



GOD'S MESSENGER

THE ASTOUNDING ACHIEVEMENTS OF

MOTHER CABRINI

A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF

MOTHER FRANCES X. CABRINI

"Gentle fictional touches...wonderfully portrays Cabrini's cheerful pluck and courage...
Cabrini's many devotees around the world will likely love the author's work here."

— *Kirkus Reviews*

Nicole Gregory



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PROJECT

Chapter One

A STRANGE SIGHT IN CHICAGO

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

The police officer speaking was slightly older than the other, and at this moment, also slightly drunk.

“If you’re seeing three nuns with a long twine marking off a piece of property, then yes,” said the younger man. “But what the devil are they up to?”

It was 1904 and Chicago had just declared a crackdown on the rampant problem of police officers drinking on the job and doing nothing to stop crime. The younger officer took this quite seriously and had sworn off the drink two days before—today his inebriated partner irritated him badly.

It was early dawn—the red sun peeked out between gray wisps of clouds into a cool morning mist over Lake Michigan. The two officers slowly approached the nuns, the older policeman listing slightly to the left. To him, the nun in charge seemed to be incredibly short, yet even in the dim light he could sense her bustling energy.

“Good morning, Sister!” said the older officer loudly. “Can you tell me what you could possibly be doing at this hour, in this place? You’re looking slightly suspicious, if I do say so!”

Mother Cabrini stopped and turned to the officers, noting the older one swaying slightly. “*Buongiorno c’è qualcosa che non va?* We’re finding out just how dishonest the men are who are selling this property to us,” she said with a smile, noting their interest. Although she could speak English, she still had a strong Italian accent. “We are Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and we’re about to purchase this land and that building to establish a hospital.”

“Why, that’s very good and kind of you!” said the younger police officer. “But what is that twine for?”

“We are making our purchase on a specific size of land, and I’ve asked my Sisters to help me measure the dimensions again. I’m sorry to tell you that the seller has tried to trick us by moving the surveyor marks so that we get less land than we’ve been bargaining for.”

“I see. Do you need our help with anything, Sister?” said the older policeman, suddenly indignant at the thought of anyone swindling a nun.

“No, thank you, Officer. I think we’ve confirmed what I suspected—he’s trying to cheat us. We will meet with the owner this morning, and I will not hesitate to tell him exactly what I think of his treatment of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart.”

“He should be ashamed of himself,” said the younger officer, shaking his head. After assurances that she and the Sisters could find their way back to their lodgings easily, the two officers walked away.

Mother Cabrini watched them go—she had smelled the alcohol on the older one’s breath, and said a quick prayer for their safety.

She was not bitter that the seller had attempted to deceive her, but she was glad she'd followed her instincts to measure the property. It would not be the first time—nor the last—that a man would try to swindle her in business dealings. When she exposed their tricks and confronted the men directly, she watched them shrink under her blue-eyed gaze in shame.

Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini was far from the small village in Northern Italy where she was born and raised. She was in America, where, now at age fifty-four, she demonstrated her skills as a shrewd and successful businesswoman.

They had been honed for decades—she had already negotiated with many businessmen and officials around the world for buildings and property to be used by her Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Intelligent, charming, generous, adventurous, *La Madre* was petite but fierce. She would not back down in her negotiations when the well-being—both physical and spiritual—of Italian immigrants and their families was at stake.

Her eyes sparkled as she watched the police officers walk off into Chicago's city landscape. She knew that in a matter of years this hospital would be ready and would be named Columbus Hospital, after the first Italian immigrant to America. But she had no way of knowing that this would be one of many hospitals she would build in her lifetime—and the one in which she would die years later.

And she did not know that she would become America's first saint. In fact, in honor of her astounding accomplishments, she would be called the Patron Saint of Immigrants. Now as the sun rose on the empty lot, Mother Cabrini calculated that in several hours she would find the office of the crooked property sellers who had tried to cheat her, and confront them.

She relished the thought.

