic parishes, by presenting responses to the question: “In a typical month, does your congregation have a worship service in which the primary language is not Italian, or which is bilingual with Italian and another language?”.

Table 2. Question: “In a typical month, does your congregation have a worship service. . .?”.

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	55	14.5
No	320	85.0
No response	2	0.5
Total	377	100.0

Thus, around 15% of the parishes surveyed (i.e., 55 out of 377) claimed to have a weekly service in which the main language is not Italian. This finding is interesting as the percentage appears quite high if considering the finding about only 18 foreign Catholic clerics leading the detected parishes.

5.2. Commitments toward Immigrants in the Catholic Parishes

Apart from these descriptive data on the proportion of immigrants and the language adopted within the parishes, we were interested to know about the types of social activities and services for supporting them. Hence, it appears useful to provide a short premise. We will analyze the various actions of Catholic parishes to assist immigrants, but the latter may also have received material assistance from Catholic offices, associations, or groups that are outside of parishes’ activities. In short, these data do not delineate the Catholic Church’s overall help to immigrants in the three Italian cities as much as the fundamental but not exclusive one of its parishes.

More specifically, we asked the question: “Within the past 12 months, have there been any regularly meeting groups or activities specifically focused on the purpose of organizing events for or supporting migrants?” (Table 3). The findings suggest that during the last year, around 42% of the studied Catholic parishes have hosted groups or meetings focused on migration. We did not get responses only from three Catholic parishes, while 217 parishes claimed that they had not organized any groups or meetings related to the support of migration. However, 157 Catholic parishes responded affirmatively to this question, thus tracing a positive trend and illustrating the significance of this issue for them.

Table 3. Question: “Within the past 12 months, have there been any regularly meeting groups. . .?”.

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	157	41.6
No	217	57.6
No response	3	0.8
Total	377	100.0

Table 4 shows that in the last year, about 71% of the Catholic parishes analyzed have organized activities to offer many types of services for immigrants. We carried out the following question: “Within the past 12 months, have there been any groups or meetings or classes or activities specifically focused on offering services for immigrants, such as legal assistance, translation, Italian language instruction, or job placement?” (Table 4). Only seven Catholic parishes did not answer the question, while 104 parishes claimed that they had not organized any groups or meetings supporting immigrants. Instead, 266 Catholic parishes offer many types of service for immigrants, therefore indicating a remarkable and driving trend of a broad ecclesial commitment to the issue.

Table 4. Question: “Within the past 12 months, have there been any groups or meetings. . .?”.

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	266	70.6
No	104	27.6
No response	7	1.8
Total	377	100.0

Another interesting aspect regards the inclusion of immigrants by Catholic parishes through the sharing of places of worship. Around 10% of Catholic parishes in our study share their place of worship with a religious minority composed of immigrants⁶ (Table 5). Only 2.4% of parishes’ leaders did not provide answers to that question, while 87% of them claimed that they did not share their places of worship with a religious minority composed of immigrants. As shown by several research [37–39], indeed, a smaller but significant number of Catholic parishes in Italy share their place of worship with immigrant groups from Greece, Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine, which belong to the Orthodox Christian tradition.

Table 5. Question: “Is your building used by any other congregation for. . .?”.

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	40	10.6
No	328	87.0
No response	9	2.4
Total	377	100.0

In terms of activities and educational initiatives related to race and ethnicity, we were interested to observe to which degree Catholic parishes in three cities are engaged with them. In this regard, we addressed this question to the Catholic leaders: “Within the past 12 months, have there been any groups or meetings or classes or activities specifically focused on discussing issues related to race/ethnicity?” (Table 6). The findings reveal that during the last year, about 43% of the Catholic parishes have organized special meetings or classes discussing issues related to race/ethnicity. However, the majority of the Catholic parishes have not been engaged in such classes or meetings (205 out of 377), while 10 religious leaders did not answer that question. Nevertheless, the data of 162 Catholic parishes organizing social and cultural activities aimed at discussing race/ethnicity issues represent a relevant tendency within the Catholic institutional action at the local level.

