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# The Writer's Inkhorn

Volume 12, Issue 1

Continuing Reflections on the Word for Your Personal Growth in Christ

Jan/Feb 2019

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## *Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini: A Life That Inspires*



This issue of the *Writer's Inkhorn* is different from my usual offerings. I have chosen to share with you a biographical piece from research I did for a presentation on the life of Mother Cabrini that I prepared for a celebration of her life at a retreat center named in her honor. Her story so inspired me that I thought you might enjoy reading it as well.

Every person's life is a work of art, woven through the years with threads of many hues and patterns that create a deliberate design! A glimpse at the life story woven by Mother Cabrini and God is a tapestry that shows how this ordinary woman chose to and did live a life of such extraordinary achievement as to make any one of us wonder, what, indeed, are we doing with *our* lives and time on planet Earth. And I give you questions from Mother Cabrini that I wish for you to ponder deeply, before I venture any further:

*What is the Sacred Heart of Jesus? Is it just a nice phrase, a title, or the name of an order? I say to you it is so much more. The heart of Jesus was one of compassion. A life of service to mankind, the poor, the needy, the maimed, the infirmed, and the weak was my life's work. What will it take for YOU to know / to see that YOU can and YOU must live a life like mine, in your own time, and in your own way, from wherever you are?*

I learned that Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini was a woman of very humble beginnings, who became outstanding, not because she was famous or rich or powerful, but because she lived an incredible life of **service** to *all* of mankind, and to the glory of God. It is *this* life I present to you in the pages that follow, and I trust you will glean some lessons along the way.

**The early years.** On July 15, 1850, under the

bright blue skies of the great valley of Lombardy, south of Milan, little Maria Francesca Cabrini first saw the light of day. She grew up on the farm where she was born, the youngest of 13 children. That little girl growing up knew nothing of the grand future that God had in store for her. The hand of the Lord was at work, as He is in all of our lives, if we would but take the time to see. Although the records say that she was *frail* all of her life, still she often aroused the admiration of those who knew her, since paradoxically, she must have been stronger than she looked.

One wonders if her secret was not a kind of tough-minded personal courage which she developed on the farm. It may have been precisely that work on the farm which strengthened her physically and prepared her for what was to come. I say to you, despise not the day of small things, the humble beginnings. Sometimes the menial tasks, the things we disdain, build character in us, preparing us in ways and for purposes we cannot even begin to imagine. It is often God's way.

By 1870, at the tender age of twenty, Maria Francesca had already completed school and received her teacher's certificate with top honors. It was in that same year that both of her parents died. However, she was blessed to have had visionary parents who had not chained any of their children to the land. Maria was free to pursue her dreams. The diligence of faithful parents cannot be taken lightly. My mother, too, even from her meager means, was one who gave me roots for being grounded *and* wings to soar.

Having been educated by the Daughters of the Sacred Heart, Maria applied for admission in that religious congregation after her parents were laid to rest, and was told, reluctantly, that she was *too frail* for that life. She also applied to the Sisters of Cannossa, whose work was devoted to Asian missions, her heart's desire, but to her dismay, was

rejected again on the grounds of *frail* health. But God always has the last word; He chooses the weak things of this world to confound the wise. What a sense of humor He has. Who ever knew from such frailty would come such greatness and achievement? No one could have imagined!

**A call to service.** The early 20<sup>th</sup> century African American theologian, Howard Thurman, once said, "*I will not be daunted by an interval.*" Undaunted, Maria obediently took the advice of her pastor and went to work in a small orphanage which had been badly mismanaged in a nearby town. Three years later, she took her vows, and when domestic problems lead to the eventual closing of the orphanage in 1880, Maria Francesca was urged by the bishop to found her own community. Maria quietly consented and on November 14, 1880, having been assisted by Monsignor Serrati, she began a small congregation now known as the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, with some half-dozen girls from the former orphanage.

There it is. Did you hear it? Yes, obedience. Somewhere in the midst of the small things and the consent of our hearts, God sees to it that we receive the training that we will later need for our greater selves, *our* larger work. I am learning that the essence of true obedience is my willingness to submit to God's authority under human hand. Only in this way do I truly develop a heart like Christ – One Who was obedient to death, even the death of the cross.

Sister Cabrini and her girls began small, and almost without means, but what is *that* when we serve such a great God? A heroic trust in God, even from the beginning, was a characteristic of Sister Cabrini, as evident in the motto she chose for her congregation: "*I can do all things in Him who strengthens me*" (Philippians 4:13).

