Discussion Questions for Orsi, *Madonna of 115th Street*, Chapters 1-5 (for Wed Sept 25)

Acknowledgements

How, when and why did Orsi decide to study this topic?

Intro: Popular Religion and Italian Harlem

What is the scope of this study in time, place, and subject matter?  
What are Orsi’s central assumptions?

What does he mean by “popular religion”? By “religion”?

In order to study Italian Americans’ devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street, what else does Orsi bring into the orbit of his analysis?

In what ways does Orsi hope his study serves as a methodological model?

How would he answer the “so what?” question about his work? What are the larger implications of looking at one immigrant community’s religious devotion so closely?

What kinds of sources did Orsi use in his research?

1. The Days and Nights of the Festa

Orsi provides a thick ethnographic description of a *festa*, year unspecified (July 16). What elements of his description stand out to you?

What questions does the *festa* raise for Orsi? What questions does it raise for you?

2. Italian Harlem – a “theater of extremes” (48)

Where does Orsi begin his story of the neighborhood of East Harlem?

In what ways was Italian immigration near the turn of the 20th century a “family strategy”?

Orsi enumerates several complexities and ambiguities of migration to Italian Harlem, such as…?

What were conditions like in the neighborhood? In the homes? On the streets?

Don’t overlook the photographs in this chapter – when / where were they taken and what do they show us about Italian life in East Harlem in the early 20th century?

How does Orsi navigate peoples’ affection and nostalgia for the lost neighborhood?

3. The Origins of the Devotion to Mount Carmel in Italian Harlem

Who was the Madonna of 115th Street and how did she come to America?

How did the Italian *festa* of 115th Street begin?

What conflicts arose with the Irish-dominated Catholic leadership in New York?

Orsi says there were really three interlocking festas (p. 59) – how so?

What is the significance of the Madonna’s coronation in 1904?

Orsi mentions the “cult” of Marianism (i.e. the worship of Virgin Mary). “Cult” can be a loaded term – what does he mean by it?

How did the Italians expand public devotion of the Madonna in the 1920s?

What evidence is there that people incorporated the Madonna into their personal religious lives?

What other activities did the parish organize?

How did the Madonna “lose her power in the postwar world”?

4. The Domus-Centered Society

Define *domus*.

In the prior chapter, Orsi explored public devotion. Now he takes the story into people’s homes, the center of their lives and culture. How does the Madonna show up there, too?

What were the values of the Italian *domus*? In what aspects of political and personal life were those values expressed?

Orsi addresses the issue of the Italian mafia: a myth?

5. Conflicts in the Domus

Why did the *domus* seem threatened in American society?

In your view, and based on Orsi’s evidence, were Italians responding to the challenges of emigration they would have encountered in any other country, or was there something specific to the American (or NYC) immigrant experience?

What kinds of conflicts (inner, family dynamics, gender, power) raged in Italian Harlem?

In some ways, Italian Harlem was profoundly a patriarchal society, yet Orsi calls it a “private matriarchy” (p. 131). Why?