Chapter Two

A WEAK GIRL WITH A STRONG SPIRIT

Years before, little Francesca Cabrini—called *Ceccina* by her family—sat on a grassy patch of ground near the river and arranged purple violets in a small paper boat she had made. Glancing around to make sure she was alone, the six-year-old girl began to speak to the flowers about the missions she had prepared for them. “*Carissime Sorelle*. My dear little one, you must go to England,” she said to the first flower. Picking up another she said, “You must be brave and sail all the way to Brazil to help the poor children. And you,” she whispered to a small flower, “must go all the way to China!”

Francesca Maria had been born prematurely in 1850, one of thirteen children to Agostino and Stella Cabrini, in the village of Sant’Angelo Lodigiano in Northern Italy. Her sister Rosa read her stories about brave missionaries, how they traveled to far away places to teach savages about Jesus. Sitting on the bank of the Venera River, near the home of her uncle, Reverend Luigi Oldini, she turned her wide blue eyes upward. She felt at peace in this isolated spot—the quiet soothed her as she stared into the blue horizon across the fields where farmers worked. *When can I become a missionary, and sail to other countries?*

She was a small child, with a round face, wide blue eyes, and blond hair. Her temperament was calm. She was obedient—wanting to do what her parents asked simply because she loved them very much. She was an observant child, and saw that her mother and father worked hard, as did most of the grown-ups in her small village.

In the evenings her father read the Bible out loud to the family, and later, in bed as she was falling asleep, Francesca would go over these stories in her mind, picturing herself as a character in them. She would find a baby lamb and cradle it in her arms as she walked beside Jesus. She would run to help the poor beggar left on the side of the road, and help the Good Samaritan to the inn. She gasped as Jesus came out of the cloud wearing glowing white robes. He waved to Francesca and then reached down to give her a tiny cross.

Francesca was sick often, mostly with breathing difficulties, and often she just felt weak and tired. But she could be as strong-willed as her older sister Rosa, who acted like she was her mother. Rosa was a harsh disciplinarian to Francesca and their little brother, and she was as adamant as their parents that reading and practicing arithmetic came before playing outside.

Ceccina liked it when Rosa told her stories about missionaries, but she didn't like it that Rosa always wanted to know what she was doing, where she was going. Francesca preferred to climb trees, or roam about the village and the nearby fields as she wished. Like now, for instance—it was so much fun that her older sister had no idea that she was down here by the water.

Ceccina carefully slid down the bank of the rushing river with her paper boats and stepped onto a large flat rock on the edge of the water. She looked down into the water—it was dark. She knelt to place the first little boat in the little stream, leaning

far out and stretching her arm over the water. She tipped her body just a bit more forward...

She could feel the weight of her small body shift too far—she flung her arms down to try to catch the edge of the rock, but it was too late. Falling forward into the cold rushing water, Francesca screamed as loudly as she could. The force of the fast-moving water swept her downstream and she tried to grab something—anything—but could not.

“Aiuto!” she cried out, then she tumbled under the water and when she gasped, water filled her mouth and throat. She turned herself face up again and coughed, spurring out the water, then cried again, *“Aiuto! Help!”*

A man’s voice replied somewhere above to the left on the river bank, and then people were shouting. She opened her mouth again to shout back but the water filled it, and as Francesca gasped she saw black blotches and then lost consciousness.

When she opened her eyes, the girl was surrounded by the familiar faces of neighboring farmers and their wives who lifted her up, grasping her hands and shoulders. She was cold and someone wrapped her in a blanket. “Jesus saved me...” mumbled Francesca. “I know he saved me, he wanted me to live.” The villagers looked at each other.

“Do you remember the time of the earthquake, when we found her praying?” said one woman quietly to another. The other nodded, staring at the girl. Just a few years earlier, when their village was jolted by an afternoon earthquake, adults desperately searched for every child. One was missing—Ceccina. Finally, they came upon her calmly praying in a corner of her house. The girl was strangely unafraid, completely absorbed in her quiet prayers. She had survived unhurt—again. The women whispered that the girl seemed to be protected somehow.



