



LATTER-DAY SAINTS IN Italy A LEGACY OF FAITH

By Lia McClanahan

The history of the Church in Italy begins in New Testament times, when the capital of the Roman Empire was home to a group of faithful Christians. The Bible doesn't record who originally took the gospel to Rome, but a branch of the Church had been there for "many years" (Romans 15:23) when the Apostle Paul sent a letter to the Romans in about A.D. 57.

Paul described the Christians in Rome as "full of goodness" (15:14). He was acquainted with some of them, and his epistle contained a long list of beloved Saints to whom he sent greetings (see 16:1–15).

Paul extolled the faith of those Christians and told them that he prayed fervently for them. He longed to see them and hoped God would grant that he might visit them soon (see 1:8–15).

When he did at last go to Rome, it was as a prisoner, but the Church members' anticipation of his arrival was such that some of the brethren traveled 43 miles (69 km) to meet him at the Appii forum. Seeing them, "he thanked God, and took courage" (Acts 28:15).

Later, Paul suffered martyrdom in Rome, where Christians were severely persecuted by Nero and other emperors. Eventually the Church fell into apostasy, but the early Roman Saints left a legacy of faith at the center of the empire, setting the stage for Christianity to spread throughout the world.



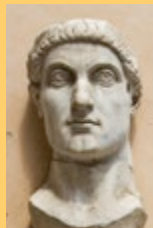
Youth of the Rome Italy East Stake help clean and paint a homeless shelter.

TIME LINE

* 63 B.C.: Roman military leader Pompeius conquers Jerusalem, which becomes part of the Roman Empire

A.D. 45: The Apostle Paul, a Roman citizen, begins first missionary journey throughout Roman Empire

64: Christians blamed for the great fire of Rome and begin to be persecuted by Roman government



◀ 313: Constantine becomes the first Christian Roman emperor and legalizes Christian worship

380: Emperor Theodosius I makes Christianity the official state religion of Roman Empire and paves the way for Christianity to spread throughout the world

A People Hidden Up by the Lord

In 1849, Elder Lorenzo Snow (1814–1901) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was called to establish a mission in Italy. As he was contemplating where to commence, he learned about the Waldensians, a religious community in the Piedmont mountains of northwestern Italy.

The Waldensians had endured extreme persecutions over seven centuries because of their beliefs. Predating the Protestant Reformation by several hundred years, they preached that Christ’s early Church had fallen into apostasy. They separated themselves from the Roman Catholic Church and were declared heretics, driven from cities, tortured, and slaughtered. Rather than renounce their faith, they fled to the upper mountains.¹

“A flood of light seemed to burst upon my mind when I thought upon [the Waldensians],” recorded Elder Snow. In a letter home he wrote, “I believe that the Lord has there hidden up a people amid the Alpine mountains.”²

In other regions of Italy, laws were not favorable for missionary activity. But two years before Elder Snow arrived, the Waldensians in the Piedmont region had been granted religious freedom after centuries of persecution.³ Not only that, but several among them had received remarkable dreams and visions preparing them to receive the missionaries’ message.⁴

Elder Snow, accompanied by two missionary companions, dedicated Italy for the preaching of the gospel on September 19, 1850. Elder Snow recorded, “From that day opportunities began to occur for proclaiming our message.”⁵

Over the next four years, the missionaries’ efforts met with both success and opposition. They published two missionary tracts and an Italian translation of the Book of Mormon. They baptized a number of converts. But by 1854, the work had dwindled—the missionaries were called away to other areas, the staunchest converts were immigrating to Utah, and persecution was growing. In 1862 all active proselyting was discontinued, and the mission was closed in 1867.

* All early dates are approximate.

The Italian Mission was active only 12 years, but during that time, 12 families and seven individuals were converted and immigrated to Utah. The Waldensians who embraced the gospel infused the Church in Utah with strength, and today tens of thousands of members trace their heritage back to the 72 faithful Waldensians who left the home of their forefathers to join the Latter-day Saints in the Rocky Mountains.⁶

Hastening the Work

After the Italian Mission closed, no official missionary work was done in Italy for almost a hundred years.

Twelve offered a prayer rededicating Italy for the preaching of the gospel.

