

Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini



**Presentation on the Lives of the Saints
Northern Deanery Venice Diocesan
Council of Catholic Women
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St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (1850-1917)



Childhood Home



Family

Frances Cabrini was born in Sant'Angelo Lodigiano in the province of Lombardy, northern Italy, two months prematurely, on July 15, 1850. It is said that a small flock of white doves descend on the house and yard at her birth. Her father, Agostino, was a farmer and her mother, Stella, stayed at home with the children. Frances was the tenth of eleven brothers and sisters, only four of whom survived beyond adolescence.

Her sister Rosa, a private school teacher, who was 15 years her senior had influence on Frances early years. Rosa feared that Frances might become vain with her blonde curly hair, so she brushed, combed and oiled it to plainness. Small and weak as a child, these characteristics influenced Frances entire life.

Her Spirituality

Her parents' strong faith was transmitted to her by word and example. Her father would read to the family from the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith, telling stories of the great missionaries. The stories of the missions in China made a particularly strong impression on Frances and at an early age, she desired to travel there as a missionary.

Frances at age 10

While playing on the river bank near her Uncle's home, Frances would set paper boats peopled with dolls or violets and imagine that she was sending missionaries to distant places. Her massive flotillas of warriors for God, were heading for China, where she dreamed of going. She did not realize that although she would bring Christ's love to many areas of the world, China was not to be her destination.

At the time of her youth, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was at its peak and provided a spiritual foundation to the work of the missions.

When she was old enough she applied for, but was refused, admission to several religious orders because of her frail health.



In 1868, Frances received her teacher's diploma and returned to Sant'Angelo where she taught in the private school established by her sister, Rosa, and dedicated herself to works of charity and to serving the poor. In 1871, at the request of her pastor, when a substitute teacher was needed immediately, she moved to the nearby village of Vidardo to teach in the public school.

A Crucial Move

In 1874, the diocesan authorities asked Frances to move to Codogno, a larger town further away from home to take over the direction of the House of Providence, a girls' orphanage, being unsuccessfully administered by Antonia Tondini and Maria Calza, in order to organize it with the structure and spirit of a religious institute. In complying with this request, Frances renounced forever the position of public school teacher and entered on a path of consecration to God. Five young women who were teaching at the House of Providence wanted to become religious sisters. She and the five women began their novitiate with Frances Cabrini as their novice mistress.

At the age of 27, in 1877, when she and her companions made their profession of religious vows, Frances added Xavier to her name, in tribute to the Jesuit, Francis Xavier, who evangelized the Orient. The bishop named her superior of the community. In 1880, due to many difficulties, the diocesan authorities recognized that the House of Providence could not be formed into a religious community.

Mother Cabrini, Foundress at Age 30



Founding of the Institute

At this same time, Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, as she was now known, received a mandate from the bishop to found a new religious institute with the help and support of the young women who had professed their vows with her. In a short time, she found an ancient Franciscan convent in Codogno. This is where the Institute of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was founded on November 14, 1880.

It was established as a diocesan congregation in 1881, with a simple Rule written by Mother Cabrini, and approved by the bishop. There were some objections to the term missionaries, which implied a mission abroad. The bishop thought primarily of a service within the diocese, or at most, in the Province of Lombardy. However, Mother Cabrini, the 30 year old foundress, had no intention of restricting the congregation to the boundaries of Lombardy.

Expanding to Rome

She set out for Rome in September, 1887. Her goals were to have a universal missionary Institute with a central house in Rome and pontifical approval of the young Institute. Since the ecclesiastical authorities moved at a slow pace and with caution, it was surprising that on March 12, 1888, the Institute was granted permission to open two missions in the Eternal City. While there, she met the bishop of Piacenza, Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, who had just founded the Missionary Institute of St. Charles to minister to Italians abroad.

Mother Cabrini among the immigrants



The Italian Immigrants in U.S.A.

Italian immigrants faced many hardships in the United States. They worked at the most menial labor and experienced discrimination. Uprooted, without pastoral care, they were as strangers in their own church and the systematic targets of Protestant proselytism. Despite all, the great majority of Italians maintained an eagerness to return again to their Catholic faith and devotions. Seeking the help of religious women, Bishop Scalabrini asked Mother Cabrini to go to New York to work with the Italian immigrants. She hesitated because she planned to go to the Orient to evangelize.

