Identity was in any case certainly extremely malleable during the early modern period, and the extent to which identity could be misinterpreted, readjusted or feigned at the Ospizio confirms what one would expect. Sometimes the catechists were uncertain about the nationality of the person whom they were interviewing as is attested by the number of times a person’s nationality is listed first as “Inglese,” crossed out and then altered to “Hibernese.” Many pretended to be heretics simply to gain the advantage of a safe place to sleep, good food, and the prospect of a “sistemazione” in Rome. Of the forty-four guests who are listed as feigning heresy, we find the typical description as “fu scoperto Cattolico” (was discovered Catholic). Most of these left abruptly upon being found out, with a few, like the Frenchwoman Madalena Renaud, described as having “fled at night out the window.” Among these was the Irishman Giovanni Fielding who entered in 1682. His is a case of both changed and feigned identity. At first, he gave his nationality as English and his home as Minehead, but then he said that he was originally Irish from Cork. In the end he was found to have “pretended [heresy]”—“being converted 5 years earlier by a Cappuchin.” Three weeks into his stay, he fled northwest of Rome. With him went Nicolas Persevall who claimed to have been a silk weaver from Tours, but who may also have been Irish. It was not only the Irish who pretended to be heretics. This example of a Scotsman who feigned heresy helps explain why some risked being discovered as frauds: “Giorgio Ogilvy, Scots, Edinburgh, shoemaker, 23, tall, light haired, arrived April 13, Confirmation June 16, Left June 20. He pretended to be Dutch and a heretic, and was an apprentice in Rome; he lied in order to be able to enter the College of Propaganda Fide to pursue his studies.” Clearly there were advantages to be gained from conversion, but those who were already Catholics yet pretended to be heretics sometimes suffered severe consequences when found out. The most egregious example of feigned identity was that of Giovanni Harmann of Riga, who claimed to be born Jewish and then a convert to the Lutheran Church but was actually found out to have been baptized as a Catholic several times in several places, for which he was condemned to the galleys. A guest’s leaving the hospice without converting was tolerated, and even an occasional lapse into feigned identity was overlooked, but repeated deceit, when found out, appears to have been severely punished.

The majority of Irish, like the general population at the Ospizio, were single men, with some, as we have seen, becoming soldiers or priests. Some guests, however, came to Rome to convert in order to marry, and in a small number of cases their wives came with them. Only one Irish woman, Caterina Barett, age 40, who entered in 1693, is listed as “wife.” Out of a total of 181 Irish guests, only twelve were women. And out of these twelve, all but one—Barbera Murphy, age 27—were over the age of 33, with the other eleven ranging in age from 33 to 50. Among the English women, there was the unusual case of the daughter of Tomaso of Heath in England—Maria Agustina Tunquaker, a 72 year old Quaker, baptized in Spain, who was then admitted to the Ospizio to receive confirmation, but left the same day after lunch. The composition of the Ospizio follows that of Rome as a whole in the early modern period with the vast majority of inhabitants being male.

1 ASV, Ospizio dei Convertendi 7, fol. 80r.
2 ASV, Ospizio dei Convertendi 11, fol. 2v.
3 ASV, Ospizio dei Convertendi 5, fol. 49v.
4 ASV, Ospizio dei Convertendi 7, year 1734, no. 1633.
5 ASV, Ospizio dei Convertendi, 18, entered 3 January 1714.