We also addressed the sensitive issue of undocumented immigrants by collecting responses from the Catholic priests to the following question: “Some congregations have declared themselves to be sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants. Has your congregation done that?” (Table 7). Similarly to other research [2,3], our findings are not surprising showing that as many as 82 Catholic leaders stated that their parishes offered assistance and/or shelter to undocumented immigrants; that is, 21.7% of the assessed

Catholic parishes. Generally, religious organizations in Italy are quite unwilling to discriminate/differentiate their assistance and service for immigrants according to the (il)legal status of the latter⁷.

Table 6. Question: “Within the past 12 months, have there been any groups or meetings. . .?”.

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	162	43.0
No	205	54.4
No response	10	2.6
Total	377	100.0

Table 7. Question: “Some congregations have declared themselves. . .”.

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	82	21.7
No	288	76.4
No response	7	1.9
Total	377	100.0

In terms of political engagement with activities related to migration and integration of foreigners, we found some interesting results. We offered a question to the participants: “Within the past 12 months, have there been any organized meetings to prepare or participate in political activities related to migration?” (Table 8).

Table 8. Question: “Within the past 12 months, have there been any organized meetings. . .?”.

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	40	10.6
No	333	88.3
No response	4	1.1
Total	377	100.0

The Catholic parishes do not seem particularly involved in political activities concerning migration given the low positive response rate to this question (Table 8). Despite the high level of commitment toward immigrants in offering tailored services and the numerous cultural initiatives on the issue, the degree of political engagement of Catholic parishes analyzed with this topic appears to be low (40 out of 377)⁸. Considering the high degree of negative responses given by the interviewees, about 88% of Catholic parishes did not argue a political engagement on migration notwithstanding the high concrete/material engagement to the subject.

5.3. Political Orientation of the Catholic Parishes

This subsection examines the political orientation of the Catholic parishes linking it to their commitments to immigrants. In other words, it investigates whether the main political stance of the parishes, which is indicated by each respective Catholic leader interviewed, may be potentially related to their commitments to immigrants. More precisely, we identified the main political orientation of the parish through three key positions on the political spectrum, that is, more on the conservative side, right in the middle, and more on the liberal side. According to this political range, we broadly refer to a conservative/liberal congregation by considering its stances on contemporary issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, gender order, LGBTIQI rights, and cultural and religious pluralism [7].

Table 9 summarizes the results of the relationship between the parishes' regular activities supporting migrants and the political orientation of Catholic parishes. In doing that, we intersected the responses from the two following questions: "Within the past 12 months, have there been any regularly meeting groups or activities specifically focused on the purpose of organizing events for or supporting migrants?" and "Politically speaking, would your congregation be considered more on the conservative side, more on the liberal side, or right in the middle?" (Table 9). Interestingly, both 30% of Catholic parishes on the conservative side and 30% on the liberal side regularly have had meeting groups or activities focused on supporting immigrants. The same activities have been offered by 12.7% of parishes that fall "in the middle" of the political spectrum. Revealing a similar pattern, 22.1% of Catholic parishes on the conservative side and 19.9% of parishes on the liberal side have not had regular meeting groups or activities focused on immigrants; the same observation about the absence of any activity on this issue is relevant for the 18% of the Catholic parishes falling "right in the middle".

Table 9. Cross-tabulation of parishes' regular events supporting migrants and their political orientation of Catholic parishes (Questions: "Within the past 12 months, have there been any regular meeting...?"; "Politically speaking, would your congregation be considered...?").

Answers	More on the Conservative Side	Right in the Middle	More on the Liberal Side	No Response	Total
Yes	47 (30.0%)	20 (12.7%)	47(30.0%)	43 (27.3%)	157 (100.0%)
No	48 (22.1%)	39 (18.0%)	43 (19.9%)	87 (40.0%)	217 (100.0%)
No response	1 (33.3%)	-	-	2 (66.7%)	3 (100.0%)
Total	96 (25.5%)	59 (15.6%)	90 (23.9%)	132 (35.0%)	377 (100.0%)

As a following step, we intersect the data to analyze the relationship between the activities for supporting immigrants of Catholic parishes and the spectrum of their political orientation. Table 10 suggests the results by summarizing the answers to two following questions: "Within the past 12 months, have there been any groups or meetings or classes or activities specifically focused on offering services for immigrants, such as legal assistance, translation, Italian language instruction, or job placement?" and the previous formulation of question concerning the political orientation of the parish. The analyses indicate that 27.5% of Catholic parishes on the conservative side and 24.8% of parishes on the liberal side regularly have organized various types of services for supporting immigrants. Similarly, the same type of engagement with the support of immigrants was pursued by 14.6% of parishes, which positioned themselves in the middle of the political spectrum. Moreover, 21.2% of Catholic parishes on the conservative side and 22.1% of parishes on the liberal side have not settled services for immigrants, and the same thing happened for 18.3% of parishes that fall right in the middle.

