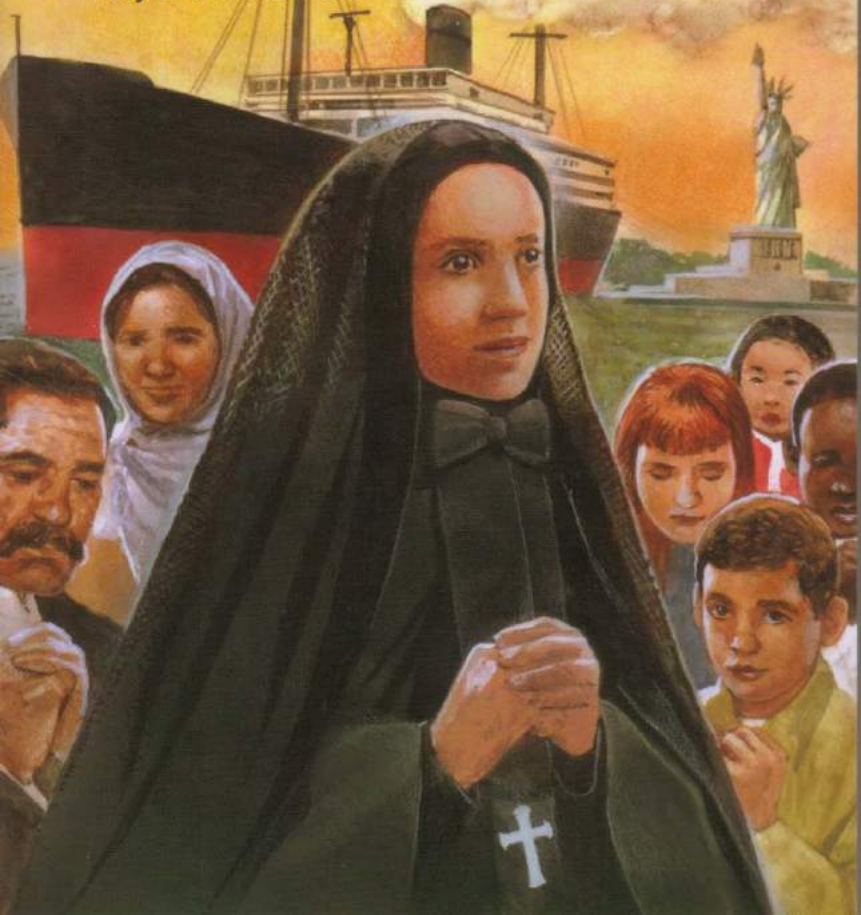


Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini

Cecchina's Dream

by Victoria Dority, MSC and
Mary Lou Andes, MSC



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CONTENTS

1. "Cecchina" for Short	1
2. The Seed Is Planted	7
3. Violets for Sail	13
4. Mama and Papa Say "Yes"	19
5. Patience and Honey	27
6. The Dreaded Pox	33
7. Just Two Weeks... ..	41
8. The Sisters of Providence	45
9. Mother Frances Xavier.....	51
10. The Cement Factory	55
11. Beginnings	63
12. The World Is Too Small	69
13. Roman Adventure	75
14. To the West!	80
15. New York	87
16. God's Well Runs Deep.....	93

17. Eternity to Rest.....	99
18. The Dream Continues	103
<i>Prayer</i>	105
<i>Glossary</i>	107

"CECCHINA" FOR SHORT

It was July 15, 1850. Agostino Cabrini was already out threshing wheat as the sun rose above his farm in northern Italy. He paused to pray. "Heavenly Father, I offer you my day. I also have a favor to ask. Stella is showing signs that our baby is coming...but it's two months early. Please allow this child to remain with us, since four of our children are already with you. Please...permit this child to live and grow up to serve you." When the sturdy peasant turned back to his work, a flock of snow-white doves encircled the grain. In his attempt to scatter the birds, Signor Cabrini caught one in his strap.

The farmer gently untangled the dove. He could feel its tiny heart thumping wildly. "Come and see this little one before it returns home," he called to his children, who were playing nearby.

"Oh, Papa, how beautiful!" cried Rosa. "Look, Maddalena! Papa brought us a visitor. Where's Giovanni? Come and touch the

dove. Feel how soft it is! Giuseppe! Francesco! Come see what Papa has!"

The children crowded around their father. "Can we keep it for a pet?" they pleaded.

"No, no," Signor Cabrini smiled. "The Lord made the birds of the air to be free. We must allow our little friend to return to its family now." As he opened his hands to release the dove, an urgent cry echoed across the fields.

