

The Mystic Who Remembered

**BLESSED MARIA CELESTE CROSTAROSA
FIRST REDEMPTORISTINE**



MARIA CELESTE CROSTAROSA, FOUNDER OF THE ORDER OF THE MOST HOLY REDEEMER WAS BEATIFIED ON 18 JUNE 2016. A SISTER OF THE REDEMPTORISTINE COMMUNITY IN DUBLIN OUTLINES HER LIFE AND VISION.

BY SR GABRIELLE FOX OSsR

Julia Crostorosa was born into a noble family in Naples, Italy on October 31st, 1696. Her father, Guiseppe Crostarosa was a magistrate in Naples, a position that allowed him to live at home with his numerous family. Her mother, Battistina Caldari was the complete picture of the Neapolitan woman. She was happy and dynamic, passionate and gentle and dedicated herself to the upbringing of her twelve children. It was in these surroundings that Julia grew up. Her character was determined, energetic and strong. Once an idea or decision was sufficiently matured, she took action immediately and dominated the games of her siblings.

A PRECOCIOUS MYSTIC

At five or six years of age, Julia began to respond to the love of God with childlike excitement and love. The 'Lord spoke to her heart,' as she put it later in her autobiography. After a time she was attracted to the frivolity of chatter and songs of the servants in the house, and for two years

with Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Her elderly Dominican confessor guided her spiritual journey, but he was transferred to another community. She began to go very frequently to confession, and her mother became suspicious! She discovered that the new confessor was a young man for whom her daughter had developed an attraction! A more suitable confessor was soon found, needless to say.

Julia shared the exuberant temperament of her Italian genes and culture. The glaring brightness of the Italian sunshine provides her with an allegory of Christ the Son of God. No more than any of us is, she was not born holy but became gradually transformed into the likeness of Christ.

OFF TO THE CONVENT

Her story continues. At the age of twenty-one, Julia entered a Carmelite monastery in Marigliano near Naples, taking the religious name of Maria Celeste. There she lived a life of deep prayer, until its suppression five years later.

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followed this shallow life style.

She was 11 when she made the first big decision to change her behaviour, carrying it out with a strength beyond for her age. A deep inner life of meditation and contemplation started when she was twelve years old, or as she called it, 'a secret companionship'

She tells the story of her entrance in her own words: "I was taken to visit a servant of God in the district of Marigliano, nine miles inland from the city of Naples, where there was a monastery of nuns of the reform of Mother Serafina of Capri. I was brought along with my mother

and one of my older sisters, who greatly desired to become a nun. When I arrived at the monastery, I was received by the Superior with much joy and courtesy, and she asked me if I would like to remain in their company in this monastery. I immediately replied that I would be only too happy to stay and embrace the religious life. With great determination, I remained in this monastery, together with my other sister, after a long altercation with my mother, because she had not gained my father's consent for me to remain. But in the end, we persuaded her and she consented on the understanding that, if our father was not pleased with our decision, she would return again to bring us home. But you, Lord, so disposed my father's heart that he was pleased and confirmed our decision."

A NEW CONVENT, A NEW ORDER

When the convent in Marigliano was closed down some five years later she went to the convent of Scala, a small town in the hills above Amalfi. Living the gospel at a profound level, Celeste had a series of revelations, which ultimately led to her founding of the Redemptoristine Order, with its distinctive deep red habit and its own rule. At the heart of the Rule, was the vision that inspired Celeste: the community and each individual sister was to become a "living memorial" of the life of Christ in the mystery of salvation. Even the red and blue colours of the new habit were to be a daily reminder of that.

Celeste's inspiration set in motion events that were extremely painful for her. Fr

Thomas Falcoia, a servant of God in his own way, had been influential in her move to Scala, but as spiritual director to the nuns of that community, he was destined to cause havoc in her life. On hearing of the 'New Rule' he severely reprimanded Celeste, telling her that it was a product of her imagination and the consequence of her pride. He ordered her to burn the rule and to be deprived of Holy Communion for two months.