When Agostino and Stella Cabrini heard that their Ceccina had nearly drowned, they were terrified and thanked God for her safety and survival. Many children died young in this village—the couple had lost nine of theirs. A pious and strong-hearted man, Agostino had suffered deeply the losses of these children. He never stopped working in his fields, never stopped greeting his neighbors whenever he passed them, never stopped caring for his wife, but everyone saw the cloud of sadness in his eyes and the downward slope of his shoulders.

He and Stella doted on their surviving children—Maddalena, a girl born with severe brain damage, who needed constant care, and their beloved boy Giovanni Battista. They fretted over Francesca's weakness and ill health, often keeping her inside. Rosa, their oldest, was solemn and dutiful, more so because she had witnessed the deaths of her other siblings.

She had learned embroidery and taught Ceccina how to do so too—the two working on intricate patterns in lace and designs on linen. When their father was busy, Rosa read the Bible and other books aloud to her siblings in the evenings, and secretly dreamed of becoming a nun.

Rosa's life was not easy. Her mother relied heavily on her to do most of the cleaning and cooking. The women of her village consoled Stella with the loss of each child, but Stella slowly withdrew into a quiet sadness. Her only joy now was to teach her children at home—reading, simple arithmetic, and the little history and geography that she knew. It was increasingly difficult for Stella to keep up with even the simple chores, and Rosa took on more and more as she minded Ceccina and Giovanni Battista and cared for Maddalena.

One evening, Rosa approached her mother, who was resting on her small bed. “Mama,” she said. “I want to tell you that I have only one dream for my future.”

Stella turned to look lovingly at her daughter’s face. “Tell me, my dear Rosa, what is it you dream?”

“My dream, Mama, is to become a nun.”

Stella loved her oldest daughter with her whole heart, but could not allow her to leave her side, especially with Maddalena’s many needs. There was too much to be done for one woman in this house. “My daughter, you cannot leave us. Make this home your convent.”

Stella closed her eyes and turned away. Tears welled up and her heart hurt. She knew her mother struggled, but she felt her spirit breaking. Finally, she wiped away her tears and resolved, *I will do the work of Jesus here, in this house, in this town.*

But over time, disappointment hardened Rosa. She became strict with her siblings, watching them constantly and ordering them to do their chores and schoolwork. She almost never let Francesca out of her sight because she seemed a bit too independent.

July 1, 1857, was a warm summer day in the village of Sant’Angelo. Sunlight splashed off the tiled rooftops and the cobblestone streets. In her room, Rosa combed and oiled Francesca’s blond hair to make it look dark, and then helped her get dressed. Ceccina was quiet—she was to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation today, an honor. Her family washed and dressed in their finest clothing, and together they walked to the village church.

Francesca was seven, and small for her age. As she knelt down at the rail near the altar with the other children, she was

the smallest of them all. She looked up, as she often did toward the sky when she was outside playing. Soft light filtered through the stained-glass windows high above. She was at peace—as big and complicated as the world was, she felt utterly safe. She listened to the familiar voice of the bishop and became aware of a loving presence all around her. The bishop leaned down to anoint her forehead, and suddenly Francesca felt as if a warm cloak were being placed around her shoulders. She lost the sensation of being on the ground. *I know it is you, Holy Ghost, who is here to protect me*, she thought. She stood up with the other children, but she was disoriented. Was it day or night? Was she inside or outside? Who was with her besides the bishop and the children now filing out of the church?

Something had just happened, but what was it?

Agostino and Stella were farmers, earning money by selling their produce in the town market. They worked constantly. They were generous to their neighbors, sharing produce with those who had nothing, but they were frugal in their business and had done well. Beyond their own village, however, Italy was in turmoil.

Austria had invaded the Lombardy region in 1869 and now ruled the northwest areas of Lombardy and Venetia. Even residents of Sant'Angelo were well aware of this, because Austrian soldiers stopped in the village—several of them inviting themselves to stay in the Cabrini household. Though the family really had no choice in the matter, Agostino politely made sure the soldiers were comfortable and had plenty to eat. Months later, to the amusement of the villagers, the same soldiers passed hastily through the village again—this time in retreat—too much in a hurry to stay even an hour in the town.

