
**Hidden Figure Mother Cabrini:
An Accomplished Servant Leader and the First American Saint**

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This manuscript highlights and summarizes the life of Frances Xavier Cabrini's contributions to Italian immigrants in the United States of America as a servant leader. It demonstrates both 1) how she fought gender, cultural, stereotypical, religious, and socioeconomic barriers, and 2) identifies her successes and contributions as an educational entrepreneur, a human rights advocate, and a strong woman proud of her Italian heritage. It summarizes her life, provides a scholarly view of servant leadership and examples from her life, and her contributions to Italian-Americans, all which exemplify and confirm her worthiness as the first American saint.

Hidden Figures

In 2017, Theodore Melfi directed the film *Hidden Figures*. The storyline is based on a true story of three African-American women who worked for the National Aeronautic Space Administration (NASA) and were the intelligence behind one of the greatest aeronautic operations in American history. It exposed the gender, race, and professional barriers these women faced during this time in history while showcasing their contributions to our society. As Margot Lee Shetterly, a character in the movie said, "I changed what I could, and what I couldn't, I endured." Mother Cabrini did the same.

Frances Xavier Cabrini, a female Italian immigrant, fought gender, cultural, stereotypical, religious, and socioeconomic barriers to aid immigrants in their transition into America. At the age of thirty, Frances Cabrini founded the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (MSC) in Italy (Sprows Cummings, 2018). This group was "the first Italian female congregation to bear the formal title "Missionary" (Sullivan, 2018, pp. 265-266). Shortly thereafter, as servant of the Catholic Church, Frances Cabrini followed the direction of Pope Leo XIII to aid Italian immigrants' transition to American life (Arruza, 2012) and to provide a formal outlet to practice Catholicism (Sullivan, 1987). Nine years after she founded the MSC, she set off to America arriving in New York (Sullivan, 1987). Because of significant

contribution she made to so many Italian immigrants struggling as they arrived in America, she received many honors. In review of Mother Cabrini's life, it's not surprising that she was "the only religious woman named" one of *Chicago Magazine's* "Top Movers and Shakers of the 20th Century," (Horwath, 1999).

Mother Cabrini

Frances Xavier Cabrini was born in 1850 near Milan, Italy (cabrinationalshrine.org). Figure 1 details the life via timeline of Mother Cabrini. It includes a) the missionary sisterhood she founded, b) how she was asked by Pope Leo XIII to go to New York to serve Italian immigrants and orphans, c) the miracles she performed witnessed by others, and d) her sainthood. She was not only the first American to be canonized (i.e. declared) a saint, but she was named the *Universal Patroness of Immigrants* (Sullivan, 1987).

There were only 185 religious female institutions in Italy, and Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (MSC) that she founded, was one (Williams, 2015). Mother Cabrini used the MSC to catapult her educational practices from Italy, to London, then to the United States. Ultimately, she opened fifty-nine different schools and children's homes across nine different countries (Williams, 2015).

In 1909, Mother Cabrini celebrated her U.S. citizenship, which is believed to advance her ability to secure property (Sprows Cummings, 2018), enhance her business ventures, and further secure her missionary endeavors (Sullivan, 1987). One century later, *Time Magazine* published an article outlining the sainthood of Mother Cabrini (Rothman, 2016).

In 1955, Lincoln Park's Columbus Hospital was built in honor of Mother Cabrini (Dickert, 2013). According to the *Open House Chicago* website, the hospital remained intact for forty-seven years before it was torn down, however, the shrine of Mother Cabrini was conserved and restored. The land where the hospital once stood is now surrounded by luxury condominiums. This luxurious lifestyle was not always the case. In the twenty years leading up to 1930, this part of town was often referred to as "Little Hell." One section was specifically named "Death Corner" for the 100+ murders and known to be heavily populated Italian-Americans (Vale, 2012). In the 1940s, land was cleared to build Frances Cabrini Homes (initially to qualified families) but was repurposed after the United States declared war on Japan and Germany to house the families of servicemen

and others aiding in war efforts (Vale, 2012), ironically aligning to the generous and caring nature of its namesake. This new housing structure revitalized the area. Little did Mother Cabrini know that decades after her death, she would still have a direct impact on local residents in the Cabrini Green that would last over a century. In 2018, Smith, Kwon, Mason, and Sheehan performed a 30-participant study with residents living in Cabrini Green homes. This study ultimately demonstrated the value of support systems and saw tangible results with the relationships between mothers and children, which is exactly what Mother Cabrini was building as an obedient, dedicated servant leader.

