

St. Frances of Rome



Saint Frances of Rome (or Francesca Romana) (1384 - March 9, 1440), like many saints, was born in Rome of wealthy Italian parents.

When she was eleven years old, she decided to be a nun, but within two years her parents married her off to Lorenzo Ponziano (or de Ponziani), commander of the papal troops of Rome. Although the marriage had been arranged, it was a happy one, lasting for forty years, partly because Lorenzo admired his wife and her sister, Vannoza, and partly because he was frequently away at war. The women prayed, visited the poor, and took care of the sick, inspiring other wealthy women to do the same. Francesca became widely known among the poor by a nickname "Ceccolella".

Francesca and Lorenzo lost two of their three children to the plague. In their case, it sensitized them to the needs of the poor. During the wars between the legitimate pope and various antipopes, Lorenzo served the former. However, in his absence, much of his own property and possessions were destroyed. Eventually he would return, wounded, to Francesca's care, dying in 1436.

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, "With her husband's consent Frances practiced continency, and advanced in a life of contemplation. Her visions often assumed the form of drama enacted for her by heavenly personages. She had the gift of miracles and ecstasy, (as) well as the bodily vision of her guardian angel, had revelations concerning purgatory and hell, and foretold the ending of the Western Schism. She could read the secrets of consciences and detect plots of diabolical origin. She was remarkable for her humility and detachment, her obedience and patience."

Francesca had turned part of the family's country estate into a hospital. On the feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1425 she founded the Oblates of Mary, a lay congregation of pious women, attached to the church of S. Maria Nova in Rome, but neither cloistered nor bound by formal vows, which on July 4, 1433 received the approval of Pope Eugene IV. The group became the Oblates of the Benedictine Congregation of Monte Oliveto, headquartered in the nearby Tor di Specchi. She died in 1440 and was buried in that church.

On May 9, 1608 she was canonized by Pope Paul V, and in the following decades a diligent search was made for her remains. They were found on April 2, 1638 and reburied on March 9, 1649. Again, in 1869, the body was exhumed and

this time exposed to the veneration of the faithful in a crystal coffin. The church of S. Maria Nova is usually now referred to as the church of S. Francesca Romana. Peculiarly, in 1925 Pope Pius XI declared her the patron saint of automobile drivers. She is also the patroness of widows. Her feast day is celebrated on March 9, the date of the first translation of her remains.

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