

A Caring Christian Community in the image of Christ: Bl Grimoaldo

Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Rochester has long been proud to entomb the remains of the mother of a great Irish leader. Eamon de Valera, successively premier and president of Ireland, was the son of Mrs. Catherine Coll de Valera Wheelwright (1858-1932), a resident of the Flower city.

Now, since January 29, 1995, the Cemetery has been able to boast of enshrining the mother and sister of a saint. On that day Pope John Paul II beatified Blessed Grimoaldo, a young seminarian of the Passionist Order.

Grimoaldo, the firstborn child of his family, was the son of Pietro Paolo Santamaria, a rope-maker of Pontecorvo, Italy, and his wife Cecilia Ruscio Santamaria. Born on May 4, 1883, he grew up in a devout family of average means. Baptized Ferdinando, he was different from the rest of the Santamaria siblings in that from age six onward, he showed an extraordinary bent towards prayer and all that was religious. Apart from prayer and self-denial, his mother used to say of him, "Nothing else was important."

This devotion hardly escaped the townsfolk. He puzzles them but they admired him. For all that, Ferdinando remained a thoughtful and likeable boy.

Pietro Paolo trained his oldest child in the craft of ropemaking, intending that he would carry on the family business; but the lad marched to a different drum. When 13m he announced his desire to join the Passionist Order of preaching priests. His father, disappointed, delayed for some months before giving his approval.

On Ash Wednesday 1899, Ferdinando left home and family for good, aged 15. The Passionists received him with joy at their novitiate in Paliano, some 40 kilometers from Rome. They clothed him in the heavy, brownish-black habit of their Congregation of the Passion. In honor of the patron saint of Pontecorvo, he took the religious name Grimoaldo of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

A year later, on March 5, 1900, he was allowed to take his vows to practice poverty, chastity, and obedience and to preach, in particular, devotion to the passion of Christ. Then he was assigned to their monastery at Ceccano to begin his studies for the priesthood.

Although Grimoaldo was strong physical constitution, God did not permit him to become a priest. He died on November 18, 1902, of a sudden attack of meningitis and erysipelas, perfectly resigned to the divine will.

Young Santamaria had predicted the hour of his death, and the death shortly afterward of his fellow Pontecorvite, Cardinal Aloisi Masella. As a boy he had been observed on one occasion when at prayer, to be lifted up in ecstasy a foot or so off the ground. But these were his only unusual charismatic gifts. His holiness was rather than of a person who tried consciously to give himself wholly to God., not only in prayer but in trying to do all the small things of life with absolute perfection. That is an approach to holiness that is a little easier for most of us, young or old, to take.

In the 1950s, the Italian Passionists started a campaign to canonize their 19-year-old Brother. His sister Vincenzina (Mrs. Anthony) Panella had come to Rochester to live some years after Grimoaldo's death. His widowed mother Cecilia ad taken up residence with her in 1920.

The Passionists asked Vincenza ("Jenny") to promote devotion to her brother in Rochester. She was able to tell friends much about Grimoaldo, from her own memories and the abundant memorials of her mother, who had died in 1934.

When the cause for canonization was formally opened in 1957, Jenny and two other Rochesterians from Pontecorvo became important witnesses. In 1991, Pope John Paul II declared him "venerable" as a practitioner of heroic virtue.

Two nieces from Rochester and a number of relatives were presented at the beatification. The whole Diocese of Rochester rejoiced. Though he lived and died in Italy, Bl. Grimoaldo, through family ties, can be considered an honorary Rochesterian. Indeed, the Mayor of Rochester officially declared him so.

-Father Robert F. McNamara