It may come as a surprise to learn that the inhabitants of the parish of San Lorenzo in Damaso, in the center of Rome, at the end of the seventeenth century, included a certain Friedrich Waldmann, described by the local priest in his census of the neighborhood as a “German heretic painter of 34 years of age” (35). Waldmann had lived in the area for several years and though he had never expressed any interest in becoming a Catholic, he was tolerated by his neighbors because he “never created any cause for scandal and minds his own business.” He was not the only one: at the same time, in other parts of the city, priests reported the presence of two German gentlemen living with their servants in the house of a tailor and two young Englishmen and their Scottish traveling companion, all of them “Lutherans.”

The subject of Irene Fosi’s _Convertire lo straniero_ are these _oltramontani_, who came from Northern Europe to Rome over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the basis of a vast array of archival sources and with an extraordinary sensibility for the nuances of the individual stories she has collected, Fosi illustrates how religious and secular authorities in a city that had come to symbolize Catholic intolerance and its instruments – the Inquisition, the Jesuit order, and the Index of Prohibited Books – gradually abandoned their intent to prosecute and condemn members of the Reformed churches without distinction in favor of a more subtle strategy that combined the repressive instincts of the Holy Office with a more irenic approach based on persuasion and relative openness. By the end of the seventeenth century, in bureaucratic language, the traditional “heretics” had been replaced with the more politically correct “non-Catholic Christian gentlemen.”

Beyond the major changes in European politics and intellectual life that altered the terms of the confessional struggle between Rome and the Protestant churches, Fosi sees the reasons for this shift as a question of numbers. Between the jubilee of 1600, a massive celebration and symbolic representation of papal authority and pardon, and the end of the century, the number of travelers – pilgrims, aristocrats in flight from their families, and travelers on the Grand Tour – increased so rapidly and continuously that authorities struggled to find ways to keep up with them. At times, even distinguishing between Protestants and Catholics became a major problem, as the officials of the criminal court who attempted to identify the body of a young Dutchman murdered at the edge of the city in 1650 found. Though they discovered a book of psalms translated into the vernacular on the cadaver, which suggested his Protestant identity, upon searching his apartment they found a rosary and an image of Saint Anthony of Padua. In order to resolve this embarrassing mystery, inquisitors handed the body over to the head of the Flemish community in Rome for a rapid – and secret – burial.

Once it had individuated the Protestants in its midst, the church used an array of policies and institutions to persuade them to convert. Prelates with the necessary linguistic skills were identified and placed in strategic positions, tours of the city that highlighted its cultural treasures were organized for foreigners, and they were often introduced to prestigious members of the clergy, such as the papal librarian Lucas Holstenius, himself a convert. They were even protected from thieves and con artists, as well as from unscrupulous innkeepers.

At the same time, an equally complex system of relations was put in place to govern the lives of those who had already converted and to provide a stable and dignified social position for men and women who had often abandoned wealth and titles in their countries of origin to face the prospect of poverty and social marginalization as Catholics. The clergy, highly sensitive to the importance of converts as symbols of Christian redemption, placed an emphasis on assuring their status, both as a guard against backsliding and as a defense against the mockery of their religious adversaries. Illustrious converts, such as Cardinal Friedrich von Hesse, maintained networks both in Italy and abroad that allowed them to find a range of positions, in court, religious orders, and the military, for others who faced minimal prospects in a society where they often lacked knowledge of the language and customs. The capacities of the Roman curia to mediate between members of this vulnerable category and representatives of the clergy, aristocracy, and states throughout Europe were seemingly endless, and the often improbable biographies of converts who arrived in Rome with few prospects are illustrated in many sections of the book.

Based on a wealth of documentation gathered over decades of work in the Roman archives, _Convertire lo straniero_ combines the virtues of microhistory with a broad analysis of the shifting perspectives within the Roman curia. Moving beyond the dominant historical conception of Italy as a land under the sway of clerical intolerance, Fosi provides a compelling and convincing portrait of a cosmopolitan city where both Catholic clergy and their Protestant adversaries were motivated by a mixture of otherworldly religious concerns and all-too-human passions and interests. Together with Benjamin Kaplan’s recent _Divided by Faith_ (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), it provides a model for understanding how religious differences were lived in practice in an age when in most parts of Europe official intolerance was the rule.