These few words to a melody came to me, once, and I share them with you, here:

### **To Dream**

To dream; to grow; to run; to fly;  
To do; to be; to reach for the sky—  
You can, you can, do anything!

You *can*, you know. You can do *anything* that

is humanly possible to do. You cannot imagine more for yourself than what God is able to accomplish *in* and *with* and *through* you. It is utterly impossible.

For Frances, the episcopal approval was received on December 29th, 1880, and foundations followed quickly in Milan, elsewhere in northern Italy, and *finally* a house in Rome, although opposition and disapproval had to be overcome first.

*That* was certainly nothing new to her. Do you *know* why Sister Frances went to Rome in the first place? Of course you do not, but I will tell you here. Having always been diligent, even as a child, in the study of the propagation of the faith, she had written a **Rule**, and in *her* mind, absolutely nothing would do but to bring it to Rome herself and get it approved by the Holy Father *himself*. And while she was about it, she decided she might start one, maybe two, houses in Rome.

Sophisticated churchmen, Cardinals included, were startled and amused at her seeming naïveté. New convents in Rome? How preposterous! And a **Rule** submitted to the Pope *personally* without careful scrutiny and canonical judgments? **Really!** But before she left Rome, the convents *were* started and Pope Leo XIII had not only read the **Rule** but received her in private audience.

**W-H-O** dares to tell *you* in *this* life what you can or cannot do or be? And you *listen*?! Here, I wish I had known her, as I am sensing that our saintly mother must have been a mixture of **quiet** reserve and **stubborn** resolve, with a healthy dash of **feisty-ness** thrown in for *God's* pleasure and *our* good measure.

**God's plan in the new world.** It was in this audience that the Holy Father turned Mother Cabrini's face westward to America, rather than eastward to China, her life's longing. You see, there was growing and deeply felt concern over the mass emigration of millions of poor Italians to the Americas. Unaware of the real conditions overseas, and unable to speak a word of any language other than their own, the emigrants were in the hands of agencies whose sole purpose was to exploit them. The repayment of the passage money advanced by these agencies meant a

crippling burden for years, even after the debtors had found work. This was not unlike the plight of poor Black sharecroppers in the South who, after slavery, never quite seemed to make enough money to repay Mr. Charlie to be free of *his* debt. Sometimes we forget how similar our collective stories and how common our pain have been. We would do well to remember.

These thousands of Italians recently arrived in the United States, lived crowded into the "Little Italys" of the great cities under lamentable moral and material conditions. The death rate was high, and they were badly in need of pastoral care. To this work, Mother Cabrini was being called. This, the bishop proposed while she was in Rome in 1887. Record has it that at first she firmly refused, but after a curious series of happenings, she consented and threw herself wholeheartedly into the new enterprise. Do you hear it again? Obedience.

On March 23, 1889, Mother Cabrini and six other sisters arrived at a fast-growing "Little Italy" on New York's East Side. After having twice invited her and informing her that an orphanage, school, and convent were being prepared, the archbishop told her when she arrived in New York, that the plans had fallen through, and advised her and her companions to return to Italy.

That would never do for Mother Cabrini. What really happened was that he had disagreed with the temporary foundress and had withdrawn his permission. However, Mother Cabrini waited out the archbishop's tantrum, reconciled the two parties, and, in the end, won him over.

**A faith that moves God.** Now, with the archbishop's blessing; they raised money together to buy a house for a convent and orphanage, and a mere four months later, by July 1889, Mother Cabrini had managed to buy 450 acres along the Hudson River. For weeks, the sisters had to haul water from the river, but after praying, a natural spring was discovered **on** the property. God always rewarded Mother Cabrini's faith.

And He *always* rewards *our* faith in *Him* as well. It is our faith that moves God to work on our behalf. Read the gospels of Jesus, and you will be reminded again that this is indeed true. The

foundation was begun, and soon others followed, spanning the country from California to New York. The remaining twenty-eight years of her life were taken up with direction of her sisters, travels, building, and personal apostolate. For us non-Catholics, author, Michele Elena Bondi explains:

Each of us has a personal apostolate, or mission, that we fulfill throughout the course of our lives. Our personal apostolate does not begin when we reach a certain age or accomplish a specific goal, nor does it reach its pinnacle when we attain a certain objective. Rather, every apostolate begins the moment each person is created and comes to fruition over time, through all the circumstances of our lives. Our mission is fulfilled in every moment, through every day. Critical to our success is our willingness to accept, return, and share the Love of God.

