

“Not to the East, But to the West”

The Saintly Adventures of Francesca Cabrini

By Sister Mary Monica, M.I.C.M., Tert.

If it is possible to fall in love with a saint by merely reading her life story, this wonderful, unassuming, humble, yet oddly forceful, Italian missionary sister would have the whole world at her feet with a single reading of one of her many biographies. Born the last child of thirteen into a peasant farming family of Lombardy, sickly from birth and shy by nature, she was to prove one of the most indomitable forces in the Catholic missionary fields of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; a figure whose spirit was as big as the world itself and who befriended president and pope alike in her zeal to bring the love of Jesus Christ and His Sacred Heart to the entire human race.

St. Frances Cabrini, or, as she is still lovingly called by those whose lives she touched, “Mother,” entered the world on July 15, 1850, in the town of Sant’Angelo in the Lodi region of Lombardy in northern Italy. Her given name was Francesca. Her parents gave her, and all their children, a love of their Catholic Faith and a knowledge of the great missionaries of the Church. After their daily devotions, the nightly readings were always stories of St. Francis Xavier, St. Francis de Sales, and other holy priests and brothers who traveled far and wide spreading the Faith and saving the souls of countless creatures who otherwise would be lost to Heaven. These tales of the missionary saints which she heard nightly fired her imagination; her burning desire from early childhood was to bring the Faith to exotic lands, especially to China.

She came two months early to a fifty-two-year-old mother, and, as her father awaited her birth and prayed that the child would be healthy, a flock of white doves, never seen before in their part of Italy, descended upon him and the older brothers and sisters, heralding the birth of this exceptional soul. “Cecchina,” as she was affectionately called by her family, was a delicate child who could not participate in the rough play of her siblings and friends.

When she was a little girl, she often visited her uncle, Don Luigi Oldini, the village priest of a small town near Sant’Angelo. Near Don Luigi’s church was a swift-flowing river, the Venera. Little Cecchina formed paper boats and filled them with violets that she picked from the river bank, pretending that the flowers were the missionary sisters that she would someday send across the ocean to China. One day, she became so immersed in this “game” that she leaned too far over the bank and fell into the Venera. Fortunately, she was pulled out of the water before the river entered a tunnel. Seeing her little body lying wet and shivering along the bank, a young boy rushed to fetch Uncle

Luigi. No one saw who rescued her, not even Cecchina! She and Uncle Luigi concluded that it must have been her guardian angel. Indeed, God had special plans for this little girl!

Francesca's appointed guardian during her childhood was her older sister, Rosa, whose dream of becoming a religious never came to pass because of her duties at home. One of the sisters, Maddalena, was crippled with polio and needed constant attention, and Francesca herself needed to be educated. Rosa, being a teacher, took Francesca under her tutelage from a young age.

One Sunday, a Franciscan missionary priest from the Orient visited their church. Francesca, now thirteen, was more enthusiastic than ever about being a foreign missionary as a result of his visit. When she shared her thoughts with Rosa, her older sister scoffed at the idea. There were no women missionaries, she said, and besides, Francesca was too frail and weak for such a task. As well as she knew her little sister, Rosa did not know that her ridicule only made Francesca's resolve all the stronger. All her life, when she was told by a person in authority that something *could not* be done, she determined more strongly than ever that it *would* be done.

Early Education

Francesca was an intelligent and



curious girl. When she was thirteen, her parents sent her to the nearby school conducted by the Daughters of the Sacred Heart. There she remained for five years, living with the sisters and receiving a thorough Catholic and academic education, enabling her to follow in her older sister's footsteps as a teacher. Here, too, she began her lifelong devotion to the Sacred Heart and became convinced that God meant for her to become a religious. Rosa remained at home, helping to care for their crippled sister, keeping the farm going, and teaching in the village school.

When it was time for young Francesca to graduate from the sis-