

Mother Cabrini, the Saint of Italians in America

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Frances Xavier Cabrini, born in the province of Lodi in Lombardy, eventually came to the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century. It was due to total serendipity that she became the saint for Italian immigrants in this country.

It is also a sweet paradox that she, from the north, arrived during the great wave of southern Italian emigration to the United States. Having taken her vows in 1877, three years later she and six other nuns founded the religious institute Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. As we read earlier, wanting to provide help to immigrants beginning in the U.S., Pope Leo XIII suggested instead that she go west, where, according to him, the already thousands of Italian immigrants in the U.S. were in great need of assistance. Mother Cabrini and six others arrived in the United States in 1889 and hit



the ground running, so to speak.

As they did in Italy, here, too, Mother Cabrini and her team founded the requisite housing, a series of schools and orphanages, and the necessary hospitals that chiefly served the Italian immigrant communities. Actions supported by the Church, for sure, but actions also emblematic of what Italians can do in order to help other Italians in need.

In all, they founded close to 70 institutions of all types in numerous cities throughout the United States — Chicago and New York the two principal cities associated with Mother Cabrini today, as well as Cabrini College in Pennsylvania. Undoubtedly, Mother Cabrini was an exemplar of all things possible and thus a symbol of hope for all. She herself had crossed the ocean in 1889 and, in so doing, had followed the same route that thousands of other immigrants had and were taking.

Privileged as she was in her role as nun — and let us underscore at this juncture her gender — she was a woman of great acumen, having succeeded in overcoming great obstacles of the time and demonstrating how all things were possible. In this sense, then, she was also an example of how one can get things done and, more important, how we can still today — and let us say should — open doors for all people who are in need of such assistance. Her legacy clearly lives on both within and beyond the Italian/ American community.

Italian Americans continue to serve and donate to many Catholic and social institutions today, at times even beyond. If there is one thing to bemoan, it is that her medical institutions of New York — Columbus Hospital and the Italian Hospital, which eventually became the Cabrini Medical Center — could not be sustained and consequently closed in 2008. Nonetheless, Mother Cabrini remains that shining light not only for all those whom she helped, but, to be sure, that exemplar par excellence that we, today, should emulate for the dedication so necessary to get things done for the better good.

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