“Say nothing,” Agostino counseled his wife and children. He wanted them to remain quiet on the subject of politics, especially because people who called themselves nationalists were against the Church and all its power. It was well known that Agostino was Catholic. He made sure to sidestep public arguments. But he and Stella were always aware of the potential danger in being known as Catholic. They wanted Rosa, Ceccina, and Giovanni Battista to be educated so that they could live well in the world. When Francesca was thirteen, they decided it was time to send their youngest daughter to a convent school: Daughters of the Sacred Heart, located in the nearby town of Arluno. The nuns there had a reputation of being kind and patient with their students, while encouraging the young women to think and express themselves intelligently. Agostino and Stella hoped it would help their inquisitive little Ceccina to focus her mind on studies. Stella and Rosa had given her lessons at home for years. Now she had learned all she could from her mother and sister and was eager for more.

“I have been to China! I have seen the people who live in the mountains and have traveled that land to share the words of Jesus Christ, our savior!”

Francesca spun around to find the person who shouted these words. It felt as if he were speaking to her and to her alone. She located him right away—the man was wearing a black cassock and his long dark hair blew about in the wind. His eyes were bright and dark, and he spoke with a half smile as he surveyed the village crowd. The visitor to Sant’Angelo was standing on a wooden box in the town square, addressing the crowd of townspeople who stopped to listen.

It was just a few weeks before Francesca was to depart for Arluno and to her new convent school. As usual, the girl had accompanied her parents to the village market early in the morning, where she would help them sell the produce from their small farm. Now she stared at the man, who stood tall and straight, calling people to come hear his story. Drawn by his deep voice, Francesca stepped toward him to better hear. He was loud—as if he knew that hardly any of them would care about his story or even believe him, yet he was compelled to tell it. He was used to traveling alone and now insisted this audience hear what he had witnessed and experienced.

“I have seen many foreign lands, traveled by sea,” he said, his voice booming. “I am a missionary, and I was guided by Jesus himself to share his words with all who did not yet know his grace and love.”

Captivated, Francesca moved closer and listened while he told of being hungry and exhausted while he walked from town to town, over mountains and across wide rivers to remote villages, hidden from civilization. He met with men, women, and even children who had no religion.

No religion? Francesca was riveted. *How could people have no religion?* With the help of translators, the man said, he brought the message of the Catholic religion to peasants of foreign lands and showed them how they could be saved from their sins. “*Cecina!*” called Stella. “Come and help us—you don’t need to listen to that man.” Francesca turned back to her family reluctantly. The man’s words were electrifying. He was a missionary, and had been to China!



Francesca was nervous about leaving home and the world she knew. But after a few weeks in the convent school, she adored the nuns at the Daughters of Sacred Heart. She loved the lessons—geography and history were her favorite subjects—which fed her quick, intelligent mind. Hours disappeared when she studied the pages of geography books, memorizing the names of the highest mountain peaks in the world, and tracing her fingers over the boundaries of Argentina, Chile, Spain, England, and France. In her daydreams she could almost see these places, especially the mountain peaks, such as of Miranda and Tenerife in Spain.

One day I might climb these mountains, she thought.

At school, she found an atlas and books filled with real-life stories about explorers who had traveled to far-off countries beyond the familiar small villages of the Lombardy region. She read about native tribes in South America who still lived as their ancestors had hundreds of years ago.

She discovered a book about China and tried to memorize the names of provinces and cities of this vast country. She wondered: *Exactly where did the missionaries go? What were their routes, and how did they survive?* Her teachers drew the girls into discussions and encouraged them to learn about cultures and customs foreign to their own. Francesca was an eager student, taking in all she learned and basking in the kindness that the nuns offered. In her imagination, she was already a missionary, traveling far and wide around the world.

With each year, young Francesca's confidence grew. While she was in school, her sister Rosa had become a teacher. Now seeing a chance to earn money for her parents, to keep learning, and

help other girls do the same, Francesca decided she would train to be a teacher too.

