

Saint Frances of Rome

1384 - 1440

PARADISE

At the end of the year 1413, as Frances de' Ponziani was absorbed in prayer as she was every night, an extraordinary light shone in her room and suddenly Giovanni Evangelista, her nine-year-old son who had died a short while earlier, appeared to her.

The saint's biography relates that this child "had the same clothes, the same height, the same expressions, the same features as he did alive, but with an incomparably greater beauty. Evangelista was not alone. Another young boy of the same age, but even more resplendent in appearance, was standing at his side..." The first thing Saint Frances did was to hug her son and ask him, "Are you all right, dear son? Where is your place in heaven? What are you doing? Do you remember your mother?" After hugging her, the little one said, "Our only activity is to contemplate the infinite abyss of God's goodness, to praise and bless His Majesty (God) with profound respect, intense joy, and perfect love. Since we are absorbed in God ... we can feel no pain, we enjoy an eternal peace, we can only will and do only will what we know is pleasing to God, who is all our happiness."

He then said he was in the choir of the archangels and the companion who appeared with him was an archangel, whom God sent to her for her consolation, so that he would remain with her for the rest of her whole life, always visible to the eyes of the body. After conversing for about an hour, Evangelista disappeared and the angel remained.

Frances of Rome was born in Rome in 1384 to a noble and wealthy family. As a young child she heard God's call to religious life, but her parents had already given her in marriage to a young nobleman, Lorenzo de' Ponziani. At the age of 13, she moved to the noble Ponziani Palace in Trastevere. Unfortunately, because she was unable to fulfill her religious vocation, she became ill and was wasting away. On July 16 1398, St. Alexius appeared to her in a dream, telling her, "You are to live.... The Lord wants you to live in order to glorify his name." At that moment, the saint recovered her health and became an exemplary wife. With her cousin Vannoza, she dedicated herself to works of charity and care for the poor. Three children were born to the marriage, but only one survived to adulthood. Meanwhile, some women who shared her love for the poor and for prayer gathered around her. On August 15, 1425 in the church of Santa Maria Nova, eleven women formed the Olivetan Oblates of Mary Association, inspired by the spirituality of the Olivetan Benedictines. In March of 1433, the oblates withdrew to a house at Tor de' Specchi, and the following July 21 Pope Eugene IV approved the congregation, which would later be called the Oblates of Saint Frances of Rome. On March 21, 1436 Frances moved to Tor de' Specchi, where she was elected superior. She died on March 9, 1440 and was acclaimed a saint by the people.

