Growing up in an ethnic, Italian parish with the Traditional Mass and Sacraments, I had the best of both worlds. The Sacred Liturgy of all time was offered in an Italian renaissance style church, complemented throughout the year by different devotions, various acts of popular piety, and most especially, numerous feasts of Our Lord, Our Lady and the Saints. Perhaps the only such example in the United States, this church is unique in itself in that two canonized saints, one blessed and one venerable, visited and prayed there.

These feasts were and remain the best efforts of thousands of Italian immigrants and their descendants to venerate (and to spread devotion to) the patrons of the towns and cities they were forced to leave. They almost always brought on their long and difficult voyages a small image of their patron saint, whose intercession they knew would see them through.

Once settled in their new country, residents of a particular town or city in Italy would find each other, and often settling in the same parishes and neighborhoods, would establish some kind of a society and organize a feast in honor of their patron including a High Mass, a procession, some kind of dinner or dessert, music and folk dancing, and even reworks! Other, unique traditions would mark particular feasts, customs which were copied from the celebrations in Italy such as barefoot races or preparing certain foods.

The immigrants scrimped and saved (including door to door collections in Italian neighborhoods) not only for the annual feast, but also for the eventual purchase of a larger statue of the saint in question, which would be temporarily enshrined in the church's sanctuary for the feast and carried in the festal procession, and then would be kept in the church year round for the devotion of the faithful.

So many were these statues in the parish of my youth, that some were relegated to the choir loft, or the vestibule or the sacristy. Others remained on the pilasters, but were lovingly carried down (and then replaced) in the sure and steady arms of their male devotees, often carpenters and other contractors, "tough guys" who normally staid and laconic would be overcome with emotion, coming into such close contact with their favorite saint.

They unashamedly caressed and kissed the statue, and they wept, conscious of their saint's unfaltering intercession in their lives; as they remembered their birthplace, the feasts and traditions of yesteryear, the distance which separated them from their beloved home towns and loved ones. They were well aware that although materially poor, it was their faith that enriched them, which sustained them; their saint's protection that motivated and strengthened them in their facing a new world, a new language and culture.

With all of these statues and paintings, it was easy to be "piously distracted" during Mass; what with St. Nicholas next to the three boys in the barrel, St. Lucy holding her eyes, St.

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Vitus with his dog, St. Angelus with a dagger in his chest, blood staining his white mantle – and so many others! Perhaps these "colorful" statues and these feasts would appear strange to Americans, even to some American Catholics, but not to the Italians, whose lively faith was full of tangible things and practices, that faith which embraced everyday life with a patron saint and a prayer as the remedy for anything and everything.

But one statue, the first on the church's right hand side, had always struck me in a particular way. A crown of roses compassed her long hair – as does every depiction of her –and her mantle indicating her nobility included two seashells (symbolizing her living in Palermo, a major seaport and her protection over the local shermen); she grasped a Cross which she gazed on in meditation, and a skull rested on her copy of the Bible. The sign on her pedestal identified her as "Santa Rosalia" – or as we could call her in English, St. Rosalie.

Saint Rosalia

Rosalia Sinibaldi was born in Palermo, capital of the then- Kingdom of Sicily sometime between 1125-1130. Her father was Duke Sinibaldo, a vassal to the Norman king, Ruggero II. He was lord of Sierra Quisquina and Monte delle Rose (Mountain of the Roses), found in what is now the province of Agrigento, in the heart of Sicily. Rosalia's father was said to be a descendant of Charlemagne; and her mother, identified as the noble lady Maria Viscarda (or Guiscarda) was related to the Norman royal family, perhaps as a cousin to King Ruggero.

Tradition has it that as King Ruggero watched the sunset one evening with his wife, he received an apparition during which he was told: "Ruggero, I announce to you that, through the will of God, there will be born in the house of Sinibaldo your kinsman, a rose without thorns," and so was baptized Rosalia. Another version claims that she was named Rosalia from the Latin "rosa" and "lilia," meaning rose and lily, symbolizing respectively regality and purity, anticipating two of the noble virgin's attributes.

In any case, St. Rosalia's youth was passed in the Sicilian royal court where she knew no want, and was provided a good education and an excellent Christian formation. Her kindness, noble bearing and extraordinary beauty led Rosalia to be chosen as a lady in waiting to the queen.

Rosalia had now grown up and her parents were considering her future husband. He would need, of course, to befit their daughter's state, and the young lady was not initially opposed to marriage. Accounts differ as to how the match developed and was received.

A certain courageous knight, Baldovino by name, had saved King Ruggero from an attack of

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a wild beast. One version holds that Ruggero was so grateful to the noble hero for preserving his life that he wanted to compensate him with a gift; and in turn Baldovino asked for Rosalia's hand in marriage. Another explanation describes Baldovino's saving the King, but that her parents had chosen him in the rescue's aftermath, and that Rosalia was in agreement. In any case, Rosalia then received a vision.