But after five years at the school, she really only wanted one thing: to join the nuns and be as much like them as possible. She made a formal request to join the order, but her request was turned down. Stung and hurt, she returned home. Was it her physical weakness? She was sick often, and could not run around with the other girls too long before she needed to stop and sit down. Heartbroken, Francesca cried to herself: *I know with my whole soul that I am called to be a spouse of Jesus. Why am I being denied?*

Chapter Three

A GIFT FOR TEACHING

“*I’m going to be a teacher.*” Francesca practiced saying the words out loud. The reality was sinking in. Ever since she received the news of her rejection from the Daughters of the Sacred Heart, Francesca had suffered in silent disappointment. But now her schooling was completed—she had packed her bag, said her goodbyes to her friends and beloved teachers. At last, she stepped down and away from the school and began her long walk back on a hard, dusty road to Sant’Angelo.

Fields of golden wheat undulated in the breeze to her right, and cows lazily grazed in the hazy afternoon sunlight to her left. But Francesca hardly noticed. She looked down at her already dusty shoes walking, one step in front of the other, toward home. In her mind she was going over the question again and again: *Why was her request to join this order denied?*

Suffering, she knew, was part of being a missionary and of following Jesus. And she very much aspired to perform “mortifications,” ways in which Catholics purposely suffered—by fasting, sleeping on hard wood, living in extreme poverty, even lashing their own bodies. Her suffering right now was severe

disappointment at not being able to become a nun. But to question the rejection, was that going against God's will?

In the quiet of her solitary walking, Francesca shifted her thoughts to the fact that she had passed her examinations and was now officially qualified to be a teacher. She had had many teachers—her mother, Rosa, the Sisters. Teachers were sacred. They could change a girl's life forever by just offering praise at little things well done, and by opening up the world through books and stories about other countries. That's what had happened to her. These kind and knowledgeable nuns had fueled Francesca's passion to be a missionary, although it still seemed like a far-off dream to her. Of the girls she knew in Sant'Angelo, some were already married and had a baby or two, and some never got to go to school at all because they had to work every day on their family's farms. She already knew in her bones that this was not the life she wanted. Francesca had also known girls not much older than Rosa who had died in childbirth.

To be a teacher—this is a privilege! Francesca thought. And she already knew that it was one way she could explore the world. She relaxed a little and allowed herself to feel pride in the years of her education with the nuns. It had been difficult at times, but her teachers had been so encouraging and delighted in her appetite to learn. They had given her and the other girls a rare freedom: to be as inquisitive and intelligent as they wished, with no boy or man to judge or stop them. From this moment on, Francesca vowed that she would add the words "Elementary School Teacher" beneath her signature in any letter she wrote. It was autumn, 1868. This would be a proud day for her family too.

She arrived at the door of her parents' home by late afternoon and eagerly pushed it open. Her whole family was there,

preparing to eat an early dinner, and looked up in surprise when she entered the house. Stella rushed to greet her daughter, with Agostino close behind. Rosa nodded at her with a smile, but was quiet. Giovanni Battista laughed and jumped up to give her a hug. Even Maddalena seemed to pay attention and stared at Francesca and at the family commotion.

Francesca waved her examination papers in the air and shared the good news. But when she looked into Rosa's eyes, she knew instantly something was wrong. When she had a moment, she pulled her sister aside.

"You can't hide it, something is wrong—tell me!" she demanded.

"Can't you see it?" Rosa said quietly. "Mama and Papa—neither one is in good health. I'm worried." Now Francesca was quiet.

"I did see," she said, thinking now how tired they'd both seemed. "But what is wrong?" Rosa shook her head; she didn't know.

Happy to be home, Francesca returned easily to her life with her family, helping with the chores, caring for Maddalena, and maintaining the spiritual practices she had become accustomed to with the Sisters. Sundays were always especially happy, because the family attended church together.

"*Help! Rosa, Ceccina!*" Stella wailed early one Sunday morning. The daughters ran into their parents' bedroom to find their father slumped to one side in the bed. He could not right himself—half his body had gone slack. The village doctor was called and he confirmed that Agostino had suffered a massive stroke.

Rosa and Francesca exchanged glances, knowing that their life was changed forever. In the following days, weeks, and months, they cared for their debilitated father as he struggled to do even minor tasks in the house. Stella, heartbroken and overwhelmed, became withdrawn and the sisters ministered to both—attending their physical needs, and praying with them.