At this point in the story, Fr Falcoia invited another priest to preach a retreat to the sisters. His name was Alphonsus Liguori. Like Celeste, he was a Neapolitan, just one month older than she was. Initially sceptical about Celeste, as he got to know her he found her account of her revelations credible. He was less prepared to believe her when she told him she saw him, in God's plan, as the founder of a male branch of the order, devoted to preaching the message of redemption. With Alphonsus' encouragement, the sisters accepted the new rule with the red and blue habit on the feast of Pentecost, the 13th May 1731.

DEPARTURE FROM SCALA

Fr Falcoia continued to interfere in the affairs of the monastery. Some of the men who were attracted by Alphonsus' initial attempts to found the new missionary community did little to improve matters.

Maria Celeste was imprisoned for a time in the attic of the monastery, where even her two siblings, Ursula and Giovanna also members of the community, were forbidden to speak with her. Finally, Celeste was presented

with an ultimatum: either accept Fr Falcoia as her sole spiritual director or leave the community.

Her elderly father, now bedridden, sent his son Giorgio, a Jesuit priest and theologian to intervene. He was only allowed to communicate with his sisters in the confessional, and he advised Celeste that in conscience that she could not submit to these conditions. The Crostarosa sisters were expelled from Scala. After years of wandering, and living in other religious communities, they made their way to Foggia. There Celeste founded a community living under the revealed rule. She died there on September 14th 1755.

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CELESTE THE WOMAN

The spiritual journey of Celeste was favoured with many mystical experiences.

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the rights of conscience. She was intelligent, with great intuition and understood the urgent needs of the society of her time. But Maria Celeste was above all a mystic who lived in deep communion and prayer with Christ.

In addition to her friendship with Alphonsus, Celeste was also a close friend of St Gerard

Majella. She died just one month before Gerard, who had an intuition of her death. St Gerard encouraged his niece and other young women to enter the religious life in Celeste's monastery.

CELESTE'S SPIRITUALITY AND ITS MESSAGE

Celeste's spirituality is so simple yet so profound. She held a 'fixed gaze' on the face of Christ especially in the context of the Eucharist, which gradually transformed her so that Christ, became flesh in her - the Spirit within prayed with sighs too deep for words. One of the

principle marks of the spirituality of Celeste is the 'Viva Memoria,' that is the call of each person to be in himself/herself a true and authentic living image of Christ, called to reflect and make Him present in our thoughts (having the mind of Christ), - conscious that each word must speak of Christ and in our attitudes to all, especially those who exist on the

margins and periphery of life in our world today.

Each one of us can find inspiration in Celeste and her mission is a topical one. This is especially true of women who have a strong sense of their own dignity. They can find in her a companion as they search for new forms which help them to express and realise better the dignity of woman in the Church and in society. She would identify with the words of Rosemary Ruether: 'whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women', is to be appraised as non-redemptive, and must be presumed not to reflect an authentic relation to the Divine. The positive principle is also affirmed: 'what does reflect the full humanity of women is of the Holy, reflecting the true nature of things and the authentic message of salvation.'

Her's is a spirituality of everyday life, lived in communion with Christ, the Redeemer. It should radiate and go forth from us, imparting a contemplative dimension to the reality of the life of every Christian. Contemplation does not mean flight but rather commitment to finding the presence of the God of love in each event of every day.



The present Redemptoristine community in Dublin

Contemplation is the response to a call: a call from him who has no voice, and yet who speaks in everything that is, and in the depths of my own being: for we ourselves are words of his.

Celeste invites us to understand that we are co-responsible together with Christ in giving real hope

and genuine human dignity to each other, especially to those who feel oppressed. She was convinced that there is no Christian community, and much less any religious community, if we are not living the transparent memory of Christ, the Saviour. Her desire for us all was that we make Christ present in our world.

SPIRITUALITY IN DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD

Celeste calls us today into dialogue with the world. The call is to ever deeper communion with God, but at the same time actualised and demonstrated most effectively in our communion with others, in a mission that stems from listening to their needs and involves every dimension of existence but especially to the abandoned and the poor.

Redemptoristines today are spread throughout Europe, USA, Canada, Africa, Asia Australia and South America, continuing to live the charism of Maria Celeste and trying to be credible living witnesses of his love. ®

A native of County Tipperary, Sr Gabrielle Fox OSsR was prioress of St Alphonsus Monastery, Drumcondra, Dublin.