
Madonna of the Streets --by Jacqueline Galloway

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The painting we recognize as "The Madonna Of The Streets", by Roberto Ferruzzi was first exhibited in the Italian artist's hometown of Venice in 1897. This lovely portrait which adorns many homes and we so aptly assume is the artist's rendition of the Blessed Mother is in fact just not so. For in the recent search by Sister Angela Marie Bovo (a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet) for her ancestral roots, a most remarkable story was uncovered.

Sister Angela Marie was born in Oakland California in 1920 and Christened Mary. Like many Californians, she is first generation born in the states. Her mother, Angela Cian was married in Venice, Italy to Antonio Bovo and they both moved to the United States in 1906.

(the painting as often reproduced)

Her father was a marble craftsman and supported his growing family (now numbering 10 children) until an influenza epidemic in 1929 caused his death. His young wife Angela had not mastered the complex English language, for her world centered on the upbringing of her large family. The youngest of which was a baby of six months. With no adult family members for emotional or financial support and with the pressures of no income insurmountable, the young mother suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. The four youngest children were placed in an orphanage and ultimately foster homes.

In a recent discussion with Sister Angela Marie, she recalled vividly the happy times she accompanied her mother, with toddlers and a baby carriage and infant to the local grocery store. Sister was only eight years old when her mother's illness necessitated her being sent to an orphanage.

Almost miraculously, the children managed to keep in touch with one another and when their mother died of a heart attack in St. Theresa's Convalescent Home in Haywood , California at the age of 85 in 1972, they were able to be a support to each other. The children had always yearned to learn more of their heritage, which they knew extended beyond the coastlines of the United States, but because of their mother's illness and her inability to communicate, this desire remained a mere unfulfilled dream.

Sister Angela Marie entered the religious life in 1939 and taught school in the Northern California area for 35 years. Her longing to trace the family roots became a reality in 1984 when her community gave her permission to visit Venice, Italy in her quest. At the Department of Genealogy in Oakland, California, an Italian researcher gave Sister the basic instructions for her to begin the arduous search.

As the Lord indeed lights the way, when Sister arrived in Venice in the summer of 1984, with the birth and death certificates of her parents, she found a young American woman in the convent of the Istituto Maria SS Babbina where she was to live. This "instrument of the Lord" generously and enthusiastically accompanied Sister Angela Marie as she went about the city tracing the records of the marriage of her parents, names and dates of other relatives, etc. Having someone proficient in English and Italian was the only way she could accomplish the enormous task of translating the complicated records.

(photo of Sister in 1945)

The pathway to the information appeared to be another extraordinary experience, for the Registrar in the city hall, Mr. Ferrere overheard from his private office, a conversation regarding the family names and left his desk to graciously offer his assistance, which became the very key to locating two family members still alive and nearby! In addition to this, Mr. Ferrere also was able to do the complicated construction of the entire family tree and forward this data to Sister Angela many months later when she was back in the convent in California.

From city hall, a successful telephone contact was made with Sister Angela's mother's sister, her Aunt Guilia, 80 years old! A meeting with Aunt Guilia was arranged and the reunion took place in the same home Sister's mother had lived as a young girl. Sister's Aunt Elisa (88 years old) was also present, as well as many other immediate members of her long lost family. Aunt Elisa sadly told of the time in 1950 when she attempted to locate Angela and Antonio Bovo via the Consulate's Office in San Francisco. The only information forwarded to Venice was the death of Antonio in 1929. The records did not indicate the ensuing hospitalization of his wife Angela, nor the whereabouts of the 10 children. The family in Italy reluctantly gave up contacting authorities but did not cease in praying for a miracle. The answer to those prayers appeared 34 years later as Sister Angela appeared in their home.

During the exciting reunion with many tears, much embracing and a good deal of confusion, with only the interpreter able to bridge the gap of the language problem, Sister's Aunt Guilia took a small gold framed oval picture from her wall (the one we know as Madonna Of The Streets) and said in Italian "this is your mother."

"Yes", replied Sister Angela, "I know" (thinking her aunt meant the Blessed Mother} "no no" insisted her aunt, accurately reading her reaction..."this is your real mother". Through the interpreter, the astonishing story unfolded:

Roberto Ferruzzi, an artist in Venice, saw Sister Angela's mother Angela Cian then 11 years old caring for her baby brother. Because of her tenderness and her patience, her serene angelic face and incredible youth, the young artist asked if he could sketch her portrait. Angela saw no harm and readily agreed to sit for those moments, becoming the model for the soon to become famous painting.

Roberto Ferruzzi is best noted for his portraits of heads. Ferruzzi never intended his painting to be a likeness of the Blessed Mother. Simply because of his model's youth, he called his painting "Madonnina", or "Little Madonna".

The painting was exhibited in Venice in 1897. Since that time the original has not been located. At first it was thought to be lost during the war, but both the Ferruzzi family and Sister Angela have begun the search to locate its whereabouts. In more recent inquiries, it has been suggested that the original painting was acquired by an American Ambassador in Switzerland, but that has not been authenticated, thus the search continues. The aunts explained that when the 11 year old Angela returned home that day and explained to her mother what had take place...the child was sworn to secrecy, with the explanation that proper young ladies did not pose for portraits. Thus the wonderful secret died with the passing of Angela Cian Bovo in 1972. Perhaps because of her 42 years of hospitalization, it is quite likely that Angela Bovo never learned how significant the "Madonna" had become.