On the day in which Rosalia was set to encounter Baldovino, perhaps even on their wedding day, she looked in the mirror. She saw Jesus Crucified, covered in blood, due to the Crown of Thorns. Rosalia had no doubt: she would leave all things behind, forsaking her noble future and family, refused Baldovino and cut her long, blonde hair, announcing to the court that her only desire was to espouse her Lord.

While some authors hold that Saint Rosalia directly embraced the eremitical life, it seems much more probable that she first entered a Palermo cloister, either of the Basilian or the Benedictine nuns. As previously mentioned, Rosalia is (almost always) portrayed holding a cross, and quite often it is a Greek cross in deference to her living with the Basilians, religious of the Greek rite. Basilian spirituality with its emphasis on solitude has been cited in leading to Rosalia's eventual complete withdrawal from the world, as a hermitess.

Others, particularly the historian Tornamira – supported by Pope Urban VIII – maintain that she rst dwelled in a Benedictine cloister – a stance seemingly supported by her association with the great Sicilian Benedictine, Saint William of Vercelli. Saint William is said to have recommended to Rosalia to stay with the Benedictine hermits at Bivona and Santo Stefano Quisquina (in the province of Agrigento); and only later would Rosalia obtain the permission of Palermo's Archbishop, Ugo I, to become a hermitess herself. This version would explain why, among the Benedictines, devotion to Saint Rosalia flourished almost immediately after her death, and why the Saint would come to live for more than a decade at Quisquina.

Quisquina, or the Sierra Quisquina, is the name of the forested area near the town of Santo Stefano (known since 1863 as Santo Stefano Quisquina). It is found in Sicily's rural inland, crossed by two rivers and in the Sicani mountain range. At the time of Rosalia, it was owned by the Sinibaldi family.

While it is quite possible but not certain that the saint made the long journey from Palermo to bucolic Quisquina alone, once there she had the spiritual support of the neighboring Benedictines whose Masses she would have attended and direction she would have received. There were also Basilians in nearby Mèlia.

Saint Rosalia lived a simple, consecrated life in her grotto-hermitage in Quisquina. She is said to have possessed only a cross and a kind of chaplet – perhaps given to her by the

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Basilians for the recitation of the "Rule of the Theotokos," the recitation of the Psalter or some other devotion predating the Holy Rosary.

After 12 years, Rosalia left Quisquina. Some authors hold that this was due to Rosalia's fame for holiness spreading, leading pilgrims to search her out, disturbing her holy solitude. Rosalia has also been said to have parted Quisquina, choosing to live instead, in nearby Bivona, in order to avoid visitors.

Other biographers maintain that there was a rebellion on the part of counts and barons against the Normans and that Rosalia's father was killed. The goods and property of the family, including Quisquina were then confiscated, leading Rosalia to flee after avoiding her would-be murderers by hiding in the empty trunk of an oak tree.

In any case, before leaving Rosalia inscribed in Latin on her grotto's wall: "I Rosalia, daughter of Sinibaldo, lord of Quisquina and of the Mountain of the Roses, decided to dwell in this cave for love of my Lord Jesus Christ" and in the left, lower angle was written "12" which has always been interpreted as indicating the number of years of her sojourn there.

The saint then returned to Palermo, and stopped brie y at her family's home. Then, from Queen Margherita, the wife of King Guglielmo I (who had since succeeded his father, Ruggero II to the Sicilian throne) she received a gift, her new home: the state-owned Monte Pellegrino. North of the city, the mountain rises 606 meters (1,970 feet) and overlooks the Tyrrhenian Sea. The picturesque views it provides led visitor, famed German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, to describe Pellegrino in his diary as "the most beautiful promontory in the world."

Rosalia found a cavern suitable for her new hermitage. It enjoyed an abundant water supply and was located in a forgotten, sylvan part of the mountain, almost at its summit; adjoining a shrine of Our Lady which the Byzantines and then the Normans constructed and maintained, replacing a former pagan altar. Here our Saint was to spend the last years of her life. Essentially, it was the same eremitical, contemplative life that she had led at Quisquina, meditating on the Sacred Scriptures and the Mysteries of the Faith.

Now settled on Pellegrino's height, after her short stay in Palermo, she looked down on the city. Having found "the one thing necessary" Rosalia had "chosen the better part" (Luke 10:42) but she was also well-aware of so many who had forgotten their God and had turned to fleeting, empty things. Conscious of the frivolity, luxury and outright sin which she had observed again after years away, very much on the rise since her own youth spent at court, she increasingly sought to make reparation. Spouse and imitator of Christ Crucified, she wore her body out from keeping vigils, fasting, and various penances, e.g. using a rock for a

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pillow.

