

A new 'Blessed' in the Family
Maria Crocifissa Curcio (1877-1957)

Angela Bergström-Allen

This article was published in Assumpta – the magazine of the Carmelite Third Order in Britain – in the Spring of 2005. Because of the death of Pope John Paul II, the beatification ceremony was in fact conducted by Pope Benedict XVI on 13th November 2005.

Later this month, on 24th April in fact (the Pope's health permitting), another member of our Carmelite Family will be declared 'blessed' and held up to the world as an example of holiness. Her name is Maria Crocifissa Curcio, and she was responsible for co-founding the *Carmelite Missionary Sisters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux of the Child Jesus*.

This Servant of God was born Rosa Curcio in Sicily, by the southern tip of Italy, on 30th January in 1877. She was baptised in the church of S. Bartolomeo the next day, and received hold communion there for the first time in 1885. Though a bright and vivacious (even mischievous) girl, she was not encouraged to go to senior school, nor to church. However, deprived of school books, and perhaps as much out of stubbornness as of piety, at the age of just eleven years old Rosa read the life of St. Teresa of Jesus of Avila, and so first came into contact with Carmel. She later described how Teresa changed her view of life, by the way that great Carmelite mystic got to the heart of what really matters.

A young member of the Third Order

At the age of thirteen Rosa joined the Carmelite Third Order, making her profession as 'Maria' five years later in 1895. In 1897 she was elected prioress of the Chapter, a post she held until 1908. Although she was secure in her vocation as a Carmelite, she eventually felt called to live that vocation as a religious, rather than as a lay Carmelite. She briefly lived alongside Dominican nuns, but knew her vocation was not to that Order. She had various contacts with Carmelite groups, and desired to found a Carmel in her hometown of Ispica.

Perhaps because of the schooling she had been deprived as a child, Rosa and some friends began to teach local children, and to run an orphanage. This grew into a prototype religious community, but not without opposition from some of the local clergy, and like many people seeking to follow Christ, Maria met with trials and sufferings for a number of years.

Meeting Fr. Lorenzo

1924 was a turning point in Maria's life. In that year Maria had her first meeting with Fr. Lorenzo van den Eerenbeemt, O.Carm. Fr. Lorenzo was a Carmelite scholar of Dutch and Italian extraction, who for a number of years had been looking for a congregation of Carmelite sisters to work alongside the friars in various missions.

In that same important year, 1924, on 17th May, Thérèse of the Child Jesus was canonised a saint in St. Peter's in Rome. Rosa, who by now had become Mother Maria Crocifissa, attended the ceremony with Fr. Lorenzo, and together they prayed that the new Carmelite saint, who had desired to be a missionary herself, would support their missionary cause. Later that year Mother Maria went with Fr. Lorenzo to visit Santa Marinella, a village by the

sea north of Rome, in the hope of starting a small missionary Carmel charged with the task of working with the poor and needy in the diocese of Porto San Rufina. Her hope was realised, and on 3rd July 1925 she transferred there with her companions. On 16th July that year, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the small community was affiliated to the Carmelite Order.

Building community

In Santa Marinella, and in other houses of the Congregation that grew from there, Mother Maria continued to work with the poor and to build community. In 1930, Mother Maria made her final profession as a religious, in the same year that Fr. Lorenzo received permission to be exclaustated from the Order of friars so that he could collaborate more closely with the Congregation founded by Maria. He did not cease to be a Carmelite, but like Maria leaving the 'Third Order Secular' to become a religious of the 'Third Order Regular', Lorenzo discerned that his position in the Family of Carmel was changing (which is what sometimes happens in families).

In 1945, the first chapter of the Congregation elected Mother Maria as Superior General of the *Carmelite Missionaries Sisters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux of the Child Jesus*.

Maria returns to the Father

On 4th July 1957, Maria died, leaving behind a diary with many insights into her life and character. It confirmed what her sisters had known: that Maria had placed Jesus (particularly Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament) at the centre of her life, and that she had a great love for Carmel and Our Lady. As well as her diary, she left behind a legacy of religious communities caring for society's outcasts in many parts of Italy, in Brazil, and on the island of Malta. The Congregation spread to Toronto in 1967 to open a house of welcome for immigrants. Ten years later, Fr. Lorenzo died.

In the 1980s, houses of the Congregation opened in Tanzania, the Philippines, and Romania; it seemed that the Little Flower, St. Thérèse, was supporting the Congregation throughout the world. At the end of that decade, the bishop of Porto San Rufina, where Mother Maria had established her community some sixty years before, opened the cause for beatification of the Servant of God Maria Crocifissa.

Miracles: signs of God's grace

Before anyone is beatified or canonised, a process of enquiry must establish that they lived the Christian life 'heroically', and that – because they are now united to God in heaven – they can intercede with God to work miracles. The miracle which paved the way for Maria's beatification was granted to a young building labourer, Giovanni Azzarelli, in the late 1970s. Giovanni, aged only 27, had a malignant cancer, and underwent a number of unsuccessful operations. Friends of Giovanni prayed that he would be healed, if it was God's will, through the intercession of Mother Maria Crocifissa. The tumour was completely healed, and after a long process of medical and theological enquiry, in 2004 the Congregation for the Causes of Saints accepted this as a miraculous intervention, so paving the way for Mother Maria's beatification.

Mother Maria's beatification is being marked in Italy by a series of celebrations, talks, and events, which the whole Carmelite Family is invited to attend. For details (if you can read Italian!), see the Congregation's website: www.madrecrocifissa.org

For a fuller account of Mother Maria's life and work, see R. M. Valabek, *Profiles in Holiness II*, (Rome: Edizioni Carmelitane, 1999).

Most Holy Trinity,
we give you thanks for the gifts
by which you have enriched the soul
of our sister Maria Crocifissa.
Following her missionary spirit,
may we – in contemplating Jesus,
present in the Word, the Eucharist, and the poor –
become more and more sensitive
to the needs of our sisters and brothers.
This grace we humbly ask.
Amen!