Returning home to the states that summer of 1984 , was both a humbling and awesome experience, for in Sister Angela's search for her heritage, she found a "madonna" for a mother. Sharing the news with her community and ultimately her 9 brothers and sisters, kindled a new thirst to know more facts about her ancestors.

The following summer of 1985 Sister Angela returned to Venice with some of the other members of her family from the California area. During a meeting with the grandson's of the artist Roberto Ferruzzi, they uncovered the original logs and clearly established the young Angela Cian as the model in 1896 for the "Madonnina".

When comparing the reproduction of the "Madonnina" accompanying this article, note the authentic print must not have a halo, nor have the young girl amidst clouds, but rather the girl depicted standing next to a pillar. Some holy pictures, prayer cards, and other inspirational prints seem to have added the halo and clouds, but in error.

Prints of the "Madonnina" are not only found in homes, rectories and convents but in selective illustrated collections of famous paintings, housed in art libraries at county museums, universities and public libraries. The "Madonnina" is shown with prints of equally famous paintings, Sallman's "Christ At Heart's Door", Strant's "The Last Supper", Raffaello's "Madonna", etc.

(photo of Sr. Angela and painting taken in 1985)

After teaching school for over three decades, Sister Angela Marie prayerfully and with the guidance of her superior and community sought to continue her religious vocation in a new ministry. Remembering how she eagerly assisted the nuns in the orphanages with braiding the long hair of her fellow orphans, Sister Angela was encouraged to pursue a license in cosmetology. In 1976 she began her new career at a time some people would consider retiring . Presently a prison barber at Martinez and Marsh Creek Jails in Northern California, she also does hair styling for the homebound and convalescent homes patients.

This enhances her call to evangelization, for being a listener to the circumstances she finds her clients in , Sister can use her own frame of reference to offer love and caring as well as from her extensive academic training as a teacher.

This is by no means the end of this inspirational story, Within the last year Sister Angela was visiting her sister Lena (Watson), a resident of Denver Colorado. The two were casually going through the familiar cardboard box that holds the meager contents of their mother's belongings from the institution when some familiar snapshot pictures taken before her death in 1972 were fingered. Suddenly a now very significant incident clarified a mysterious occurrence. In 1970, at St. Theresa's Convalescent Home in Haywood California where she was a resident, Angela Bovo, was asked by her children to just pose for one snapshot. Slowly, silently Angela rose from the bench upon which she was seated, picked up her shawl and gently draped it on her head, she turned sideways, clasped her hands and gazed slightly upward, saying not a word. The picture was taken and tongue in cheek placed with memorabilia assuming it was not eccentric for a person hospitalized for nearly 50 years. No indeed, it may have been a message unspoken, it may have been a mere distant memory in Angela Bovo, it may have been an ache for the act of obedience in "never telling anyone" for some 75 years. That last picture of Angela Bovo (see photo)before her death of a heart attack two years later now has as much significance to the Bovo children as the famous Madonnina.

Roberto Ferruzzi and his famous artist sons, enjoy recognition and reputation among Italian painters. Other successful works of Ferruzzi such as "La Prima Penitenza", "Zitto" and "Toward The Light" are historic in the prestigious art circles, but his "Madonnina" did more than any other one work to securely establish his reputation.

Roberto Ferruzzi was an only child born in 1853 to a wealthy family. His father died before he was 7 years old . He graduated from the University of Padua (Italy) with a degree in law but with no avocation for law he never undertook it as a profession but instead began to study painting. Being a man of wide general culture, of ample means, free to dedicate himself entirely to his pursuit of art, it did not take Ferruzzi very long to acquire a technique for his artistry and to plant himself in the midst of an of an environment which was naturally stimulating to the senses. Venice, Italy, being that of historical beauty and uniqueness and Ferruzzi having the sophistication and cultural education financial security affords, was the perfect combination that nurtured his genius to become the renowned Italian artist of the 19th century. Ferruzzi died in 1934.

Sister Angela now has bonded with an entire family of relatives in Italy. She currently is studying Italian in order to be able to correspond with her cousins, aunts and uncles. During this interim, the president of the Italian Catholic Federation Chapter 62 in Santa Monica, California , Enza Cianfanelli has become the official translator of the many documents and letters arriving from Venice. (note the coincidence in the first syllable of the translator's last name) It was one of these official documents from Italy that served to unfold God's Providence.

When Sister entered the convent she longed to take her mother's name which she erroneously thought was Angelina. Previous articles by this famous author in fact recorded her mother's name as Angelina. Given a choice of three names at her profession of vows, it was with a sense of hesitation and a tinge of guilt that the young nun felt called to choose the name Angela rather than her mother's name Angelina.

We see the Divine Wisdom and His Providence unfold as Sister Angela relates how it was in the summer of 1985 she saw the official records in Venice and learned her mother's name was Angela, the choice she felt so strongly led to in her novitiate days.

Many more unanswered questions are being explored. Long lost relatives both in the states and in Italy are being discovered. In subsequent updating, more information will be released.

How many of us, in our search for our heritage, find a famous Madonna for a mother? This is after all, a kind of miracle. (Sr. Angela Marie at her 50th Jubilee)

Jacqueline Galloway

*Note: The above article appeared in "Our Sunday Visitor" and several other publications

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