Given her predilection for solitude, perhaps another penance was in her charitably receiving those who came to Mount Pellegrino. These were not only the shepherds who tended their flocks on the vast spaces of the mountain, and pilgrims to Our Lady's shrine there, but mostly other visitors whom, as at Quisquina, had come to see the saint in order to con de their needs to her prayers, ask her counsel and to be comforted by her.

Like all the saints, Rosalia's own fidelity was to be tested. Various temptations would arrive: she would be shown a handsome, young man, or she would see her family in trouble. She steadfastly refused to give in to sin or to abandon her solitude. And so "God tried (her) and found (her) worthy of Himself." (Wisdom 3:5).

Having persevered, the time had come for Rosalia to leave this world, to join her Divine Spouse. Pious tradition holds that an angel appeared to Rosalia to foretell her death. Immediately, she prepared herself and requested the sacraments.

Again alone, she reclined, resting one arm on her rock pillow with her hand under her cheek and with the other grasped the Cross to her breast, and peacefully fell asleep in the Lord. It was Sept. 4. The year given varies from 1165-1170. Her body was found by pilgrims in this position shortly thereafter.

Abundant Miracles

The Sicilian vox populi recognized her sanctity immediately, as they had during her life. The people affectionately called her "la Santuzza" or the "little Saint." The Basilians and Benedictines invoked her, as did the inhabitants of the areas in which Rosalia had lived. The earliest proof of her veneration is a depiction dating to 1170, almost immediately following her death. It is found in the exquisite, Byzantine Church of Santa Maria dell'Ammiraglio, also called the "Church of the Martorana" in Palermo. Rosalia's intercession is recorded in a document of the Empress Costanza I (wife of the Holy Roman Emperor Enrico IV) in 1196. Various depictions of the Santuzza appeared in various cities and villages of the island, from its largest cathedrals to its smallest oratories.

As happens to various saints, Rosalia – for reasons unknown – grew to be largely forgotten. But during this period, various apparitions and cures were attributed to her aid. At the end of the 1300s, having been promised that their town would be delivered from a great pestilence, the townspeople of Bivona built a church in Saint Rosalia's honor and were subsequently saved. Palermo was affected by a plague in 1474, and the city senate resolved to restore the church of Monte Pellegrino, by now in ruins. Upon the church's restoration,

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the plague ceased. Yet, despite the various miracles, the Santuzza was still (mostly) ignored, almost consigned to complete obscurity. But we know that (God) “hath made all things good in their time.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Born in Sicily to African parents, St. Benedict the Moor lived on Mount Pellegrino with other hermits for 20 years, before they were ordered to enter an existing religious order in 1564, entering the Franciscan observants at Palermo’s Convent of Santa Maria di Gesù. An illiterate lay brother, Benedict was a mystic in close union with God, and often sought out by the highest prelates. Among other things, St. Benedict foretold that in 1624 the plague would come to Palermo, and that the long- lost remains of St. Rosalia would finally be discovered; and that once honored with Christian burial, the city of Palermo would be saved and she would become its new patroness. The years passed.

In October 1623, a 47-year- old woman named Geronima Lo Gatto from Ciminna (near Palermo) lay dying in hospital when a young lady appeared in her room. Geronima believing her to be a nurse asked her to soothe her parched lips with a drop of water, but found her thirst satis ed as she walked towards her. Recognizing her to be St. Rosalia, she heard:

“Abandon every fear, because you will be saved in a little while, provided you fulfill a vow on Mount Pellegrino.” Two days later, the woman was healed.

The winter passed and on May 26, 1624, Geronima, accompanied by two other women, climbed the mountain in fulfillment of her promise to visit the saint, who again appeared to her. Rosalia told Lo Gatto: “You have come to realize your vow, now go in peace. Soon, I will show to you the exact place where my body rests: I exhort you to begin soon the search and to inform the bishop and the city that my moment has arrived.” Geronima returned to the city, spoke with her husband Benedetto, and shortly thereafter along with friends and four hermits ascended the mountain again, in search of the holy body.

In the meantime, an unimaginable plague broke out in Palermo, the most disastrous ever known, with hundreds of victims. The city invoked its four patronesses: Saints Christina, Alfa, Ninfa and Agatha – to no avail. Prayers, penances, vigils multiplied but with no resolution. Survivors barricaded themselves in their homes. At the height of the crisis, thoroughly desperate, the Cardinal- Archbishop, Giannettino Doria, called for a final attempt in seeking Heaven’s mercy: a procession to Monte Pellegrino and the invocation of Saint Rosalia, whose intercession until now had not been sought.

Fifty days since Geronima’s ascent had passed, it was July 15. The plague was at its summit, the search in the place indicated by the Saint was most intense, the efforts relentless. Breaking through a stone which impeded further digging, they finally located the Saint’s

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body – petrified, mysteriously enclosed in a rock without openings, intact like a closed shell.