Scalabrini was persistent and showed her a letter from Archbishop Corrigan of New York, formally inviting the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart to establish a house there.

“Not to the East, but to the West.”

Mother Cabrini sought an audience with Pope Leo XIII and posed her missionary dilemma to him; his response was: “Not to the East, but to the West.” Exchanging her dreams of going to China for the reality of going to New York, she embarked with her Missionary Sisters almost immediately for New York.

Beginnings in America

In a new world, another culture, without contacts, not knowing the language, Mother Cabrini set out to establish her mission. She arrived in New York on March 31, 1889 with 6 Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Upon arrival, she learned that Archbishop Corrigan did not expect her so soon and their first night was spent in a dingy tenement in the heart of the Italian ghetto. They could not sleep and stayed awake, tired, yet peacefully engaged in prayer. Afterwards, the Sisters of Charity gave them hospitality and guided their first steps through the city.

*Mother Cabrini with Missionary Sisters, June 1889
New York (handing a book to a sister)*



Archbishop Corrigan, who objected to the house prepared by the Countess di Cesnola for the sisters, greeted them with “I see no other solution, Mother, than that you and the sisters return to Rome.”

Mother responded with “No, Your Grace, that is impossible. I have come here with the permission of the Holy See and here I will remain.” She later went back to Archbishop Corrigan and gained

his support and friendship. He approved the house in which the Countess di Cesnola wanted the new missionaries to live. On Palm Sunday of 1890, an orphanage for Italian children was inaugurated on the property, part of which the missionaries occupied as a convent.

Original Orphanage, West Park, New York



At the request of Archbishop Corrigan, Cabrini founded a larger orphanage in West Park, New York, on the banks of the Hudson River. It was an ideal, healthful site for the orphans and for the North American novitiate which opened in 1891. The land was formerly owned by the Jesuits, who sold it at a very low price, because it lacked sufficient water. However, to the surprise of the Jesuits, the ever resourceful Cabrini soon discovered an

underground spring on the property to that provided ample water even to this day.

In 1892, at Mother Cabrini’s direction, her Missionary Sisters traveled to New Orleans and quickly established a school and an orphanage in “Little Palermo” an Italian enclave of the French Quarter.

Back in New York, the Italian immigrants needed hospitals. Care of the sick, until this time, was not one of the ministries of the Institute nor was it an inclination of Mother Cabrini to do this type of work.

Men's Ward, Columbus Hospital, New York 1905



Archbishop Corrigan begged Mother Cabrini to take on hospital work. However, it wasn't until Cabrini had a dream where she saw the Blessed Virgin Mary tending to a hospital patient, that she considered working in the healthcare field. In the dream, Cabrini asked the Virgin Mary what she was doing; the

Blessed Virgin Mary responded, "I am doing the work you refuse to do." Mother Cabrini moved quickly to establish a hospital for the Italian sick poor in New York City. New to this work, the sisters turned out to be excellent healthcare providers and administrators. Mother Cabrini later went on to establish other hospitals in Chicago and Seattle.

Beyond the American shores

The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus had been in America only two years. They were hardly well established and yet, Mother Cabrini sought to extend their missions to Latin America. Her objective was Nicaragua and in ensuing years, Argentina, where she opened a school, Colegio Santa Rosa, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Buenos Aires.

She returned to Europe, and in 1898, she established a students' residence in Paris and spent time exploring London with the prospect of founding a mission there. In 1899, she initiated a school in Madrid.

Expanding Horizons in the United States

At the turn of the 20th century, Mother Cabrini traveled to Chicago where there was a large Italian colony and established a hospital and parish school. She went about raising funds for the hospital, but the money came in slowly. In April 1904, she came upon the North Shore Hotel that fronted Lincoln Park, with the lake beyond. It was a grey stone building, six stories high, and had been one of the most fashionable hotels, until it was ruined by bad management. It was a bargain at \$160,000. But though Mother Cabrini only had one thousand dollars to start, she put her trust in the Sacred Heart of Jesus – He would not fail her!