Ten years from the time the mission opened, the number of members in Italy had increased from about 300 to 5,000. That number had doubled by 1982. In recent years, growth has been dramatic. From 2005 to 2010, four new stakes were created, taking the total number of stakes to seven. Today there are nearly 25,000 Latter-day Saints in Italy.

Establishing the Church

Elder Craig A. Cardon of the Seventy is one of thousands of Latter-day Saints who trace their ancestry back

► 1173: Waldo of Lyons, France, starts a movement to return to the original gospel taught by Christ and His Apostles



1215: Waldo and his followers, the Waldensians—some of whom live in Italy—are declared heretics and are persecuted

1843: Giuseppe (Joseph) Toronto baptized in Massachusetts, USA—the first Italian to join the Church

1848: King Carlo Alberto of Piedmont-Sardinia grants religious liberty to the Waldensians



◀ 1850: Elder Lorenzo Snow, Joseph Toronto, and B. H. Stenhouse begin missionary efforts in Italy

1852: An Italian translation of the Book of Mormon published

When the light of the gospel began to shine again in Italy, it was amid World War II, when Latter-day Saint military personnel from the United States were stationed in cities throughout Italy. These members formed groups that met for Sunday meetings, and the groups continued after the war as the members were assigned to military bases in Italy.

Over the next 20 years, the Lord hastened His work. Native Italians began to join the Church after encountering missionaries in nearby countries. Military members' groups in Naples and Verona were organized into branches under the direction of the Swiss Mission. The mission had the Book of Mormon retranslated into Italian and published. The time for missionaries to be sent to Italy was drawing near.

In 1964, Italy was organized as a district of the Swiss Mission, and soon Italian-speaking missionaries were sent to several cities. In 1966, the Italian Mission was organized, 99 years after the original Italian Mission had closed. Elder Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) of the Quorum of the

Elder Ezra Taft Benson (center) meets with missionaries of the newly formed Italian Mission.





to Phillipe Cardon, a Waldensian convert who immigrated to Utah in 1854. Elder Cardon has witnessed the Lord’s work unfolding in the land of his ancestors, first as a missionary in the newly opened Italian Mission in the 1960s and then as president of the Italy Rome Mission in the 1980s.

When Elder Cardon was called to be a mission president in 1983, all but one of the chapels in Rome were rented buildings. In those days new Church buildings were paid for partly by donations from members

the Church. I am convinced that their commitment was a central part of what allowed the Church to continue to grow to the point for a stake to be organized and now a temple constructed in Rome.”⁷

Prior to being called as a General Authority, Elder Cardon returned to Italy in 2005 to be present when the Rome Italy Stake was created. It was a sweet experience. “Here was priesthood strength,” he says, “the keys of the priesthood, the scriptural definition of a place of refuge—a stake—now established in Rome.”

▲ Meet some Italian Saints: The inspiring stories of three modern Italian Latter-day Saints are found in the online version of this article at ensign.lds.org.

1854: Missionary work dwindles as persecution grows and missionaries shift their focus to Switzerland; Waldensian converts begin immigration to Salt Lake City, Utah

1862: All active proselyting in Italy stops

1944: LDS military members’ groups are established in Italy



◀ 1964: The Church publishes a new Italian translation of the Book of Mormon; the Swiss Mission organizes an Italian district

▶ 1966: The Italian Mission organized; Elder Ezra Taft Benson rededicates Italy for the preaching of the gospel



in the area. Because funds were needed to construct several buildings, it looked impossible on paper for the members to be able to contribute so much. After the matter was given prayerful consideration, the Italian members were invited to take the money they would have spent on Christmas that year and donate it to the building fund. Instead of gifts, families would place a brick under their Christmas trees to represent their sacrifice.

