



Mother Cabrini Visits ICF Convention

Her Life

By Eric Bravo

(2010)

This past Labor Day weekend 2010, MMX to Romans – At the Gateway Sheraton near Los Angeles International Airport, the Italian Catholic Federation (ICF) celebrated their annual National Convention. It was a nice gathering of American Catholics of Italian decent of all ages from all over California, Nevada, Arizona and Chicago.

On Friday evening, a presentation by Sister Regina, a sister from the Order of Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (MSC), introduced me to a remarkable woman whom I'd never heard of before. Sister Regina portrayed a heart wrenching, unrehearsed rendition of Saint Francesca Xavier Cabrini (July 15, 1850 – December 22, 1917) *in her own words*, as if channeling the Saint in a dramatic portrayal that sought to unify in splendor.

We California Catholics of Italian decent had enjoyed a mass that Friday morning celebrated by Father Charles Fanelli who sermonized about tolerance. Friday evening began and ended with much revelry and food and wine and assorted cocktails served up by petitioning delegates up for election. It was a time for much formal and informal camaraderie and new friendships and old re-acquaintances.

Also called Mother Cabrini – the Saint, whose life I was first introduced that Saturday morning assembly – Francesca Cabrini was the first American citizen to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. I borrow largely from *Wikipedia* as I tell of her life. I believe in the salute of greatness to Individuals, for the simple reason that, like Jesus – there are some individuals that WE, as a people, and as individuals, should look to for guidance and example. Here is a little bit about Saint Cabrini's long life.

Born in Sant'Angelo Lodigiano, Lombardy, Italy – Francesca Cabrini was born the 10<sup>th</sup> of 11 children. Her parents, Agostino Cabrini and Stella Oldini were rich cherry tree farmers. Sadly only four of eleven children survived beyond adolescence. Small and

weak as a child, born two months premature, Francesca Cabrini remained in delicate health throughout her 67 years.

Cabrini took her first religious vows in 1877 at age 27 and added Xavier to her name to honor the Jesuit saint, Francis Xavier. Shortly thereafter, Sister Cabrini became the Mother Superior of the House of Providence orphanage in Codogno, Italy, where she taught.

In 1880, the orphanage closed. Cabrini and 6 other sisters, who took religious vows along with her, founded the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (MSC) on November 14th. Mother Cabrini composed the rules and constitution of the order, and continued as its Superior-General until her death. The Order established seven homes and a free school and nursery during its first 5 years. Her successful good works brought Mother Cabrini to the attention of Giovanni Scalabrini, then bishop of Piacenza; and also, of Pope Leo XIII.

Pope Leo XIII sent Mother Cabrini to New York City on March 31, 1889 to help the Italian Immigrants there; *Not to the East but to the West*. Cabrini, at this time, wanted to travel to China, but Pope Leo wanted Cabrini to do work for Italians living in America. Since one of Cabrini's vows was Obedience, she had no choice. As Sister Regina told HER story, it was if the nun (Sister Regina) was channeling Mother Cabrini, using only the first person in her discourse and being very convincing in her soliloquy. Mother Cabrini really wanted to do missionary work in China. We as audience members could feel that. THEATER had never been so truthful and revealing as we audience members listened to Sister Regina, a.k.a. Mother Cabrini, tell us HER life story.

When Mother Cabrini first arrived in New York City, she obtained the permission of then Archbishop Michael Corrigan to found an orphanage, which came to be called, The Saint Cabrini House. This orphanage is still fully operational and is located in West Park, Ulster County, New York.

Saint Cabrini Home was just the first of 67 institutions that Mother Cabrini would found in New York, Chicago, Des Moines, Seattle, New Orleans, Denver, Los Angeles, Philadelphia; Mother Cabrini rested little in the decades following 1899, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century unfurled before the human race. As the century began, Mother Cabrini was busy organizing and starting orphanages all over America and in countries throughout South America and Europe, as well.

Long after her death, the Missionary Sisters would achieve Mother Cabrini's goal of being a missionary to China. After much social and religious upheaval and only a short time, the sisters left China. Chairman Mao took over China in 1949. After that time, any foreign thought had been limited in China. For that, Cabrini's movement had little effect in China. Still, her sisters followed her ideal of trying to help the entire world.

Chicago, rather than China, would become a major center of Mother Cabrini's work. In 1899, Cabrini opened the Chicago's first Italian immigrant school. Cabrini also transformed a former hotel into Columbus Hospital in 1905. In 1911, Cabrini opened Columbus Extension Hospital (later renamed Saint Cabrini Hospital) in the heart of Chicago's Italian neighborhood in the Near West Side. Although both hospitals eventually closed near the end of the 20th century, their founder's name lives on via Chicago's *Cabrini* Street, and via Chicago's *Cabrini*-Green housing project, which has since been mostly torn down, was named after her, due to her work with Italian immigrants in the location. It has since become a haven for underprivileged and poor people and the MSC sisters still working there.