Table 10. Cross-tabulation of particular types of urban parish activities supporting immigrants and political orientation of Catholic parishes (Questions: "Within the past 12 months, have there been any groups or meeting...?"; "Politically speaking, would your congregation be considered...?").

Answers	More on the Conservative Side	Right in the Middle	More on the Liberal Side	No Response	Total
Yes	73 (27.5%)	39 (14.6%)	66 (24.8%)	88 (33.1%)	266 (100.0%)
No	22 (21.2%)	19 (18.3%)	23 (22.1%)	40 (38.4%)	104 (100.0%)
No response	1 (14.3%)	1 (14.3%)	1 (14.3%)	4 (57.1%)	7 (100.0%)
Total	96 (25.5%)	59 (15.6%)	90 (23.9%)	132 (35.0%)	377 (100.0%)

Finally, we examined the relationship between the assistance by the studied Catholic parishes to undocumented immigrants⁹ and their political orientation (Table 11). Both 28.1% of Catholic parishes on the conservative side and 28.1% on the liberal side have been sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants, and the same activity has been carried out by 17% of parishes that indicate themselves as politically moderate. Displaying a related tendency, 24.6% of Catholic parishes on the conservative side and 23.3% of parishes on the liberal side have not been sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants, and the same thing was revealed by 15.6% of parishes that fall right in the middle of the political spectrum.

Table 11. Cross-tabulation of the assistance by Catholic parishes to undocumented immigrants and political orientation of Catholic parishes (Questions: “Some congregations have declared themselves. . .?”; “Politically speaking, would your congregation be considered. . .?”).

Answers	More on the Conservative Side	Right in the Middle	More on the Liberal Side	No Response	Total
Yes	23 (28.1%)	14 (17.0%)	23 (28.1%)	22 (26.8%)	82 (100.0%)
No	71 (24.6%)	45 (15.6%)	67 (23.3%)	105 (36.5%)	288 (100.0%)
No response	2 (28.5%)	-	-	5 (71.5%)	7 (100.0%)
Total	96 (25.5%)	59 (15.6%)	90 (23.9%)	132 (35.0%)	377 (100.0%)

In short, it appears clearly that the political orientation of the detected Catholic parishes is not associated with their commitments toward immigrants. These latter were pursued or not by Catholic parishes beyond their main political attitudes, showing indeed across Tables 9–11 a similar ratio of parishes on the conservative and the liberal sides. Furthermore, a smaller but consistently observed percentage is attributed to parishes situated politically right in the middle.

6. Findings Discussion and Analysis

The research results examined in Section 5 allow us to elaborate on three main reflections on the main sociological observations concerning Italian Catholic parishes and immigrants. The findings of the congregations study conducted in three cities seem to confirm the main sociological arguments about Catholicism and migration in Italy [2–5], but they also show certain divergent aspects entangled with some challenges in parish life.

First of all, in terms of the presence of immigrants within the Catholic parishes, Section 5.1 analyzes 377 parishes in Bologna, Milan, and Brescia discussing some interesting findings. More specifically, around 59% of Catholic parishes claimed to have no adult immigrants in their communities, while 26% of parishes furnishing an affirmative response indicated that around 3% of their members are immigrants. These data show a low degree of immigrant presence within the analyzed Catholic parishes or rather a low percentage of foreign Catholics’ attendance at native Catholic parishes. In fact, the latest estimates offered by the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) indicate the presence of about 830,000 foreign Catholics in Italy in 2023, which amounts to 16.5% of total immigrants in the country [40]. These figures sound higher than the percentages found in the congregations study conducted in Bologna, Brescia, and Milano. It should be also emphasized that the number of immigrants is higher in the regions of Central and Northern Italy—i.e., in the three cities where the research was conducted—due to the better local economic and productive fabric [41]. Thus, the percentage of immigrants within the studied Catholic parishes should have been more significant since it is supposed to be higher than in parishes located in Southern Italy and the Islands.