“What happened on that occasion was miraculous,” says Elder Cardon. “The contributions exceeded the need. Because of this and the Saints’ continued tithing faithfulness, the Lord poured out a rich spiritual blessing upon the mission and upon the Saints throughout the area as they willingly responded to do all they could to establish



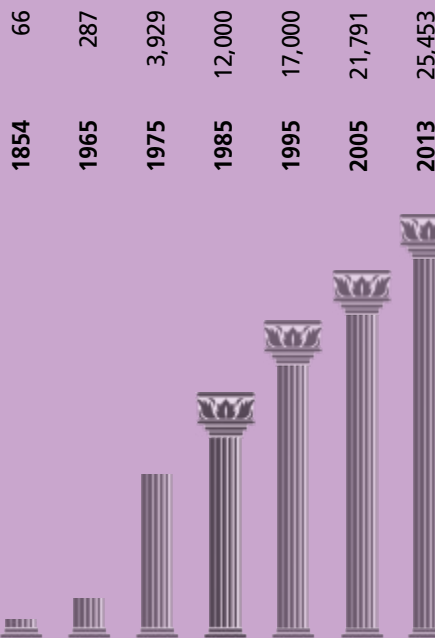
The meetinghouse of the Catania Ward on the coast of Sicily. The Catania Branch was formed in 1967, a year after the Italian Mission was organized.

A Temple in Rome

In the October 2008 general conference, when President Thomas S. Monson announced that a temple would be built in Rome, an audible gasp and whispers of excitement swept across the Conference Center. In Italy, congregations of Saints watching by satellite let out shouts of joy. One sister remembers, “We went to our homes as if on wings, with joy in our hearts.”

Why is the idea of a temple in Rome so meaningful? Besides being aware of the temple’s profound spiritual significance, members have a sense of the city’s historical significance, says Elder Cardon: “Its governance and power

MEMBERS IN ITALY



THE CHURCH IN ITALY TODAY*

Members: 25,453
 Missions: 2
 Stakes: 7
 Wards: 46
 Branches: 52
 Districts: 5
 Temples: 1 (under construction)
 Family history centers: 49

* As of December 2013



1972: President Harold B. Lee visits members in Italy, the first Church President to visit in latter days

1981: The Milan Italy Stake organized, the first stake in Italy

1993: The Church given legal recognition to formally own property and perform government-recognized marriages



◀ 2008: The Rome Italy Temple announced by President Thomas S. Monson

2012: The Church given the highest legal status granted to religions in Italy

during its particular season; its explorers, artists, scientists, and inventors who have contributed so much to the world; and the blessing that the religious power of Rome has been in helping to introduce Christianity throughout the world are all a part of Rome’s history, now graced by a temple of the Lord.” At the 2010 groundbreaking ceremony, President Monson said, “With regard to the temple which will be built upon this site, it means everything to Latter-day Saints.”⁸

For over 40 years, Italian members have traveled to the Bern Switzerland Temple, some journeying two days to get there. Massimo De Feo, former president of the Rome stake and now an Area Seventy, believes the Rome Temple is a sign that the Lord has seen the years of service and sacrifice from the Latter-day Saints and recognizes their great desire for a temple.

When the announcement about the temple was made, Elder De Feo says the excitement was like that felt in a stadium when a team wins at the last second; the joy was

similar to what he imagines we felt in the premortal life when the plan of salvation was announced. The Saints were hugging, smiling, and crying. It was true happiness.

“It is marvelous to serve the Lord in these days,” says Elder De Feo, “so special for Italy, for Rome.” He testifies, “I know that the Lord is greatly blessing this part of His kingdom.”⁹ ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTES

1. See Ronald A. Malan, “Waldensian History: A Brief Sketch,” Waldensian Families Research, www.waldensian.info/History.htm.
2. Lorenzo Snow, *The Italian Mission* (1851), 10–11.
3. Lorenzo Snow, *The Italian Mission*, 10–11.
4. Diane Stokoe, “The Mormon Waldensians” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1985), 26–27. For an example of one such dream, see Elizabeth Maki, “Suddenly the Thought Came to Me: Child’s Vision Prepares Her Family for the Gospel,” June 3, 2013, history.lds.org/article/marie-cardon-italy-conversion.
5. Lorenzo Snow, *The Italian Mission*, 15, 17.
6. Stokoe, “The Mormon Waldensians,” 1–5, 71–84.
7. Craig A. Cardon, from an interview with the author in June 2013.
8. Thomas S. Monson, in Jason Swenson, “Rome Italy Temple Groundbreaking,” *Church News*, Oct. 23, 2010, ldschurchnews.com.
9. “Interview with President Massimo De Feo—Italy—Episode 1,” *Into All the World* (archived radio program), mormonchannel.org.