

Frances Xavier Cabrini



Source: Britannica

Mother Cabrini taught people and their children “by word and example to become good Christians and law-abiding citizens, befriending the poor, instructing the ignorant, watching the sick, all without hope of reward or recompense...”

– George Cardinal Mundelein¹

The film *Cabrini* was released on March 8, 2023, on International Women's Day – and for good reason. This cinematic biography follows the life and witness of an Italian woman whose missionary work in the United States led her to establish orphanages, schools, and hospitals. Today, the religious order founded by Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, has hundreds of professed and lay members who serve God and neighbor on six continents. Who is this obedient daughter of the Church whose missionary zeal, inexhaustible love, and tireless compassion were

exemplary – so much so, that upon the completion of a formal investigation into two miracles attributed to her intercession, Mother Cabrini was elevated to sainthood, becoming the first American Saint of the Catholic Church?

Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini was born Francesca Cabrini on July 15, 1850, in the town of Sant'Angelo Lodigiano, Italy. Born into a large family, she was one of 13 children. Francesca knew from a very early age that God was calling her to be a missionary. She would spend hours at the riverside near her uncle's home making paper boats and filling them with violets; and as she released these tiny floral vessels, she would imagine that the flowers were missionaries that she would send to every corner of the world. Yet, despite this picturesque scene, it was at that same riverside where young Francesca nearly lost her life. One day while dreaming of sending missionaries down the river, Francesca fell into the water. Miraculously, she was pulled from the water by an unidentified figure. Her uncle was confident that little Francesca's rescuer was in fact her guardian angel.² This traumatic experience – coupled with the frailty she experienced due to her premature birth eight years earlier – was more than sufficient of an excuse to never go near water again. Yet, this courageous Italian woman would go on to cross the Atlantic over 20 times out of love for God and neighbor, and obedience to the Pope.

The years following her near-death experience in the river were formative for young Francesca. She lost both her parents when she was in her early twenties. She earned her teacher's certificate *cum laude* (with Honors) and requested entrance into a religious community; but the Mother Superior of the community refused her request, thinking Francesca was too frail for the religious life. While the rejection may have been heartbreaking at that time, God had other plans for Francesca. As biographer Theodore

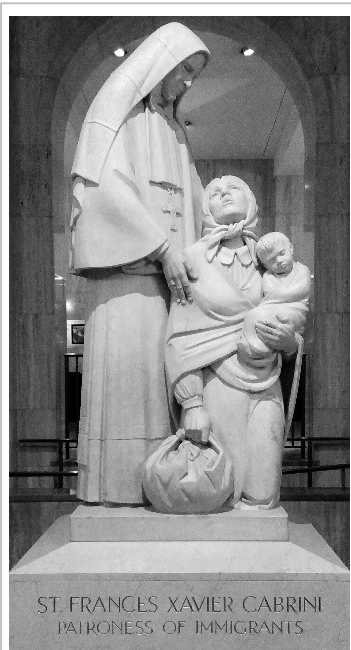
Maynard wrote, “Had Francesca been accepted by these Sisters, she would probably never have been heard from again by the world.”³ But today, the name Mother Cabrini lives on as an inspiration and model to many people.

Francesca would soon become acquainted with caring for the sick. In 1872, smallpox entered Sant’ Angelo. Placing the health of those infected above her own, while at the same time overcoming her revulsion to the outward symptoms of the disease, Francesca tended to her neighbors afflicted with smallpox until she contracted the disease herself. Her older sister Rose, who had been in so many ways a second mother, teacher, and disciplinarian to young Francesca, became a model of a “beautiful tenderness”⁴ which she would carry with her throughout her life and work.

Francesca resolved to once again seek entrance into a religious community. Her path to the religious life was a twisting, winding road, that seemed filled with detours and dead ends. Yet, Maynard noted, “For eight years she appeared to be going farther and farther away from what she had known, even as a child, to be her missionary vocation. Then just when that vocation seemed to be forever lost, she found that every step she had taken had been leading her to it.”⁵

On October 15, 1874, Francesca entered the religious order and convent of the House of Providence. She entered

as a novice, without making any solemn promises. Then, nearly three years to the day, Francesca made her vows to God and the order, took on the habit of a sister, and accepted the duties of a superior. Mother Cabrini, as she would be called from then on, was poised to become the missionary that she knew in her heart she was called to be.



Source: RFI Staff

In 1880, she founded a religious order called the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and began her work of serving the poor, while at the same

time building up the order. These life experiences equipped Mother Cabrini with the knowledge and determination to persevere in service to her fellow countryman; and she did just that throughout the whole of Italy.

Mother Cabrini’s successes did not go unnoticed. She was given an audience with Pope Leo XIII, and upon his instruction, set out with six of her fellow sisters to serve the poor Italian immigrants in New York City. America was not where Mother Cabrini had felt called to serve. For her entire life, she had thought her mission would be in Asia. However, as an obedient daughter of the Church, she made the perilous journey across the Atlantic. Upon stepping off the boat, Mother Cabrini immediately realized how dire the needs were of the often forgotten and despised Italian immigrants. But when the immigrant children were abandoned, Mother Cabrini built orphanages. When they were denied an education, she built schools. When their medical needs were neglected, she built hospitals. Mother Cabrini lived out the words of Jesus Christ written by Matthew the Evangelist, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me,” (Matt 25:40).

After nearly two decades of serving the least of her brothers, Mother Cabrini died in Chicago, Illinois. Her exemplary life devoted to God and neighbor was recognized by Pope Pius XII, who canonized her on July 7, 1946. Among her many patronages, Mother Cabrini is honored today with the title “Patroness of Immigrants” because of her tireless care for them.

Key Questions

1. Mother Cabrini and her Missionary Sisters reached out in love to the people who were too often despised and rejected. Can you find 3-5 faith-based groups who reach out in love to their neighbors? In what ways do they serve?

Sources

- 1 Theodore Maynard, *Too Small A World: The Life of Mother Frances Cabrini* (New York: Ignatius Press, 2024), 16.
- 2 See Maynard, *Too Small A World*, 39-40.
- 3 Maynard, *Too Small A World*, 51.
- 4 Maynard, *Too Small A World*, 53-54.
- 5 Maynard, *Too Small A World*, 55.