However, about 15% of the Catholic parishes claimed to offer at least a liturgy in non-Italian language every week (Table 2), i.e., data that are still quite low but significantly higher than the findings on the immigrants’ presence in the parishes discussed above. Probably, these liturgies for immigrants are performed by foreign clerics who are

not incardinated in the studied parishes or by foreign priests of religious orders who provide temporary service. Indeed, regarding the religious leaders of the detected Catholic parishes, only 18 out of 377 were born abroad (Table 1), which is around 5% of the clerics interviewed—revealing a low degree of cultural diversity.

To sum up, the data confirm the sociological pattern—which has been traced at the national level—according to which foreign Catholics are weakly integrated into Italian Catholic parishes [2,3]. Despite the relevant commitments of Italian Catholics toward immigrants, it seems that a separation between native and immigrant Catholics seems to persist within the parishes. With regard to this particular situation, the targeted creation of manifold Catholic Immigrant Pastoral Centers may have fostered dynamics of social distancing between Italian Catholics and immigrant ones [4]. Concretely, these ecclesial structures could have the effect of isolating immigrant Catholic groups at the border of native parishes, carefully settling them in nearby places, or planning their worship in different time schedules. The mission of “ethnic chaplains”, that is, caring for their respective ethnic flock, can have strained the development of cultural diversity and contaminations within Italian parishes and the creation of multi-ethnic parishes in Italian cities.

Secondly, the results obtained through the application of the congregations study methodology offer important insights into the Catholic parishes’ commitments toward immigrants in three cities (Section 5.2). We found that about 71% of the parishes were engaged in the past year in offering various types of service for supporting immigrants (Table 4), while about 42% held meetings or reunions to organize assistance for immigrants and 43% of parishes discussed issues related to race or ethnicity (Tables 3 and 6). Furthermore, a significant number of parishes—given the heightened sensitivity of the issues—stated to serve as a shelter to undocumented immigrants (22%), while 1 parish out of 10 affirmed to share its place of worship with a religious group of immigrants (Tables 5 and 7).

According to the data of the research, and in line with a previous more general sociological study [5], the Catholic Church in Italy has developed local repertoires emphasizing a solidarity approach [28]. This latter is built on material and social commitments by Italian parishes in which immigrants are seen as victims of a situation of social and political inequality. While this article does not detect the political lobby for migrants and refugees by the Catholic Church at the national level and/or its political rhetoric in the public debate on the issue, we found concrete forms of consistency with respect to the above position in the activities of the parishes at the local level. Based on this, the strong commitments of Catholic parishes toward immigrants appear to establish the grass-roots social legitimacy for the current lobbying activities of the Church in Italian politics on the issue and for its influential position in the public debate.

In that respect, it is uncertain whether the widespread adoption of these activities in Italian Catholic parishes should be related to a “Pope Francis effect” [42]. That is, whether the high percentages of analyzed parishes’ commitments towards immigrants are influenced by the “pressures” arising from the Pope’s special concern for migrants and refugees [30]. As mentioned above, these figures appear so high since immigrants are usually assisted also by national and diocesan Catholic offices and organizations not counted in the research. Moreover, it is interesting that despite the intense politicization of migration issues in Italy [2–5], the diverse orientations/identifications of Catholic parishes in the political spectrum appear to be not so much linked to their level of commitment to the issue (Tables 9–11).

