

The History of the Church in Italy

In 1843, Joseph Toronto (born Giuseppe Taranto) became the first known Italian convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when he was baptized in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1849, Toronto was among the first missionaries to his homeland when he accompanied Church Apostle Lorenzo Snow and others in opening a Church mission. This first mission was short-lived; it was closed in 1867, but a handful of converts remained.

Vincenzo di Francesca, a native of Sicily, exemplified the faithfulness of those early Church members. In 1910, he was a Protestant minister in New York City when he found a book with no title page. He read the book, which sounded like the Bible to him. When he finished reading, he prayed and received confirmation it was a work of God. His heart, he said, palpitated “as if it would talk,” and he felt a “supreme joy that human language finds not words to [describe].”

Di Francesca began using the book in his preaching. When asked by his superiors to destroy it, he refused and was barred from preaching. He later returned to Sicily, where he continued to share the book as often as he could.

In 1930, while studying a dictionary, he found an entry for the word Mormon. Recognizing it as a name in his mysterious book, he searched for more information and soon found the address of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. He wrote a letter to Franklin S. Harris, president of the university, who passed the letter on to Heber J. Grant, president of the Church. Di Francesca began corresponding regularly with various Church leaders in Salt Lake City.

During World War II, cut off from communication with the Church, he continued to preach from the Book of Mormon and other Church materials, many of which he translated and shared with his neighbors. After four decades of waiting, di Francesca was finally baptized on January 18, 1951, in the Mediterranean Sea.

The Church was not reestablished in Italy until the 1950s, when a number of Italians learned of the gospel in other countries and returned home to share the message with friends and family. The first Italian-speaking congregations were formed in Brescia and Palermo.

In 1966, the Italian Mission was reestablished with headquarters in Rome. The Church made steady progress, and between 1970 and 1980, Church membership in Italy increased nearly eightfold. Another milestone was reached in 1981, when the first stake (similar to a diocese) was organized in Italy.

Latter-day Saints consider participation in the sacred ordinances of the temple the pinnacle of their worship. For many years, Italian members traveled on chartered buses to the closest temple near Bern, Switzerland, often at great personal expense.

But members in Italy longed to have a temple in their homeland. During the Church's general conference on October 4, 2008, Thomas S. Monson, president of the Church, announced plans to build a temple in Rome. Thousands of Church members in Italy, watching the satellite broadcast in their local meetinghouses, cheered, exchanged hugs, and rejoiced. "We all shouted," reported Massimo De Feo, who was serving as president of the Rome Italy Stake. He described the reaction as what "you might expect to see in a sports arena during a last-second win."

The announcement of the temple was one of several indications of the increasingly firm foundation of the Church in Italy. In 2012, the Church was granted an *intesa*. This agreement with the Italian government grants the Church protections under the Italian constitution, including freedom to pursue its worldwide mission and recognition of Church leaders as clergy.

Currently, there are over 25,000 members of the Church in Italy in 101 congregations.