

Mother Cabrini, Pray for Us

The Feast Day of St. Mother Francis Cabrini

November 13, 2025

Fr. Tony Davis

"We are disturbed when we see among our people a climate of fear and anxiety around questions of profiling and immigration enforcement. We are saddened by the state of contemporary debate and the vilification of immigrants. We are concerned about the conditions in detention centers and the lack of access to pastoral care. We lament that some immigrants in the United States have arbitrarily lost their legal status. We are troubled by threats against the sanctity of houses of worship and the special nature of hospitals and schools. We are grieved when we meet parents who fear being detained when taking their children to school and when we try to console family members who have already been separated from their loved ones." These are the words coming from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops yesterday from their annual meeting in Baltimore. In spite of our divided Church and with constant criticism of our bishops, they are united on this issue.

Today, November 13, we celebrate the Feast Day of Mother Francis Cabrini, who was declared patroness of immigrants in 1950 by Pope Pius XII. Later this evening, we will hear a testimony of her

life and what she means for us today (see below). For now, it is important to note that Mother Cabrini stands as a counterweight to those who think the Church is becoming too political by speaking about immigrants. We have a rich tradition of supporting immigrants. It is called 'welcoming the stranger' and remembering that all of us, as the people of God, were migrants at one time ourselves, some of us quite literally in recent history.

In our Gospel for this mass, which is not necessarily tied to Mother Cabrini's Feast Day, speaking about Jesus, the last line said: "but first he must suffer greatly and be rejected by this generation." It is fitting for us to remember this evening that Jesus knew what it was like to be rejected by the crowds and those with power. This is the experience of the immigrants in our country in the present moment, rejected by this generation.

The immigration debate is certainly delicate and calls for nuance. As Christians, however, what we cannot be nuanced about is our deep desire to support immigrants, even if that support has to be tempered by other realities. Regardless of our personal opinions, we must treat immigrants as human beings who have the same dignity as us. We should want to hear their stories to better understand why they are here and what risks they had to take to get here. We should be thoughtful enough to not lump them all into the category of criminal and realize that they are much more likely to be victims of crimes themselves. We

should value the diversity they bring to our country and be appreciative of the jobs they do that others don't want to do. Immigrants are not aliens, they are our brothers, sisters, and children in Christ.

As Catholics, in the words of our bishops, we are disturbed, saddened, concerned, troubled, grieved, and lament whenever immigrants are rejected.

What are my current thoughts on the issue of immigration? How can a Catholic approach help us better understand the issue?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that Mother Cabrini, who came to the aid of Italian immigrants living in the United States of America at the turn of the 20th century, may come to our aid in 2025 with a message of hope and support for immigrants.

The Feast Day of St. Cabrini by Michelle Kriegel

Maria Francesca Cabrini was born in Italy in 1850, the youngest of thirteen children in a farming family. Born prematurely, her health was always poor, and when she decided that she wanted to become a religious sister she was rejected by two orders because of her medical issues. When she did take her vows, she added the name "Xavier" to her own in honor of St. Francis Xavier, the patron saint of missionaries. Her dream was to travel to eastern Asia to help minister to the impoverished populations there. After she founded her own order, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, she presented her plan to Pope Leo XIII, who ultimately rejected it. He asked her instead to go to New York City to help its poor Italian Catholic immigrants, and he recognized her order as the first Italian religious sisters to be called a missionary institute.

Once in New York, Mother Cabrini faced obstacle after obstacle, starting with the city's racist attitude toward Italian immigrants. Even in the Catholic Church, most of the leadership was Irish, and many priests segregated their Italian worshippers to church basements. Some of her projects were even vandalized in an effort to keep Italians out of "respectable" neighborhoods. In addition, the archbishop resented the fact that the Vatican had sent women to help him, wishing that priests had come instead. He tried to send Cabrini back to Italy, but she refused, citing her letter of introduction from the Pope. The tumultuous political

climate in Italy caused even her fellow countrymen, the Italian immigrants, to be suspicious of the Sicilian sisters who had come to help them.

Despite all these hardships, Cabrini was able to start an orphanage outside the city, where the nuns took in poor Italian children and educated them. She was especially protective of the young girls, giving them the best chance she could to survive on their own once they left her care. It was common practice to force girls out of orphanages when they turned 14, but Cabrini would only release them to an adoptive family or make sure they were trained in a skill that would help them make a living for themselves. Next, Cabrini founded a hospital for Italians, the first of its kind in New York. After her success with these projects, other religious orders began requesting her help, and she traveled extensively throughout the United States and other countries, ultimately starting 67 institutions like schools and orphanages. Mother Cabrini crossed the Atlantic ocean by boat 24 times in her lifetime, including one voyage where she had bought a ticket for the Titanic, but ultimately had to change her plans and sail earlier on another vessel.

When asked how she managed to stay grounded in the midst of so much work, she replied, "Prayer and interior silence are great necessities for the person who is occupied with a thousand concerns; speaking, listening, hearing, giving of herself even to

many good things . . . Prayer and silence bring to her that mystical rest". She became an American citizen in 1910, and died in 1917 in Chicago, working up until her last moments wrapping Christmas gifts for the children under her care. When she was canonized in 1946, she became the first American saint, and was later named the patron saint of immigrants. I love that the first American saint was actually an immigrant, and indeed one that wasn't treated as welcome when she came to this country!

Today, shrines stand in her honor in New York City, Chicago, and Boulder, Colorado, among others, and a large statue in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican places her among other saints who founded religious orders. In 2020, the state of Colorado voted to change "Columbus Day" to "Cabrini Day", replacing a conqueror with a compassionate immigrant woman. And her order, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, can be found today on six continents to continue her work as teachers, nurses, and social workers, to name a few. Mother Cabrini's courage, tenacity, and deep love for the poor allowed her to overcome her poor health, as well as so many social barriers. Her remarkable body of work is a testament to her deep love of God. She was quoted as saying, "I will go anywhere and do anything in order to communicate the love of Jesus to those who do not know Him or have forgotten Him".

I have been trying to imagine how Mother Cabrini would react—and act—in modern America. The persecuted demographic has changed since her time, but the immigrant's struggle continues in our country to this day. Certainly she would be busy providing resources to the impoverished, the hunted, the outcast—there is no end to the need. But while it's nice to speculate about what St. Cabrini would be doing right now, if we are not inspired to act ourselves, then her legacy falls short. It's hard to believe that she would have wanted her influence to end with her life, that her story would become another nice, seemingly unattainable tale of sainthood. As an immigrant and a woman, she was at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and yet she accomplished so much through faith, hope, and determination. Like Jesus, she went to the low places, sought out the downtrodden, and aligned herself with the marginalized. Cabrini's life is not meant to be a vague inspirational bit of history—it is a call to action. So really, it doesn't matter exactly what she would be doing in America today. What matters is that we are continuing her legacy through our lives, in ways that are unique to us. We can't all go out today and start an orphanage or change immigration legislation. But God has given each of us our own gifts and talents to use in these circumstances, unique ways to act and react with love toward our brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us pray that Mother Cabrini, the Holy Spirit, and the radical love of Jesus move each of us to live as one blended family with our immigrant neighbors.