

Childhood

On October 31, 1696, Maria Celeste is born to a prominent middle-class family in Naples. The tenth of twelve children, she is baptized Giulia Marcella Santa Crostarosa the day after her birth, because she is a sickly baby. Her father, Giuseppe Crostarosa, a Naples lawyer, and mother, Paola Battista, are very devoted to their faith, and deeply cherish their children. In spite of her inauspicious beginning, Giulia becomes a very lively child, and is taught to read.

Giulia experiences many stories of the saints. She says this about encountering Christ at the age of 6 or 7: "...the Lord began to give her knowledge of His Divinity in such a passively sweet way that she conceived the desire to love and serve Him..." Sometimes Jesus "...urged her to love Him with some brief interior words, without her knowing really what it was about." (*Autobiography*, Chapter 1, B4, p.54) Around the age of 11, Giulia begins exploring mental prayer, finds the recommended books unhelpful, turns to the Gospels instead, and is much drawn to the wounded heart of Jesus.

At the age of 17, after a few years of distractions from sharing the secular pursuits of the housemaids, and after an unfortunate choice of confessor, Giulia finds a better director, Bartolomeo Cacace, and sets her sights on Jesus again. She makes a vow of chastity. Giulia is much influenced by St. Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue*, Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, and the works of St. Teresa of Avila.

The Carmelite Monastery at Marigliano April 1718-October 16, 1723

Giulia, her mother, and her elder sister Ursula visit the Carmel of Marigliano, where Ursula seeks entrance. Founded by Venerable Serafina Pisa, this Carmel loosely follows the Teresian Reform. Giulia insists on seeking entrance with her sister, although she has not indicated beforehand that she wants to do this.

Giulia and Ursula are accepted as novices. Giulia becomes Sr. Candida del Cielo, and Ursula becomes Sr. Colomba dello Spirito Santo. Sr. Candida finds the monastery too far from the spirit of the Teresian Reform, and remonstrates with the prioress that the nuns are too free to form secular attachments.

After only 8 months in the novitiate, Sr. Candida is put in charge of the parlor and grill, with the prioress hoping that Sr. Candida can stop some of the abuses against the Carmelite Reform. Candida and Columba are accepted into the community at the end of their novitiate.

In 1720, Candida is appointed to be novice mistress. Her youngest sister, Giovanna, joins Candida and Columba in the Carmel. Candida is re-appointed Novice Mistress in 1722. She makes a careful examination of the rule of the Marigliano Carmel, and formulates from it 7 rules of her own to assist her in becoming the "living image" (*imitatio*) of her Lord as an individual, but also part of the community's "living memory" (*viva memoria*) of Jesus. At this time, she becomes acquainted with Msgr. Falcoia when he gives a mission in Marigliano.

In 1723, the prioress' term of office ends, and she leaves the community. The nuns are at loose ends without her, because they do not have official ties to the larger Reformed Carmelite order. (They are oblates who have taken their vows to the local bishop.) When Duchess Isabella Mastrillo, who owns the land beneath the Carmel, has a dispute with the bishop, he shuts down the Marigliano convent, alleging that the air is no good there, there are insufficient funds, and the discipline is lax (although he has previously praised the discipline). All the nuns are forced to reclaim their dowries and leave. Falcoia urges Candida and her sisters to come to a convent of nuns he is trying to reform in Scala on the Amalfi coast, and they decide to go.

The Convent of Scala: January, 1724 to May 24, 1733

The three Crostarosa sisters arrive at Scala, and are given Visitandine habits. Ursula becomes Maria Illuminata of the Cenacle, Giulia becomes Maria Celeste of the Desert, and Giovanna becomes Evangelista of Jesus. All three must do a second novitiate. Falcoia and his superior Filangieri (both members of the Pious Workers religious congregation) have undertaken to bring this loosely organized convent under the rule and constitutions of the Visitation nuns founded by St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales. However, they cannot find a professed Visitation nun to instruct the Scala sisters.

