

Rochester celebrates links to 'Blessed Grimoaldo'

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

Preparations are almost complete for the Jan. 29 beatification of Venerable Grimoaldo Santamaria, a 19-year-old Passionist seminarian who died in 1902. Although Grimoaldo spent his whole life in Italy, the city of Rochester, too, has some claims on him. After his death, his sister, Vincenzina Santamaria Panella, settled in Rochester; and in 1920 his mother, Cecilia Ruscio Santamaria, left Italy to spend her last years here with Vincenzina and her husband Frank Panella.

When the Holy Father celebrates the Mass of beatification and bestows the title "blessed" on Santamaria and two others, Rochester will be well represented. More than 30 local Santamaria descendants and friends plan to attend the Mass, including nieces Ida Panella Turan of Webster, and Helene Panella Schlegel of Greece. Also attending will be two area pastors: Father David W. Mura of Rochester's Holy Apostles/St. Anthony of Padua Parish Cluster and Father John T. Reif of Webster's St. Rita's Parish.

The new "blessed" was born in 1883 in Pontecorvo, southeast of Rome. Baptized Ferdinando Santamaria, he was the eldest child of Pietro Paolo Santamaria, a self-employed rope maker, and Cecilia Ruscio. The Santamarias raised their five children in staunch Catholic practice. But from age 6 onward, Ferdinando showed an attraction to self-denial and to prayer, especially to Christ crucified, the Blessed Sacrament, and Our Lady. For all that, he remained a perfectly normal and thoughtful youngster.

In 1899, at age 15, Ferdinando left home for good to join the Congregation of the Passion. The Passionist Fathers welcomed him as a promising candidate. He then assumed the religious name of Grimoaldo of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. After a year of novitiate, he professed his religious vows on March 6, 1900.

Santamaria blossomed as a member of this order dedicated to prayer, penance and preaching. As he began his studies for the priesthood (and studies came hard for him), he surpassed the other students in the precise observance of the Passionist rule of life. Community life was humdrum, but he managed to do the ordinary things extraordinarily well.



File photo
Preparations are almost complete for the beatification of the Blessed Grimoaldo Santamaria, a 19-year old Passionist seminarian with ties to Rochester.

Rather oddly, God did not grant him a long life. Although tall and strong (friends referred to him as "Hercules"), he proved no match for a sudden attack of meningitis and erysipelas, a disease of the skin and mucous membranes. He died on Nov. 18, 1902.

Although he was reputed among both the Pontecorvites and the Passionists to be a possible candidate for sainthood, no steps were taken to introduce Grimoaldo's cause for 50 years. Then the Passionists began to spread devotion to him and to record favors received through his intercession. They wrote asking Vincenzina ("Jenny") Panella to help them in the United States.

In 1957, on the basis of good reports from Italy, the United States, and Brazil,

the the Bishop of Ferentino, Italy, launched official investigations. He requested our Bishop James E. Kearney to appoint a special tribunal to examine three Rochesterians who had known the young Passionist. They were Jenny Panella, who not only remembered him but had learned much more about him from her mother; Maria Rosa Giovannina ("Jenny") Ferdinandi Grassi, a neighbor in the old country; and Filomena Santoro Turchetti, also from Pontecorvo. This "rogatorial tribunal," headed by then-Monsignor and later Bishop John E. McCafferty, with the double task of gathering data and testing the witnesses' credibility, worked diligently at its assignment between October, 1957 and April, 1958 (see accompanying story).

When Ferentino's Bishop Leonetti had received reports from the tribunals in Rochester, Brazil, and Italy, he forwarded them to the Vatican to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Only in 1991 did the congregation reach the conclusion that Grimoaldo had indeed practiced the Christian virtues to a heroic degree. Pope John Paul II proclaimed this decision on May 14, 1991.

Grimoaldo Santamaria could now be called "venerable," but he would merit the title "blessed" only if a verified miracle could be attributed to his intercession.

The required miracle was approved by the Holy See on Feb. 4, 1994.

Early in the evening of Saturday, May 15, 1982, several members of the Romano family were gathered in the doorway of Cesario Romano, an Italian farmer of Cesa di Caserta, near Naples. While they were chatting, 4-year-old Nicola, the son of Cesario's brother Antonio, climbed into the seat of a heavy farm tractor, and turned the ignition key. The motor started with a jump and the child was thrown upon the hard-packed ground. The adults looked up, and, transfixed with horror, saw the rear right wheel, with its 200-pound rubber tire, roll over Nicola's chest and cheek.

At once, his father, Antonio, a devotee of Grimoaldo, cried out: "Brother Grimoaldo, help him! Save my son!" The rest picked up the cry. Uncle Cesario lunged for the child, accidentally treading on his little left foot. When he laid him in the father's arms, Nicola seemed lifeless, and the tread pattern of the tire lay distinct across his cheek. In a few moments, however, he opened his eyes.

But he might still have suffered internal injuries. Antonio and his wife jumped into a car and were driven — ever invoking Grimoaldo's help — first to the hospital in nearby Aversa and then, since the Aversa X-ray department was closed, to the Santobono Hospital in Naples. In each place, Antonio and the others described the frightful accident.

In each place the clinicians found absolutely nothing wrong with the boy except for a broken bone in his left foot where the uncle had stepped on it. At Naples, X-rays and other tests were made, his foot was put in a light cast, and he was kept overnight for further observation. The next day he was released with a clean bill of health. Physicians at both hospitals were inclined to

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