Finally, Catholic parishes do not seem to be particularly involved in organized political activities concerning migration, as only about 11% of them have organized in the last year meetings to prepare or participate in political activities related to the topic (Table 8). The weak formal political engagement of Catholic parishes on migration, beyond the lobby efforts pursued by the bishops’ conference and other Catholic NGOs in the national arena or by the dioceses at the broad city level [5], seems to find an echo in the already theorized current absence of political activism by Catholic parishes at the grass-roots level [43]. According to this situation, Catholic parishes are absorbed in producing liturgical, pastoral,

and charity practices, rather than developing a robust political culture¹⁰. As argued by Diotallevi in his analysis of the current transformations of the Catholic communities in Italy, “such religious organizations save an enormous amount of resources by abandoning almost every project of extra-religious relevance” [43] (p. 498). In short, the findings drawn from the analysis of Catholic parishes in the three Italian cities—on the more specific subject of their dealing with immigrants—appear to resonate with the above-multifaceted perspective. Likely, also due to the significant presence of the Catholic Church in the public sphere in Italy [45] (pp. 41–44) and the established space reserved by the main Italian political parties for Catholicism in the national arena [46], the assessed Catholic parishes appeared to refrain from developing organized initiatives or engaging in formal acts of political involvement on this highly debated issue at the local level.

7. Conclusions

The observed patterns in the studied parishes illustrate the importance of further research on Catholicism and immigrants at the local level. They indicate the multiple layers of analysis of the processes of cultural diversification of society and the role of predominant religious tradition within it. Moreover, they underscore the importance of selecting a methodology capable of capturing these complex trends. In this respect, congregational studies offered sharpened categories to investigate the practices, stances, and habits of Catholic parishes towards immigrants and in addressing societal environments increasingly marked by pluralism [47]. However, the results present two main critical issues and/or limitations. Foremost, they do not provide significant details of some important practices stances of the detected parishes, as well as the content of some of their initiatives like the cultural one—rendering the analysis occasionally too broad. Secondly, the NCS systematically grasped activities within parishes or congregations, but it neglected the related initiatives occurring in the sphere of diocesan offices, charity religious institutions, related faith agencies, or informal/formal associations. This issue gained particular relevance in analyzing the nexus between the local communities of a major religious tradition—marked by a huge and diversified internal network—and a widespread and complex social problem such as immigration.

The analysis of the data appears to outline the portrait of a body of Catholic parishes in the three Italian cities divided between two general tendencies. On the one hand, one can observe a noticeable level in parishes’ commitments towards immigrants and their practices of social inclusion, and on the other hand, simultaneous strains to cultural diversity within ecclesial organizations and their lack of interest in grass-roots and formal political initiatives on migration issues. Starting from a necessary interdisciplinary social perspective on the subject [48] also related to democratic values [49], it seems suitable to further focus on these ambivalent aspects emerging in the analyzed Catholic parishes, especially one related to cultural diversity. Beyond the valuable solidarity approach toward immigrants and refugees nurtured by Catholic parishes, less evident patterns reveal their challenges in addressing—or more ambitiously “embracing”—the multicultural dimensions that are reshaping Italian society.

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Notes

- 1 We cannot focus further on the aspect of this theory but only point out that after two decades, it would be important to examine it in European countries, also starting from the observations that have emerged in the debate that it has provoked [11].
- 2 Concerning the data about the number of immigrants in Italy, see the website of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT); <https://www.istat.it/> (accessed: 16 November 2023).
- 3 Concerning the data about the number of inhabitants for each city, see again the website of the ISTAT.
- 4 For the data about foreign residents in the three Italian cities, see again the website of the ISTAT.
- 5 The above foreign clerics are generally not Catholic immigrants who became priests when they arrived in Italy. Usually, they are priests (sometimes seminarians) from African, Asian, and South American Catholic dioceses sent to Italian ones—as in those of other Western countries—to meet the shortage of native priests.
- 6 Here is the question: “Is your building used by any other congregation for its worship services? If yes, is that congregation composed primarily of minority ethnic or national groups that have come to this country approximately in the last 20 years?”.
- 7 This is the only time in the research in which we consider one specific type of immigrant, namely the undocumented one. This can be seen as a limitation of the research, as in the study of migration, it is important to distinguish between the various types of immigrants, such as first- or second-generation immigrants, illegal or regular immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, or economic immigrants. The NCS focuses its questions more on the organizational features of congregations/parishes rather than their population.
- 8 The following question in the congregations study, which is not reported in the article, confirms that the above 40 Catholic parishes have mobilized politically in favor of immigrants.
- 9 The entire question is “Some congregations have declared themselves to be sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants. Has your congregation done that?”.
- 10 The lack of political engagement by a religious organization at the local level has been related to the notion of “low-intensity religion” [44] (p. 206).

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