On Rogation Day, April 25, 1725, Maria Celeste receives the news from Jesus that He will bring a new Institute into the world through her. She tells her superior and her local confessor, and is ordered to write down what Jesus is showing her. The nuns are ecstatic that they will have an ordered path to holiness, and there are some supernatural happenings that all observe. Over a period of time, Maria Celeste records what Jesus is telling her of the Rule and Constitution of the new Institute. In February of 1726, in spite of misgivings caused by her visions, the convent votes to accept Maria Celeste and her sisters into the community, and they take the Visitandine vows.

When Falcoia hears of Maria Celeste's revelations, he at first dismisses them as the work of the devil on a vulnerable mind, and instructs her to burn the manuscript. Letters cross in the mail, and Maria Celeste has already sent him the

manuscript before his letter arrives. After showing her manuscript to many theologians, Falcoia concludes that it is of God after all. But his superior, Filangieri, concerned at the upset Maria Celeste's visions have caused at the convent, temporarily forbids Falcoia to have contact with the nuns.

In 1730, Filangieri dies, and Falcoia is made Bishop of Castellammare. He obtains the Bishop of Scala's permission to resume directorship of the nuns, and sets himself up as founder of Maria Celeste's new Institute, with total power to interpret her Rule and Constitutions. Falcoia is helped by Silvestro Tosquez, a layman, to achieve his purpose with the Bishop of Scala. Falcoia insists that every nun must come to him as her spiritual director, and be bound by his decisions. He withholds the original copy of Maria Celeste's Rule and Constitution (having forced her to write them down again after he takes the original copy.)

On the Feast of Pentecost, May 13, 1731, the new Institute, though not as yet defined by an official, Church-approved document, is established. On August 6, 1731, the nuns are clothed in their new habits of red tunic (representing the blood Christ shed for our salvation) and blue veil (representing the heavenly goal of all humanity).

In 1731, on October 3 (the Vigil of the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi), Maria Celeste has a vision of Our Lord with St. Francis and Alphonsus Liguori. She discovers that Jesus wishes to have Alphonsus be the first superior of a men's Institute, which will be formed with the same basic purpose, Rule, and Constitution as the women's institute, but with the additional charge to "...Go and preach to every creature that the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Falcoia again at first rejects the idea, but then later embraces it. He encourages Alphonsus to accept the challenge. Alphonsus initially doesn't want to have anything to do with this, but is counseled by his spiritual director, Pagano, both to attempt this work and to transfer to Falcoia as his own spiritual director. Falcoia also makes himself the *de facto* superior of the men's institute.

Falcoia proceeds to change the Rule and Constitution of Maria Celeste to suit his own ideas of how a convent should be run, in many instances contradicting Jesus' instructions. When she protests, he again attacks her as deluded, merely seeking her own glory and the approval of others. He accuses her of an improper relationship with Tosquez (whom Falcoia himself introduced to the nuns) because he is jealous of Tosquez' influence with them. A new novice, Maria Colomba, claims falsely to have private revelations like Maria Celeste, and relays false gossip to the other nuns and to Falcoia.

Maria Celeste insists on removing herself from Falcoia's direction, and even her dear friend Alphonsus castigates her for this without fully understanding what is going on. She becomes the laughingstock of all Naples. Finally, Falcoia and the superior insist that Maria Celeste agree to three demands or be thrown out of the convent: 1) She must have no further contact with Tosquez; 2) She must sign the constitution as Falcoia has amended it, and 3) She must swear to keep Falcoia as her spiritual director for life and give him her complete obedience. Maria Celeste readily agrees to the first demand, argues that, as a simple nun it does not matter whether she signs the document or not, and flatly refuses to continue under the direction of Falcoia. She and her sisters are ordered to leave.

