



**A Saint ...
A Grandfather ...
And paper boats filled with flowers.**

By Rev. Dr. Jack R. Miller

Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini was born on July 16, 1850. She was the youngest of thirteen children and one of five siblings to live beyond her teenage years. She was known most of her adult life as Mother Cabrini. After immigrating to the United States in 1887, she became a naturalized American citizen in 1909. Despite the prejudice against Italian migrants at the time and opposition within the Catholic Church, she successfully established charitable institutions in New York City for poor Italian immigrants. These events are well documented in the 2024 film, “Cabrini.”

Canonized on July 7, 1946, by Pope Pius XII, she became the first American citizen to be recognized by the Catholic Church as a saint. In 1950, Mother Cabrini was declared the “Patroness of Immigrants” for her efforts extended to immigrant populations across the United States, Latin America, and Europe.

The memorable life of Mother Cabrini began in the northern regions of Italy and ended at Columbus Hospital in Chicago sixty-seven years later. She was not only the founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and a tireless champion of Italian nationals, but Mother Cabrini was also responsible for the establishment of seventy institutions. Among them were orphanages, schools, and hospitals dispersed over eight countries.

From an early age, she was drawn to the missionary life. Her father, Agostino, would often read aloud to his children from a book of missionary stories, which stirred the young child’s imagination. While visiting her uncle, a Catholic priest, she would make boats from paper, fill them with flower missionaries, and send them off down the canal to India and China.

Roberto Licciani was a sixteen-year-old Italian immigrant when he entered the United States on February 25, 1913. Born in Vecchiano, in the Tuscan region of northern Italy, Roberto would spend the next three years working for the railroad as a laborer across the country, becoming a naturalized American citizen in Elko, Nevada, on May 15, 1916. Roberto Licciani was my “Nonno,” my grandfather. Did he ever cross paths with Mother Cabrini as she assisted Italian immigrants in New York, or as she visited labor camps across the country? I may never know for sure. I do know this: my grandfather, who was from northern Italy, taught me how to make paper boats when I was a child—something I have done for my grandchildren without realizing the connection with history. Now I tell them the story of the little paper boats Mother Cabrini made as a child. The ones she filled with flower missionaries and would send down the canal on imaginary journeys to India and China.

On November 13, 2010, I was ordained to the priesthood on the feast day of Mother Cabrini. Each year, I remember her and Nonno in a very special way. A paper boat is carefully folded and placed on the altar before celebrating my anniversary Mass. It is filled with flowers and my prayers of thanksgiving for a Saint who touched millions, and a man, although hardly a saint, who touched the life of one small child.

Grazie, Nonno!