Literature Review

Servant Leadership

There are a number of leadership styles, including trait, behavioral, situational, authentic, and servant (Kovach, 2018). The author defines servant leadership as the idea that an individual can improve an experience or situation by consistently putting aside their own self-interests for the betterment of others, i.e. creating an outcome where the opportunity cost of helping others outweighs the benefit to self. It can be exhibited in formal or informal situations. The notion of servant leadership originated in 1970 by Robert Greenleaf. More recently, characteristics used to describe a servant leader included empathic and nurturing (Northouse, 2017), and creating an atmosphere of inclusion and value (Robins & Judge, 2017). Jones and George (2017) further advance the concept of servant leadership by indicating that these leaders are driven internally, rather than by external forces.

Examples of Mother Cabrini as a Servant Leader

- In 1902, Mother Cabrini founded the Columbus Hospital “to serve the immigrants and poor of Chicago,” (Horwath, 1999).
- During her lifetime, she established sixty-seven different charities (Horwath, 1999) including numerous orphanages, schools for children, and hospitals for the sick (Smith, 2012).
- When she arrived in America, there were approximately thirteen million Italians who emigrated between 1880 and 1915. This was said to be the greatest number of people who left one country for another ever documented (Choate, 2008). She was personally invited by community

leaders to replicate what she was doing all over the United States – aid the Italian immigrants and orphans by providing them with education, basic needs, and a community support system in which to succeed.

Research to Date – Contributions to Italians

As a native-born Italian, she not only represented her country with honor, respect and dignity, she assessed and aided Italian immigrants in their transition to America. Williams (2015) detailed the numerous contributions Mother Cabrini made to females and to the Italian community. For instance, when Mother Cabrini founded the MSC, it was common for a male figure (a bishop, for example) to draft the Rule of the institution. However, contrary to popular custom, Mother Cabrini wrote the Rule herself for the Missionary Sisters. Sullivan (1987) detailed how Mother Cabrini personally attended to many Italian families in lower Manhattan and ensured the MSC continued those visits in lower Manhattan, then expanded to the west (as far as California and Washington state), the south (including Louisiana), and the Midwest (the Chicago area), all of which included religious (e.g. baptisms, marriages, prayer) and the social aspects (e.g. bringing groceries and clothes to wear).

Mother Cabrini's contributions to the Italian-American community were so vast, the MSC was often short-handed. Because the congregation she founded in Italy thrived, she was able to transport aid from Italy to America for additional assistance.

While in Chicago, she established parochial schools specifically for local Italian immigrants pro bono, for them not to worry about tuition. Because of her success and intuition, and because the need was so great, and Mother Cabrini (a non-native speaker) was able to recognize how children identified as *orphans* were outcast from society. As a result, she further expanded her schools to New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. As word spread about her success in helping poor Italian immigrants, bishop from Denver sought her services where she later opened another school (Sullivan, 1987). She was declared the Patron Saint of Immigrants in 1950 by Pope Pius XII (cabrinationalshrine.org).

Conclusion

Best stated by Sullivan (1987), “the institutions which Frances Cabrini founded established her role as an advocate for Italian immigrants... [She] developed a philosophy of education which combined the need for Americanization with, to her, the equally important preservation of the

Italians' cultural heritage" (pp. 274-275). She was a true servant leader, dedicating her life to help create a better life for others. Frances Cabrini was an Italian immigrant who became a citizen of the United States of America and the first American to be declared saint by the Catholic Church. With dignity and grace, she endured adversity as an Italian-American female, overcame obstacles, and committed herself to immigrants and the less fortunate. More than a century later, in October 2019, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York confirmed the building of a statue of Mother Cabrini.

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Figures

Figure 1. The timeline of Mother Cabrini’s life, adapted from www.cabrinationalshrine.org.

