

Syracuse, Italy

Madonna Shed Tears For Poor

The author of the following article is a member of the Rome bureau of the N.G.W.C. News Service. He is making a tour of southern Italy to make a first hand report on developments there and interview the area's outstanding Catholic personalities.

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(N.G.W.C. News Service)

Syracuse, Italy—After five years the Weeping Madonna of Syracuse has changed this entire city, and there is every sign that even greater changes are still to come.

Tourists have always flocked in great numbers to Syracuse to see the beautiful Greek and Roman ruins and to enjoy the lush Sicilian scenery of mountain and sea. But since 1933 their attention has been turned to an inexpensive religious plaque found in the poorest, most unattractive part of the city. In 1937 their numbers exceeded 50,000.

On Saturday, August 28, 1933, the Santa Lucia quarter

of Syracuse was nothing more than the poorest section of town where low-paid day laborers made up the city's greatest economic strength. Via degli Orti, like every other street in that quarter, stood bare and dirty, its stone and plaster houses glaring white under the blazing August sun.

AT NUMBER 11 Via degli Orti Angelo Jannuso, a laborer and a communist, had just returned from his work in the country, had washed and eaten a meager supper and prepared to go to a movie with his wife, Antonia. Jannuso was not feeling well.

She was expecting a child

and had been suffering from toxemia, which had brought on periodic convulsions and temporary blindness. She returned home from the movie very ill and with another attack of blindness coming on.

The next morning, Sunday, August 29, Mrs. Jannuso remained in bed while her husband set out for work at 8 a.m. She changed position to put her head at the foot of the bed in order to benefit from the little cool air coming in through the room's single window.

While lying there she looked up at the plaque of the Blessed Virgin on the wall over the bed. It was an ordinary plaster model that had been given to her and her husband as a wedding present five months before. She saw that the face of the Madonna was wet and became frightened.

SHE CALLED HER sister

and Grazia took the Ma-

donna is perspiring."

Grazia looked closely at the plaque and saw that tears were coming from the eyes. They were running down the Madonna's cheeks and filling up the figure's right hand which was slightly upturned over the heart. They were falling over the figure's shoulders and dripping onto the bed linens.

Towards five o'clock in the evening Angelo Jannuso was returning home from work. He saw a crowd filling the street, in front of his house and immediately thought that his wife had taken a turn for the worse or was dead. After forcing his way through the crowd he discovered what had happened. When the Madonna began to weep again that evening, the crowds pressed into the house and Jannuso had to ask help from the police to keep them back.

WORD SPREAD quickly

from mouth to mouth. Sunday afternoon and evening hundreds of people filed through the house to see the Madonna.

The next day the plaque was hung on the outside of the house to accommodate the crowds. The entire time, at irregular intervals, the Madonna shed tears. They fell only from the eyes. Thousands from every part of the city saw the tears. Many brought handkerchiefs and bits of cotton to catch the tears. The paint from the figure's face was worn almost completely away.

For fear that the jostling crowds would break the plaque, it was moved to a house across the street where there was a fence that would hold them back. There it remained on a temporary outdoor altar until Monday afternoon. Then it was taken back to Jannuso's house and placed in a bureau drawer for safety. The Madonna continued to weep even inside the drawer.

ON THE mornings of the fourth day a commission composed of two doctors, an engineer and the parish priest examined the plaque. They searched closely for any poss-

ibility of trickery, examined its composition and structure, took a specimen of the tears in a sterile test tube.

The plaque, made in a small stationary factory in Leghorn, Italy, was thoroughly dried, its back coated with waterproof varnish and its front covered with a hydro-cellulose material. The figure was made of common plaster, painted and also coated with varnish.

Under the microscope the eyes of the figure were found to be devoid of any cracks or pores. Chemical analysis proved the fluid to be the exact composition of human tears.

While the examination was going on the Madonna wept. Then, after three and a half days, she wept no more. She has not wept since.

On the following day Archbishop Ettore Ercanini of Syracuse, who up to this time had kept a prudent reserve, went privately to Jannuso's house, wishing to see the Madonna personally and to question the witnesses. Some time later, when the crowds became too great, the Archbishop carried the plaque in his own hands through the streets to

its new place in Piazza Euripide.

There, the Weeping Madonna of Syracuse is found today, encased in an open-sided shed constructed of steel tubing and covered with a wood and tarpaper roof. Flowers and burning candles stand constantly before her.

The wall behind the altar is encrusted with crutches, braces, casts and silver votive offerings in the form of hearts and various members of the body. There is always a priest on hand throughout the morning to hear confessions and distribute Communion. Masses are almost constant.

THE SETTING for this Sicilian shrine stands in beautiful contrast to the world's other and better known shrines to Our Lady. Piazza Euripide is stark in its lack of ornamentation. The wide, airy piazza is spotlessly clean and glaring under the sun. Barely a hundred yards in front of it railroad tracks pass by. Not too far away fishermen dry their nets and mend them.

One begins to think that the Weeping Madonna meant it to be this way. The railroad tracks

cannot be moved; the poor workers' hovels cannot be uprooted; the fishermen's docks cannot be pushed back into the sea. Someday she may be carried to "a more worthy" shrine, but for the present she remains with the poor people to whom she gave her tears.

Bishop Peter Ireton Of Richmond Dies

Washington—(NC)—Bishop Peter L. Ireton, 75, who administered the Richmond (Va.) diocese for 23 years, died (April 27) at Georgetown University Hospital here.

The Bishop had been a patient at the hospital since April 18, following a fall that day at Marymount Junior College, Arlington, Va. He broke a bone in his pelvic region, and complications from the injury resulted in his death.

Archbishop Francis P. Keough of Baltimore will offer a Pontifical Requiem Mass for Bishop Ireton on Saturday (May 3) in Sacred Heart Cathedral, Richmond.

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