

CATHOLIC **NEW YORK**

AMERICA'S LARGEST CATHOLIC NEWSPAPER

EDITOR'S REPORT

In St. Scalabrini's Footsteps

Posted Wednesday, October 19, 2022 9:01 am



BY JOHN WOODS

The Catholic New York office at the New York Catholic Center is a short walk from the Center for Migration Studies of New York on East 60th Street near the Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge. I have not made the short trip, but I hope that may soon change after my conversation last week with Don Kerwin, the center's executive director.

Our talk came on the heels of the Oct. 9 canonization of St. John Baptist Scalabrini by Pope Francis. The 19th century founder of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo was "viewed as the first social scientist of the Catholic Church that studied and sought to understand migration," Kerwin said.

He explained that "facts mattered quite a bit, analysis mattered" to Scalabrini, who was laying the groundwork for the Church's pastoral work with migrants as well as that of his own religious congregation.

Some background about Scalabrini provided in a report on the center's website by Dr. Mary Brown, Ph.D., also is telling. Scalabrini was appointed Bishop of Pacienza in Italy in 1876, when he was just 36 years old. In founding the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo, he organized priests and brothers to be "migrants with the migrants."

His congregation was established to "follow and serve" Italian migrants wherever they went, which spread its mission across the globe. Along with their spiritual work with

migrants, the Scalabrinians, then and now, are also concerned with meeting their material needs, including work, food and shelter and family unity, Kerwin said.

When I suggested Bishop Scalabrini as a trailblazer in proposing his congregation's mission, Kerwin's answer caught me off guard. "The Church's history of migration is integral to its own identity," he said. "Jesus was a migrant. The early Church was a church of migrants. The Church of the United States was a church of migrants."

Bishop Scalabrini was the right man for the times in which he found himself. He was smart enough to work with a trio of talented and faithful women religious leading their own congregations. Their names certainly ring familiar, both for their work in Italy and America: St. Frances Xavier Cabrini of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Blessed Clelia Merloni of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Blessed Maria Assunta Marchetti of the Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo.

"They were friends, they were collaborators. It was a small world in that way," Kerwin said.

The "disruption and upheaval" of St. Scalabrini's time is not unlike what we are experiencing now. "There's a lot we can learn from their responses to migrants in that time that can be applied today, if we think about the multiple crises of people being uprooted around the world," Kerwin explained.

Migrants should not be seen as "problems," but as people "with gifts and challenges, and people to cultivate and honor and respect," Kerwin said. "It's not obvious that would be the vision, but it's the Christian vision."

Cardinal Dolan makes some of these same points in his column on Page 5. For many, these are not easy words to hear. I'm not suggesting the federal government is off the hook, either. The U.S. immigration system is broken and in need of serious repair.

When it comes to welcoming and helping the immigrant, we can learn an awful lot from St. Scalabrini.

"It's his mission that we try to carry out, which was based on a recognition that you absolutely have to understand the people you try to serve and accompany," Kerwin said. "You have to have the best information, reports and access that you can to serve them effectively."

That's just what the Center for Migration Studies of New York does here, and other Scalabrini study centers do across the globe. "We're the source of good help on more than 50 different populations of immigrants in the United States," Kerwin said. "We're who everybody comes to for customized data."

"We take to heart that facts have to be linked to values in Catholic teaching," he said.