Mother Cabrini was beatified on November 13, 1938, and canonized on July 7, 1946, by Pope Pius XII.

St. Frances Xavier Cabrini is the Patron Saint of Immigrants. Most Americans are immigrants, or children of immigrants, so Cabrini's spirit looks after millions of people.

Cabrini's beatification miracle involved the restoration of sight to a child who had been blinded by excess silver nitrate in its eyes. Her canonization miracle involved the healing of a terminally ill nun.

The date fixed at the universal level for Mother Cabrini's Feast Day is November 13.

Cabrini College, in Radnor, Pennsylvania, also bears her name, as does Cabrini High School in New Orleans, and Cabrini Medical Center and Mother Cabrini High School in Manhattan, New York City.

The Cabrini Mission Foundation is an organization committed to advancing St. Frances Xavier Cabrini's mission and legacy of healing, teaching, and caring around the world.

Mother Cabrini died of complications from dysentery at age 67 in Columbus Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, on December 22, 1917. By that time, she had founded 67 missionary institutions to serve the sick and poor and train additional nuns to carry on the work. Her body was originally interred at Saint Cabrini Home, an orphanage she founded in West Park, Ulster County, New York,

In 1931, her body was exhumed and is now enshrined under glass in the altar at St. Frances Cabrini Shrine, part of Mother Cabrini High School, at 701 Fort Washington Avenue, in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan. The street to the west of the shrine was renamed Cabrini Boulevard in her honor.

By the time of her death in 1917, Mother Cabrini had established 67 schools, hospitals and orphanages throughout the U.S., South America and Europe, and her order numbered in the thousands.

Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini came to San Fernando Valley, California in the late 1800s. In 1880, she founded the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, which then built the Villa Cabrini Academy.

In 1917 Mother Cabrini built a small chapel in honor of the Blessed Mother above Villa Cabrini Academy, atop Mount Raphael, for the residents of the San Fernando Valley. The Chapel was said to protect their crops and shelter the residents from the ravages of fire. During the war, it also served as a beacon to pilots. Mother Cabrini made daily meditation visits to the chapel while overseeing a new academy for girls.

For decades, the chapel attracted thousands of pilgrims who made the steep climb every December to honor St. Cabrini and prayed to the woman who was consumed with the love of God and worked tirelessly "for the greater glory of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus," the motto she chose for the Missionary Sisters.

In 1970, the land on which the chapel was built was sold to a developer. However, members of the Italian Catholic Federation in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles raised money to rescue the chapel and moved it down the mountain in 1973 to St. Francis Xavier Church in Burbank where they later restored it with stained glass windows, a mosaic of St. Cabrini, new tile, and more. Fr. William C. O'Connor, St. Francis Xavier Church pastor and San Fernando Valley District ICF Chaplain at the time, headed the renovation committee. Many hours of planning went into the project and many donations were made in the form of construction-related labor and historical artifacts for the collection. A formal dedication ceremony of the restored chapel was held on the grounds of St. Francis Xavier Church on Sunday, September 14, 1975.

A library sponsored by the ICF was built under the direction of ICF Branch 102 member Orlando T. Granata in 1993. Mr. Granata also supervised the moving of the chapel to its new location on the St. Francis Xavier Cabrini Church property. The library contains historical and contemporary works about the immigrant saint, and adjoins the Chapel.

Today, the Chapel and Library collectively form a Shrine in St. Frances Cabrini's honor. The Mother Cabrini Shrine is located behind St. Frances Xavier Church in Burbank, CA.

In keeping with tradition, an ICF Pilgrimage to the Mother Cabrini Shrine is still held on the first Sunday in December of each year and begins at St. Francis Xavier Church. All ICF branches, parishioners and affiliated Saint Francis Mother Cabrini Groups in the Southern California area are encouraged to join the Pilgrimage. Those who have difficulty walking are welcome to join in the Pilgrimage by using automobiles to drive across the church grounds to the location of the Shrine.

In addition to the annual December Pilgrimage, the Mother Cabrini Shrine is open

between 9:00am - 1:00pm every 2nd Sunday of February, April, June, September, and November, or by special appointment.

Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini is a co-patron saint of the Italian Catholic Federation, and for this reason, I became first introduced to this remarkable woman. Respect and admiration for Mother Cabrini was my sole motivation for writing this piece – most of which had already been written, but others moved by her life and her work.

For more information about visiting the Mother Cabrini Shrine,  
please contact Carmelo Sabatella: Phone: 1-626-372-7812  
Email: [cas1810@aol.com](mailto:cas1810@aol.com)