However there was going to be a lot of sweat, blood, and tears in order to finish the hospital. First of all, the owners tried to cheat the Missionary Sisters out of a portion of

the land occupied by the hotel. And later, the contractor suggested so many improvements on the hotel, when only a few small changes would have sufficed, that the building was almost completely gutted. Francesca had been away from the scene for a while, but when she saw what the contractors had done, she exclaimed, *“You will of course be paid what is just; you will not be paid one penny more! I’m going to take this in hand myself!”* One of them asked her what she meant, and she replied, *“I mean that you are all fired! I’m in charge from now on!”* Francesca did supervise the work and eight months later on April 26, 1905, the Chicago Hospital was formally opened. As in the case of New York, Francesca decided to call this hospital, the Columbus Hospital, again in order to please the Italians;

From Chicago, she traveled to Scranton, Pennsylvania, where the Italian immigrants asked for schools. From Scranton, she proceeded to Newark, New Jersey, where she accepted the task of establishing and running a parish school there.



Sacred Heart Villa, Dobbs Ferry, New York 1914

She looked for solutions which would afford her the means to subsidize free schools. In Dobbs Ferry, New York, on the Hudson River, she founded Sacred Heart Villa a school for daughters of now well-to-do Italian families who paid tuition, monies which in turn were utilized to fund the free schools.

Cabrini headed to the Rocky Mountains of Colorado where a needy colony of Italian immigrants worked mostly in the mines under very harsh conditions. Her Sisters staffed a parish school and later, an orphanage.



Children of Sacred Heart Orphanage, Seattle, WA 1905

In 1903, Mother Cabrini traveled seven days by train from Chicago to Seattle where she founded a school and an orphanage for Italian

immigrants. Early in 1913, she went to Seattle to buy another orphanage. As she had done many times in the past, she took a map of Seattle and studied it closely, and then put her finger upon a spot. At this spot, there was a beautiful mansion, and when Francesca went to look at the spot two days later, she providentially hitch hiked for a ride with the very lady whose husband owned the place! And later, an anonymous benefactor came forward with the \$100,000 needed to buy the place.

She dreamed of establishing missions in Alaska and had she lived longer, this may have come to pass. Her dream of going to China persisted throughout her life. Her works on the western coast of the United States brought her closer to the Far East.

She extended her educational and childcare missions to California where there were settlements of Italian as well as Mexican immigrants. By September 1905, a school and an orphanage had been opened. Later, a preventorium for tubercular children, would be started in the Santa Monica Mountains north of the city.

While in Seattle in 1909, Frances Cabrini fulfilled a long-desired plan and became a citizen of the United States of America. The ensuing years were times of constant movement: New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Louisiana, Colorado, California, Washington State, Central and South America and Europe.

Mother Cabrini's Naturalization Papers 1917



It was in the spring of 1917 that Mother Cabrini undertook her last mission. Her health was compromised. In spite of this, she traveled to Chicago where the now two hospitals there needed her presence. On December 22 of that year, Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini died in her private room at Columbus Hospital as she was preparing Christmas candy for the local children. She was 67 years of age.

Her Legacy

For twenty-eight years of her missionary life, Mother Cabrini traveled regularly across the Atlantic Ocean. A prolific writer, it was during her second voyage, that she began the custom of writing letters to her sisters in the form of a travel diary. These letters are preserved today as valuable biographical documentation.

In conformity with the Heart of Jesus, the Institute she founded has responded compassionately and efficiently to the needs of all, immigrants, as well as the native-born worldwide. Education, pastoral ministry, and religious instruction and outreach to those in need spiritually and materially flourishes on six continents. Responses to the “signs of the times,” to needs as they presented themselves continue.

When Mother Cabrini died December 22, 1917, at the age of 67, 67 missions of the Institute had been established, ministries of healing, teaching, caring, giving and reaching out, in cities of the United States, Italy, France, England, Spain, Brazil, Argentina, and Nicaragua.

In 1946 she became the first naturalized American citizen to be canonized. In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared Mother Frances Cabrini the Universal Patron of Immigrants.

Resources for information and photos used with permission:

Web Page for the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus
<http://www.motherscbrini.org/index.asp>

Web Page: article by *By Mr. Roger Zielke*
http://sspx.ca/Communicantes/Mar2006/St_Frances_Xavier_Cabrini.htm

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St. Frances Xavier Cabrini



God our Father,
you called Frances Xavier Cabrini from Italy
to serve the immigrants of America.
By her example teach us concern for the stranger,
the sick, and the frustrated.
By her prayers help us to see Christ
in all the men and women we meet.
Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.