Discrimination takes on many shapes and sizes. Sorting out “types” of anti-Italian discrimination and stereotypes is no simple matter. Even with a particular focus on the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, as in this essay, it is difficult to ignore scientific racism, struggles within the U.S. labor movement, and demeaning images in popular culture. For the sake of clarity, however, I will limit my focus to two broad issues central to anti-Italian discrimination in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States: (1) discrimination within the American Catholic community resulting from the unification of Italy; and (2) anti-Italian discrimination within the American Catholic community resulting from particular aspects of the “religiosity” or devotional “style” of Italians.

The Risorgimento and the Roman Question

The unification of Italy, which is to say the Risorgimento movement of 1848–1870, inspired aggressive condemnations from Pope Pius IX (1846–1878), who ruled the Papal States of central Italy. Even before the movement for Italian unification, the papacy had condemned the content of liberal ideology central to the Enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, religious liberty, separation of church and state—all of these “modern” notions earned papal censure before Pius’s ascension to the papal throne. Italian nationalists were divided between relatively conservative liberal monarchists, many of whom were thoughtful and practicing Catholics, and republican antiericals. Both factions eventually accepted that the Papal States were a “medieval” anachronism legitimated through outdated absolutist conceptions of sovereignty. Ultimately, the Kingdom of Sardinia under the House of Savoy conquered the Papal States, which were annexed into the new Kingdom of Italy, proclaimed...
in 1861. In 1870, on September 20, King Vittorio Emanuele II’s army conquered papal Rome itself and soon thereafter the capital of the kingdom was transferred from Florence to Rome.

Pius, humiliated and infuriated, excommunicated all those involved in the unification of Italy. He refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new state, forbid Catholics to run for national office and vote in national elections, and called upon European powers to restore him to his kingship over the lost Papal States. Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) shared the same goal. He bargained unsuccessfully with Germany, Austria, and France to restore the papacy’s lands in central Italy. In fact, every pope from 1861 to 1929 refused to recognize the Italian kingdom and called themselves “prisoners of the Vatican,” suggesting that their spiritual independence, necessary to run a world church, had been compromised by their loss of temporal power.

This “Roman Question” was central to papal and Italian diplomacy from 1861 to 1929, when the Kingdom of Italy (under fascism) and the papacy agreed to the Lateran Treaties, which created the Vatican City and won Italy formal recognition from the Vatican. But before 1929, succeeding popes made every effort to win back their lost temporal dominions. Their strategy had several parts. First, they called upon European powers to destabilize Italy (even if it meant a republican revolution) and to restore the pope’s temporal power. Second, the popes called upon Catholics in all states to pressure their governments to support the pope’s bid for temporal sovereignty. Third, the popes struggled to gain a hearing at international conferences (such as the Peace Conference at Versailles after World War I) in order to try to convince powers other than Italy to take up the “Roman Question.” At such moments, the Vatican hoped, foreign states would have to accommodate their outspoken Catholic populations calling for the pope’s temporal power. Ultimately, none of these strategies worked, but the effort to employ them is germane to our concerns.

The second strategy in particular is central to the rise of anti-Italian discrimination in the U.S. Catholic Church. The papacy and the Church underwent a profound transformation in the nineteenth century, generally called the “Catholic revival.” The papal concern for the temporal power deeply shaped this revival that revolutionized church doctrine and practice. Because the Vatican contended that the modern liberal world was pagan and had fallen to satanic influence, the papacy took unprecedented steps to promote Marian devotions, pilgrimages, public expressions of belief in the supernatural, devotions to saints, and Catholic educational and welfare institutions (and in some instances political parties). The creation of a veritable subculture of Catholic life would protect Catholics from the dangers of modern liberal societies, and cultivate a profound and intense loyalty to the institutions of the Church and their Holy Father, the prisoner of the Vatican, the pope. The theological expression of this altogether new and modern (or rather antimodern) cult to the papacy was the proclamation of papal infallibility in 1870.

Within this worldview, Italian statesmen and loyal subjects of the Italian king were prison wardens, using Italian nationalism as a pretext to crucify the sacred pontiff on a Calvary called the Vatican. Dramatic public displays and rituals to remind Catholics throughout the world about the evil events of the Risorgimento became institutionalized, and over a generation anti-Risorgimento attitudes