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A Saint for Our Times

By Sr. Renee Kittelson MSC
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In the beginning

St. Frances Xavier Cabrini was born in Lombardi, Italy in 1850, one of thirteen children. At eighteen, she desired to become a nun, but poor health stood in her way of joining an Order. But at the request of her Bishop, she founded the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart to care for poor children in schools and hospitals.

Mother Cabrini wanted to be a missionary all her life. She desired to go to China. Pope Leo XIII asked her to go not to the east but to the west. He requested that she go to America to work with the Italian immigrants. A letter from Italians in the United States was read in the Italian legislature in 1879 describing the conditions. "We live and die here like animals, without priests, without teachers and without medical attention."

In Seattle, WA

Mother Cabrini came to New York in 1889 to begin her missions. She then sent two sisters to Seattle to explore the needs of the people here in 1903. Her written words to the sisters reflect a savvy businesswoman, "Try to raise a good sum of money among the people because if the house isn't large, we shall have to build one. A wooden one would not cost much, but for us it would be a large sum. See if you can get the land donated to us, that we can have a nice mission from which the sisters can go to convert all sorts of people, even the Indians."

Whenever possible, she chose a place with scenic beauty where it would not be hard for those who lived there to raise their hearts and minds to God.

Mother Cabrini's first mission was a chapel and orphanage on Seattle's Beacon Hill, which opened in 1903. Seattle had begun to expand quickly and by 1909 the city planners decided to level Beacon Hill, thus the sisters were facing eviction. Mother Cabrini came back to Seattle to help them find a new location. After days of fruitless searching Mother Cabrini placed a map of Seattle before a sister, put her finger upon a location and said, "Go to this section, look it over and report to me your findings." The sisters returned to report, "Oh Mother, we went exactly where you told us to go, and found a little paradise on earth."

The next day, they visited the property together and the sight of it confirmed her dream. The man who showed her the property was the husband of the owner. He assured the sisters that his wife had no intention of selling.

They trudged down the hill to wait for the trolley. Just then there passed a limousine with one solitary woman passenger. Mother Cabrini signaled the driver, and approached the passenger to ask for a ride. The lady was the owner of the property, but at first she did not tell her passengers. During the ride home, she asked them why they were in the neighborhood. Mother Cabrini explained they were looking for a property for an orphanage and had found one, but it wasn't available. When they arrived at the sisters' mission, the lady asked to be invited in for a glass of water.

Soon after, Mother Cabrini negotiated the acquisition of the property and supervised whatever alterations and adjustments were necessary. Accommodated in a large, pleasant wooden framed house, which was named "Sacred Heart Villa," the orphans spent many happy hours playing and swimming on the shores of Lake Washington.

When Seattle's Bishop O'Dea visited the "Villa," he marveled at her acquisition. He asked how she managed to get the property. Smiling, she replied, "Your Excellency, I paid for it with three treasures: my love, a dream and a glass of water in His Name!" During this stay in Seattle, Mother Cabrini also became an American citizen.

She returned to Seattle in 1915 with the conviction that the Lord wanted another mission in Seattle. Mother Cabrini wanted to purchase a hotel on First Hill, but she did not have the \$200,000, which was required for the sale. Mother Cabrini placed the mission under the protection of St. Ann. She had a small statue of St. Ann holding Mary on her lap and an open book in her hand. Cabrini wrote the amount of the money she needed in the book and buried the statue on the hotel property. A few days later she was offered a loan for the exact amount she needed. Mother Cabrini eventually purchased the Perry Hotel. The plan was to turn the hotel into a children's home but after much opposition she decided to use the building as a sanatorium for people suffering from tuberculosis. The facility later became Columbus Hospital. After Mother Cabrini was canonized it was renamed Cabrini Hospital. Today the hospital no longer exists but in its place stands Cabrini Senior Housing, forty-nine units for low-income seniors.

In 1917, Mother Cabrini died in Chicago, IL at the age of sixty-seven. At the time of her death, she had established sixty-seven schools and hospitals throughout Europe, North and South America. In 1946, she became the first American citizen to be canonized when she was elevated to sainthood by Pope Pius XII. She was later named the patron of immigrants.

Using her charisms

All the Saints were charismatic in that they used the gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit for the good of the Church. Two of the gifts of the Spirit demonstrated by Mother Cabrini were leadership and administration. Mother Cabrini's leadership style displayed the following characteristics:

1. **Prayer.** She spent at least five hours a day in prayer. Mother Cabrini had lots of friends in high places. Yes, she had devotion to many of the angels and Saints. The holy souls in purgatory were also among her friends.
2. **Obedience.** Cabrini worked with the local civil and church authorities. Often she did not receive support but she was always persistent.
3. **Confidence.** She was confident and unafraid, walking by faith and not by sight. Her motto was based on the words of St. Paul, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13

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