The Convent of Pareti, Nocera June, 1733--November 5, 1735

Maria Celeste's Jesuit brother, Giorgio, upholds her decision, and brings all three Crostarosa sisters away from the Scala convent. The Scala nuns will not even allow them to keep their red and blue habits, but force them to borrow Benedictine garments. After some uncomfortable negotiations regarding the dowries that Scala does not want to return to the three sisters, their brother Michele is able to get them into a Dominican convent in Pareti, Nocera. They are still in their borrowed Benedictine habits, and have no money to get new clothing. Tosquez comes to their rescue. Through an earlier ruse of having it copied professionally, he persuaded Falcoia to give him the original copy of Maria Celeste's rule, which he now returns to her. Tosquez also provides enough money to purchase cloth for new habits.

Seeing Maria Celeste's true worth, the bishop of Nocera asks her to become the superior of the Pareti convent to deal with the many problems there. Maria Celeste succeeds admirably in this, in spite of Falcoia's writing to the bishop of Nocera slandering her as a convent-hopping vagabond. Her bishop writes back that Falcoia is misinformed. She is even given permission to take the chaplain's place directing the nuns' meditation. The Dominicans wish her to stay permanently, and she is requested for similar reforms in many convents.

The Convent of Roccapimonte November 5, 1735--March 4, 1738

By November of 1735, however, Maria Celeste feels that she is not able to pursue her true vocation at Pareti, and she looks for a more suitable convent. She agrees to start a house at Roccapimonte, near Salerno. She, her sisters, and several others make the journey after a place has been secured. They manage well there, but in July of 1737, Falcoia succeeds in persuading the Inquisition to examine the three sisters on charges of advancing the heresy of Quietism. The Inquisitor also attempts to get her to incriminate Tosquez. Maria Celeste succeeds in proving her innocence, but the circumstances surrounding the Inquisitor's visit damage her relations with the local religious authorities.

She is no longer at ease in Roccapimonte, and makes plans to settle at Foggia, far from the influence of people like Falcoia. Her youngest sister, Evangelista, decides to remain in Roccapimonte.

The Convent of Foggia March 6, 1738--September 14, 1755:
Home at Last

Maria Celeste and Illuminata initially set up a convent and a school for young girls in rooms rented from the Jesuits. Although they have been given to understand that these rooms would be furnished, there is almost nothing there. The person in charge of their finances is more interested in keeping himself remunerated for whatever he gives them than in actually helping them, and the rent for these rooms is very high. After being wrongly accused by local gossips of starving their pupils, they move to a less expensive, more spacious house with land around it for expansion. They are again almost put out of business when the tower of a neighboring house falls on their house, killing one of their students and injuring another. Somehow they survive this, attract more students, and at last fully institutionalize the Rule and Constitution Jesus gave them in Scala.

His own Congregation now beginning to be established, Alphonsus helps them when he is able. Gennaro Sarnelli and especially Gerard Majella visit Maria Celeste's convent often. When Maria Celeste dies on September 14, 1755, Gerard Majella, gravely ill and a month away from his own death, says to his caretaker, "Today, at Foggia, the Madre, Sister Maria Celeste, has gone to enjoy God." (*Singing a New Song*, p. 171)

Today, there are over 40 Redemptoristine communities worldwide. The Redemptoristines also have Lay Associates Groups. Below is how the Redemptoristine Constitution (Revised 1985) describes the relationship between the Redemptoristine nuns and the Redemptorist Congregation:

"13. the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer accomplishes its mission in the Church in close fellowship with the entire Redemptorist family. The Order is, in fact, closely linked by its origins, name and spirituality, with the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. The twofold Institute is called to achieve a common goal in a complementary fashion. The apostolate of the Redemptorists is sustained by the contemplative life of the Nuns and their ministry gives incentive to the life of prayer and contemplation of the Nuns who are themselves fully missionary (*cf. Canon 674*), The mission of both is to be faithful witnesses of the love of the Father and to continue in this way with the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Mystery of Christ Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary for the salvation of mankind."

A Brief Biography of Blessed Maria Celeste Crostarosa

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