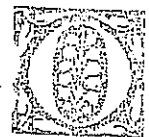


Frances Xavier Cabrini

November 13



Once upon a time, not very long ago, there lived a little girl named Mary Francesca who wanted to be a missionary to China more than anything else in the world. She would sit by a stream near her home and make boats out of empty pea pods. Then she would fill them with violets and pretend they were priests and nuns setting off on the journey to the East. Someday, she said, *she* would be doing that for real!

Mary Francesca, or Frances, was the 13th child born to a farming family in Lodi, Italy. You might think that the baby in such a large family would be terribly spoiled and determined to have her own way, but Frances was neither. Her sisters were quite strict and made her mind. (Anyone with many big brothers and sisters knows it is very hard to be spoiled with *them* around.)

At night, the family would read aloud from a book about the lives of the missionaries, and Frances thought again that this was exactly what she wanted to be. She practiced giving up candy and apricot pastries because she knew there would be nothing of that sort in China, so she had better get used to it. She wondered if she would have to eat raw fish when she got to China and prayed that if she did, God would give her the courage to swallow it quickly.

The years passed and young Frances grew up and became a teacher. She enjoyed this work but didn't feel it was enough to satisfy all

she wanted to do. Only working for God would do that.

Frances felt it was time to announce that she wanted to become a nun, and a missionary at that. She went to the Bishop and asked him if she might become a missionary and go to China.

"You want to join a missionary order?" he asked, with a slight frown. "Very well. I don't know of any, so go found one yourself."

Frances, who was very determined, set about doing just that. She, and seven young women as filled with grace and enthusiasm as she was, formed a society called the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. It wasn't a great success at first. Many people felt it just wasn't right for young women to be missionaries and to go off into strange lands. Frances would remind them that there is neither male nor female in the Lord and that all are equal in his sight.

Her good works in Italy soon won them over. Within a few years the sisters had set up schools for girls, homes for orphans, hotels for college students. Soon she opened two houses in Rome — a free school and a children's home.

One particular Bishop had been watching her and asked her to come see him. She did, wondering what was on his mind.

"Sister Frances," he began, "I have had my eye on you. I have in mind a missionary work of great importance for only the bravest, most determined believer in miracles. I believe you are the person God has in mind for me to send overseas!"

Frances was so excited her head spun. China, at last! She would sail to the Far East, not in a pea pod boat but in a real one.

"Frances," the Bishop said, "I want you to go to a foreign land — the United States, to work among our Italian people in New York City."

"Oh, no, thank you!" said Frances. She knew God wanted her to go to China, *not* New York City.

"But," he continued, "our people need you. They have so few priests to help them. They left here to find a new and better life for themselves. They thought they would never be poor or hungry again. Now, what do they find? They are ignored, pushed around, made fun of;

they work in sweatshops and dirty streets. They are still poor and hungry, and they are losing their faith besides."

"No, thank you," she repeated, feeling a bit guilty.

The next day she received a letter from the Archbishop of New York, asking her please to come. And that night she had a dream in which the Pope came to her and said, "Not to the East, Frances, but to the West."

There was no question now. Frances went to the Bishop and said yes. Once she made up her mind to something, she went full steam ahead. She packed her bags and gathered six of her strongest (in body and spirit) sisters and together they set off on their voyage west.

When they arrived in New York City, they found no one to meet them and no place to go. They stopped at the nearest hotel, which looked very down-at-the-heels with cracked shades and missing window panes. All of them stayed in one room. It was so dirty, they didn't want to turn on the light.

When they did, they heard the scurrying of hundreds of cockroaches disappearing into the woodwork. Rats — or maybe very big mice — hurried softly and quickly up and down the inside walls. The sisters did not want to pull down the bedsheets for fear of what they might find, so they spent the night kneeling and praying for courage to meet whatever tomorrow would bring.

The next day the Archbishop came to them and said he was sorry but the plans had been changed. There was no longer a building for them, so perhaps they had better go back to Italy.

Frances answered before his words died on the air. "The Pope sent me here and here I stay." He was taken aback by this spunky little woman who seemed to fear no one and who believed that nothing was impossible.

The sisters went to work. First, after finding a small home for themselves where their people lived in a part of New York called Little Italy, they learned the English language. They found a nearby building which they used to take in orphans or whatever children needed a home. When they needed money, they went out to beg. They went from

door to door and shop to shop, and even to the police stations. They would take anything — food, clothing, money — and it was always just what they needed at the moment.

Frances taught her sisters that the poor did not depend on their small works but rather upon God's working through them. She told them to "pray always and ask without ceasing, that is, have your mind always fixed on prayer, and will only what God wills." And, she urged, "Have faith and you will behold miracles!"

She proved those words in her life. She traveled up and down this country, from Chicago to New Orleans, from Scranton to Denver, starting hospitals and schools and homes. She went to Central America and crossed the Andes Mountains on a mule. She crossed the ocean 30 times altogether to spread her work throughout England, France, Spain — and, yes, Italy.

When she was 59 years old, she became a citizen of the United States. She loved this land which had become her second home and which she now knew almost better than people born here. Many of you of Italian descent may have had grandparents or great-grandparents who remember the little nun who brought comfort and the strength to keep going to her people all over this country.

She is our first American saint and is buried under the altar of Mother Cabrini High School in New York City.

Mary Francesca did not fulfill her childhood dream of sailing off to China to win souls. But neither did her patron saint, Francis Xavier, who died within sight of its shore.

God had other plans for them. So they discarded theirs and followed his, and that's all any of us have to do to become saints.