Like all saints should, she had an insatiable hunger for the spreading of Christ's kingdom. Her strength was in prayer and an unshakable trust in God. Besides schools of all grades and charitable institutions of all kinds, she founded four great hospitals, with nurses' homes attached, one each in New York and Seattle, and two in Chicago. To these homes, as to her schools, she readily admitted non-Catholics who were willing to keep the rules. This is testimony to her true ecumenical spirit. Houses were also opened in Central America, the Argentine, Brazil, France, Spain and England, besides several more in Italy.

Leo XIII supported the foundress unfailingly, as did his successors. But this is not to imply that all went smoothly, by any means. She had to face opposition from clergy *and* laity. Parties formed against her; two revolutions destroyed her Central American convents; two lawsuits imperiled her work in Italy. Yet she persevered, undismayed. Money came in as she needed it; Catholics and non-Catholics alike were generous. When all else failed, God worked miracles. Her growing and practical knowledge of building and of hospital and school organization amazed even the experts.

When negotiating for the purchase of a large property in Chicago, she suspected she was being

defrauded, so she sent two sisters to measure the whole property with ordinary tape-measures!

Having her heart set upon acquiring a fine college, which was not even for sale, in order to turn it into an orphanage, she persuaded the owner to sell it to her, and to this day, no one knows quite how. When seeking to buy a transient hotel in Seattle for a hospital, and finding it belonged to someone named Clark, she simply ordered the Superior of New York to ring up every person of that name in the telephone directory (over a hundred of them) until she found him.

Spiritually, her life is an interesting study in development. She was the kind of saint with which we can all identify. She had to learn by experience. But God's grace *in her* perfected what nature began. She had faith, she was a woman given to prayer, and she was humble. She became noted for gentleness and was loved and revered. As her character mellowed, her gifts grew more remarkable as time went on. Her big heart and her open-mindedness were evident as she embraced all, from her ministry to criminals in Sing-Sing prison to her work among the most abandoned souls.

Although her life was relatively short by today's standards, 67 years, Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini founded 67 institutions – schools, hospitals, orphanages, and missions, and I like to say one for every year in her life. It did not matter whether or not she was strong physically; what matters is that she had a great inner strength, her unbending belief in a God Who can. In all of her many undertakings, and throughout her life, she always knew that God would provide for her and the many works she founded. So she continued to actively pursue her goals and her life's work.

And you. What do you think Mother Cabrini would say to you? What is **God** saying to you? Do you not know that He desires for each of us to have a life that so inspires others, to follow the path He has laid out for us, with a heart like Jesus – full of compassion for all people? Yes, but you are wondering at what price? Just faith. Vibrant faith. Active faith. A faith that believes that we really *can* do all things through Him who strengthens us.

God expects this duty to all mankind, from *all* of His children, from wherever we are, and that includes you and me. Do not miss this -- this is the essence of a life that pleases God. There will always be needs to meet and God, the Father, will always be there to help us meet those needs.

What does it mean for *you* to live a life that inspires? It simply means to do more than you are doing, to be better than you are, to exercise faith in actively pursuing your dreams, and to have an unwavering trust in a God Who can. So, go ahead. *Realize* your dreams since you know that it is impossible for you to dream bigger than what God can accomplish in you. He *is* able to do exceeding abundantly *above* all that we can ask or think, according to **His** power that is at work in *us*.

Your Teacher and Sister,  
Dr. Mary Webster Moore

Bondi, M. E. (2009). *Your Personal Apostolate: Accepting and Sharing the Love of God*. Rochester, MN: Joseph Karl Publishing

**Disclaimer:** I researched Mother Cabrini's life for a live reading I did at the Cabrini Retreat Center in Des Plaines. Unfortunately, I did not note the sources I used in the document, so I have no idea which parts are quoted in whole or in part. As a scholar, I know the importance of not plagiarizing the work of others, so I acknowledge my error in this biographical work. Pardon this omission in my sharing this inspirational life story with you.

**Historical note:** The Frances Cabrini Rowhouses, completed in 1942, was the first major public housing project in Chicago. It was authorized by the Housing Act of 1937 and named for this same Mother Cabrini. There is interesting information on the Chicago Gang History website that indicates that in the late 1800s and early 1900s the location where those homes were built was formerly known as "Little Hell," so nicknamed due to the flames coming from the Peoples Gas and Coke Co. but perpetrated by the number of murders in the area. Gangs ran rampant as the area was controlled by the Italian and Irish mafias. The city finally "cleaned up" the area by building the homes. I grew up in this area that came to be known as Cabrini-Green, but never knew this history that predated African Americans living in this area. Read more at <https://chicagoganghistory.com/housing-project/cabrini-green/>

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