In a year, Agostino died, and months later, Stella died too, at age sixty-two. Their children were bereft. Giovanni Battista kept up the farm work, but he had no real interest in it now that his father was gone. Watching his older sisters, he had decided that he too wanted to be a teacher. Stunned by the loss of both parents, Francesca's grief was heavy. She tried to visualize her future, but could not do so.

In the spring of 1871, a highly contagious chicken pox outbreak swept through Sant'Angelo. Francesca, eighteen, realizing how many of her neighbors and friends were sick, decided to do whatever she could to help the people who were ill and her missionary spirit stirred. She brought warm bread and broth to her sick neighbors, cleaned their blisters, and placed cool cloths on their foreheads while urging them to eat. But in the evening at home, Rosa became stern. "Why do you put yourself in such danger? You think you are doing good, but you too will soon be sick and then you will be no help at all." Francesca lowered her eyes and thought: *Jesus compels me to go out to the sick. So it is Jesus who will protect me.*

Both sisters were right. Within weeks, Francesca was ill with chicken pox, and could not get out of bed. Watching Francesca feverishly toss and turn, Rosa was tempted to remind her how foolish she had been. "*Gesù Cristo, posso sentire voi vicin a me,*"

whispered Francesca in her feverish sleep. “I can feel you near me. Where you call me I will go...” Rosa stared at her delirious sister curiously. How could she admonish her?

Not long after she recovered, Francesca was visited by the local priest, who asked if she would be a substitute teacher in the village of Vidardo a mile away. She readily said yes—she and her siblings needed money and this was her first chance to use her teaching skills. She met with Vidardo’s parish rector, Don Antonio Serrati. As he explained her duties, young Francesca’s thoughts drifted. Of course she would take this job, but in her heart she could feel the desire to do something far bigger than to be a substitute teacher. She wanted to climb mountain peaks, cross rushing rivers, and bring the love of Jesus to people who had never had religion! Little did she know that the man sitting before her would be a guide toward that very journey, and in fact, that her journey had already begun.

Within a few days, her teaching post started in the small wood-frame schoolhouse. Though awkward and overly strict with her young students at first, Francesca eventually relaxed and won them over with kindness and her infectious enthusiasm for learning. Teaching religion held some risk, Francesca knew quite well, as the anti-cleric government officials frowned upon it. She made sure to use her quietest voice for these lessons.

Serrati observed Francesca’s natural style of teaching the young people in his parish, and was impressed by how engaged her students were becoming in their studies. When he learned that she had requested again to join the Daughters of the Sacred Heart, he immediately calculated the loss this would mean for his community. He exerted his influence to make sure the nuns rejected her request, citing her physical weakness.

Not long after that, Francesca offered herself to the Canossian Sisters at Crema, but once again Serrati secretly blocked her acceptance. Twice denied, Francesca was devastated and in her nightly prayers she appealed to Jesus to reveal his true purpose for her.

Soon another opportunity arose: Serrati wanted to tap Francesca's obvious ability to inspire and lead and he went to visit her at the end of one school day to tell her about it. "Francesca, I am soon going to be transferred to the town of Codogno—the orphanage and convent there, called House of Providence, is apparently not being well run. It needs help. I want to ask you to go there, to be part of the community and to do what you can to assist in the administration and regain order."

Francesca listened intently as Monsignor Serrati described the problems at the orphanage. "The two administrators have mismanaged it terribly, and furthermore they're too harsh with the orphans and young religious women. I'm afraid these administrators, well, they are personally difficult."

Francesca looked down, hoping to hide her feelings. She knew she should say yes to this proposition, but what about her dreams of being a missionary? Was that going to be an unfulfilled dream forever? Still reeling from her second obstacle toward becoming a nun, Francesca felt the calling to Jesus more than ever before. Yet she understood that Monsignor Serrati was giving her a chance to save the young orphans and convent girls from a terrible fate. She knew the rule of obedience for nuns, and she adapted it to her own life. "Of course, Monsignor," she said. "I will to go to Codogno. When would you like me to begin?"