



Every July when I was growing up, my mother would retell the story of how our grandmother and several older aunts would make the trip from South Buffalo to downtown, to St. Anthony's Church. There they would sit in the pew that Mother Cabrini sat in when she visited Western New York in the late 1800s. My mother would explain how these petite, elderly women would slide back and forth in the pew trying to merge their energy with that of Mother Cabrini's as they petitioned her to intercede on their behalf. This is the image that inspired the writing of my play, "Mother Cabrini's Mission to America."

There are not many young people today who realize that Francesca Cabrini, a small, sickly Italian woman from the Lombardy Region is our first American saint. To find out about Mother Cabrini, I didn't refer to the *Miniature Stories of the Saint*. I read six biographies, two, written sixty-five years apart by members of her Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. I also searched numerous web pages, articles, collections and cross-references. Those of us who are actively participating in this production feel that the spirit of Mother Cabrini thinks this is a good time in our history to remember her

life and her work.

Like every good reader and book sale adventurer, I was led to Christ the King Seminary's annual book sale where I was drawn to Pietro Di Donato's *Immigrant Saint*. After reading this beautifully written and impressive account of Mother Cabrini's life, I spent two years reading, researching, interviewing and writing a two hour version of the play.

I asked my main drama resource and talented sister, Jackie Albarella, to read the play and give me a critique. Jackie is an experienced actress, television personality and owner of her own media company. Like me, she felt there was something special in Mother Cabrini's story. We were convinced that the play should be produced and that Mother Cabrini's message should reach as many as possible. We spent another year collaborating and editing the script. At this point, I gave Jackie a brief description of how I envisioned the set, and she designed a unique, spiritually-centric set and included many multi-media effects.

Portraying Mother Cabrini is a challenge for any actress, but Jackie is able to merge the contrast of Mother Cabrini's diminutive size with the greatness of her deeds. St. Francis Xavier Cabrini helped Italian families and orphans world-wide but remained steadfastly attached only to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. To truly portray a real mystic even for a one hour performance is a daunting task, one that Jackie enthusiastically embraced and continues to perfect. Audience members familiar with Mother Cabrini's life, have remarked that Jackie brings our Saint alive. She brings our Saint's presence out of the worn novena books, back to her days in Buffalo.

Mother Cabrini has touched us both. At every performance we feel the pride of our heritage and the struggle of our forefathers. We are awed by the number of people who share with us the devotion they have for Mother Cabrini. They share stories of miracles and prayers answered. They show us treasured relics and those well-worn novena books that were used every day during the lunch hour when secretaries and students

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made their way to St. Anthony's for the Mother Cabrini novena. We are honored to be in their presence bringing her life and message to the world.

Although she wasn't in Buffalo for a long time, the play is framed around that trip. Mother Cabrini came here at the invitation of Father Gebelli. She came to ask the poor Italians for money to support her orphans and work. Father Gebelli hoped she or her sisters would stay and help run the Italian-American school on the West Side that at one time served over 300 children. She came to the small St. Anthony's Church because the pastors of the larger churches and the cathedrals, especially in New York City, would not let her collect money for poor Italians.

The play speaks of the Italian immigrants who were often treated like indentured servants sent from Ellis Island to wherever strong Italian laborers were needed. It was interesting to learn through the records and writings of Mother Cabrini that many Italians went to Denver to work in the mines. It was so dangerous that their children were left orphans, so Mother Cabrini built orphanages there. Other Italians worked in the oppressive heat of the Louisiana plantations, and some settled in California and as far as Washington. Mother Cabrini traveled to all of them to build schools, orphanages, churches, and hospitals.

She is not only known as Patroness of All Immigrants here in the United States, but her work also spread to nine countries on three continents. There is a version of the play set in England where her sisters set up schools and helped with the wartime effort. It also deals with the devotion to her in the Italian area called Bedford where a huge post-war migration from southern Italy took place. Housing was needed and poor starving southern Italian farmers went to Bedford to work in the brick factories. Many of their wives became domestics or worked in the local candy factory.

In the United States, Mother Cabrini almost continuously traveled to Eastern cities where there were large concentrations of Italian immigrants. On one trip, she spent three days in Cincinnati, three in Pittsburg, and three in Buffalo. She also visited Niagara Falls where she

admired the "omnipotence of God."

We think everyone should know that the first American Saint, the patroness of our country, was an Italian woman who served her people and anyone who needed help. Her life is a tribute to all of us. She came to America, like our grandparents and great-grandparents with very little and with little support from existing institutions, she built schools, orphanages, hospitals and churches. She traveled coast to coast ministering to Italian workers and their families. She makes us proud to be faith-filled Italian-Americans, part of the family of immigrants who built this nation and made it strong.

Mother Cabrini's Mission to America is available for large or small groups. It can also be adapted for fundraisers. My sister Jackie and I invite you to spend some time learning about and visiting with one of the most important Italian-American saints, our Patroness, Mother Cabrini.

For information write JKEA@JUNO.COM or call 716-656-5043.