"Agostino! Agostino! The baby is coming! Hurry!"

Signor Cabrini broke into a run. "Watch the children, Rosa!" he shouted over his shoulder. Later, as more doves encircled the farmhouse, Signora Cabrini gave birth to a tiny daughter as small and fragile as a dove. The townspeople of Sant'Angelo Lodigiano always believed that God had sent the flock of gentle white birds as a sign that the child born that day was special.

Since their new daughter was so tiny and in danger of death, Signor and Signora Cabrini wanted her to be baptized as soon as possible. That evening she was taken to the parish church and given the name Maria Francesca. Because it was such a long name for a tiny baby, everyone called her "Cecchina" for short.

Fifteen-year-old Rosa realized that neither her mother nor her new baby sister were very strong. This made her very protective of Cecchina and more helpful to her mother. Although Maddalena was the oldest child in the family, she had been born with brain damage. And so it was Rosa who soon became known as Cecchina's second mother. Under her care Cecchina slowly grew stronger and gained weight.

"Rosa, you're a great help to me," her mother confided one day. "But you mustn't forget your own dreams. Your father and I know that you want to become a teacher. Father Dedé has told us about the Daughters of the Sacred Heart in Arluno. These sisters train young girls to teach. We think it's time for you to begin your studies with them."

After four years of study at the sisters' boarding school, Rosa happily returned home with her teacher's diploma. She eventually opened a school for the children of Sant'Angelo right in the Cabrini farmhouse. It was there that Cecchina was educated and developed her own love for teaching. Although she was sick a great deal, she was still able to follow her lessons from her room. Rosa made sure that Cecchina never missed anything.

By the time Cecchina was five, she was attending daily Mass with her mother and Rosa. She watched her big sister and copied everything she did. When Rosa returned from receiving Communion, she covered her face with her hands. So did Cecchina. But she made sure to spread her fingers apart so that she could still see what was happening. If Rosa made the Sign of the Cross, Cecchina did too. She even scratched her nose whenever her big sister did!

One day, Cecchina decided to follow her mother and sister up to Communion. Rosa caught her in time and made her go back and sit in the bench. "Just what did you think you were doing, Maria Francesca?" Rosa asked after Mass. (Rosa called Cecchina her full name when she wanted to be extra serious.) The little girl looked up in innocent surprise. "I was going to receive Jesus with you and Mama," she matter-of-factly answered.

Another time, Cecchina watched Rosa go into the confessional. She decided to do the same. But once inside, she had her doubts. "Father!" she exclaimed. "Where are you? I can't see you."

"I'm here behind the screen," the priest answered kindly. "What do you want to tell me?"

"Father, why can't I receive Jesus in Communion like Mama and Rosa? I love him too, and Rosa taught me all my prayers. I want to do what Jesus tells me to do and not always what Rosa makes me do!"

"My child," Father Dedé answered, trying to hide the amusement in his voice, "Jesus gives us people to help us to learn and to understand what to do. Jesus wants you to listen to Rosa and do what she says. Isn't she a good sister to you?"

"Yes, Father," replied Cecchina. "She teaches me a lot about Jesus. I want to be a teacher just like Rosa. I want to teach others about Jesus and how much he loves us."

"Well, then, you must listen to Rosa," replied the priest. "Think of it as Jesus talking to you. Go now, and may God bless you."

"May God bless you, too, Father!" Cecchina cheerfully answered.

On her way out of the confessional, the child peeked under the other curtain and saw Father Dedé. She waved as he smiled at her, and he waved back. Cecchina would always remember that day.

Rosa was very strict with her younger sister. She especially impressed upon her the importance of using every opportunity to pray and offer little sacrifices to Jesus.

“Ouch! Ouch!” six-year-old Cecchina would complain as her sister combed her naturally curly hair into long braids. “Why are you pulling my hair so tight? And why do you have to put so much oil on it?”

“Because your hair doesn’t want to obey!” Rosa would answer. “It keeps sneaking out of the braids. You don’t want the other girls to feel badly because they weren’t blessed with curly hair, do you? Besides, all those curls might make you as proud as the peacock who likes to show off. If it hurts you too much to sit still, offer it up to Jesus for some poor sinner.”

Cecchina was always relieved when Rosa finally ended her “sermon.”

Many years later, when Mother Frances Cabrini was well into her fifties, she used to laugh and say, “I don’t think I’ll ever have gray hair... Rosa pulled it so tight, it never had a chance to do anything, let alone turn gray!”