The Cardinal-Archbishop was noticed, and sent two delegates to witness the proceedings. It was decided to transport the sepulcher into the light in order to better identify the remains, and remarkably it was found to be so light that the efforts of only one man were necessary to carry it. The relics were retrieved and carefully transferred to the archiepiscopal palace in Palermo.

Meanwhile the citizens of the city had heard of the long-awaited discovery and ascended the mountain. Finding the stone-casket they began to take pieces of it home (they immersed these fragments in water which they then drank) along with the dirt, holding them to be efficacious given their proximity to the Santuzza's body. Immediately, the plague ceased. St. Rosalia had saved Palermo.

On July 27 Don Vincenzo del Bosco, city senator and Duke of Misilmeri, in the name of the whole population, proposed St. Rosalia's official patronage over Palermo, given the miraculous deliverance from the horrific plague, and promised the construction of a rich chapel, and once positively identified and approved, a precious urn of silver for the relics. On Sept. 4, the anniversary of the saint's death, a solemn procession was held, with a statue of the saint (as the relics had still not received official recognition). The whole of Palermo, which had been under quarantine for months, turned out in full force, rejoicing in honor of their saint.

Cardinal Doria had created a commission of doctors to examine the bones and prove their authenticity, as the remains of the saint. But the first examinations were not positive: the experts claimed to have insufficient proof and the doctors did not even recognize them as human bones. Meanwhile the plague had somewhat resurfaced, causing skepticism. Official recognition came only on Feb. 22, 1625, when a new committee of theologians and doctors declared the relics authentic.

The saint herself had in the meantime appeared to Vincenzo Bonello, a soap maker popularly remembered as "the hunter" who described the apparition on his deathbed. On the night of Feb. 18, Don Pietro Lo Monaco, a chaplain of the Palermo cathedral, was called to Bonello's bedside to administer the Last Rites. Bonello confessed that deeply grieved by the recent loss of his young wife, he had set out for Monte Pellegrino, under the pretext of hunting but with the real intention of committing suicide by throwing himself off a cliff. Suddenly the holy Rosalia appeared, and stopped his attempt. The saint led him into her cave, and lamented the lack of recognition of her relics, telling the man to instruct the Cardinal- Archbishop that the remains were really hers.

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Then she predicted that the man would soon die of the plague, but added: “The day that my bones will be brought triumphantly in procession through the city, will the plague end” indicating that the Blessed Virgin had assured this to her, at the moment of the intonation of the Te Deum. Around this time, the Santuzza also appeared to (now Servant of God) Benedictine Sister Maria Roccaforte of Bivona, providing many details of her life which would have otherwise been impossible to discover. Sister Maria’s confessor, Fr. Francesco Sparacino would later publish this account as “The Life of the glorious Saint Rosalia.”

Triumphant Procession

While the Cardinal- Archbishop officially declared on Sept. 3, the vigil of the feast, that the miraculous liberation of the city had indeed taken place through the intercession of the new patroness, St. Rosalia, the triumphant procession described by the saint would occur the following year. In June 1625, a second feast was announced. As the relics would be transferred from the original urn of crimson velvet to the promised one of silver and crystal, the city was invited to fast and prepare for the procession.

On July 15, the anniversary of the discovery of the relics, the greatest and most elaborate procession that Palermo had ever seen began, for which no expense was spared in decoration or numbers. This second feast day has been kept annually ever since, and is known as the “festino,” or “little feast.”

St. Rosalia’s veneration was officially recognized in 1625. Pope Urban VIII inserted St. Rosalia in the Roman Martyrology, with the Sept. 4 and July 15 feasts in 1630.

Never since has devotion to the Santuzza ever waned, but only increased. To this day many girls are baptized Rosalia and boys Rosalino. Thousands continue to visit the shrines at Monte Pellegrino and Santo Stefano Quisquina annually, some continue to climb Pellegrino barefoot either requesting a particular grace or in thanksgiving for a favor received; to say nothing of the faithful’s innumerable, daily visits to the Palermo cathedral to visit her relics.

Wherever Sicilians have emigrated, they have brought with them their incomparable love of their patroness with them. In the United States this is most noted in the extremely popular feast of St. Rosalia in Bensonhurst (Brooklyn). There is also a feast at Saint Anthony’s Church in Buffalo, New York where a beautiful statue of the saint is enshrined and the “Congrega di Santa Rosalia” or Society of Saint Rosalia was established in 1905 which was re-founded, and the feast revived, in the early 1990s.

Let us invoke the Sicilian thaumaturge, St. Rosalia, confident in her intercession before God.

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Mirabilis Deus in sanctis suis – “God is wonderful in His Saints!” (Psalm 67:36).

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